

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HERITAGE COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, December 11, 2024

4:30 PM

**2nd Floor Conference Room,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Cauley Powell, Chair
Molly Ellis, Vice Chair
Marilyn Huston
Louise Zerba

Staff Present:

Evan Clements, Planner

Members Not Present:

Rose Carey
Julie Emineth

1) Call to Order – Roll Call

Chair Powell called the meeting to order at 4:30 PM. Roll call was conducted.

2) Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes – November 13, 2024

Ms. Zerba made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of November 13, 2024. Ms. Ellis seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) Downtown Infrastructure Project Aesthetic Features Discussion

Mr. Clements stated that 60% of the final design is going to the Municipal Services, Facilities, and Infrastructure (MSFI) Committee on December 18, so if the Heritage Commission is going to send a letter with their input on the aesthetic features, it would need to get to the City Clerk's Office by this coming Monday. The motion would be to authorize the Chair to draft and send a letter to City Council, which would go to the MSFI Committee for that meeting. The letter's focus, and today's discussion, should be the specific design elements. For example, the bricks in Railroad Square – it was good to find out they are not just random bricks the City bought by the pallet load. The Heritage Commission could make recommendations on, for example, the arch sign for Railroad Square, and things like that.

Chair Powell asked for confirmation that the group wants to send feedback to the MSFI Committee. She continued that she is comfortable with writing a letter on the HC's behalf, and would have the HC approve the draft. Ms. Ellis, Ms. Zerba, and Ms. Huston nodded/said yes.

Chair Powell stated that the first step is for the HC to decide which elements they want to speak to. She continued that as she recalls, they had spoken about the lampposts, the archways, the paving designs, bollards, planters, pavers, seating on sectioned off areas of the rail trail, public art and murals, and the granite fountain re-design.

Discussion ensued, beginning with the Central Square design, as HC members expressed appreciation for how the design pays attention to maintaining the historical character of downtown. HC members shared ideas for the flagpole, such as flowers around it, and a wreath hung on the pole for certain days. They recommend adding benches to Central Square. Regarding how to weigh in on design, Mr. Clements suggested the HC use general language such as a “we recommend a classic historical feeling versus a more modern one.” Chair Powell, Ms. Huston, and Ms. Zerba agreed. Chair Powell stated that they could say, “A classic, historical feeling for the design elements,” and name them, such as lampposts, benches, fire hydrants, trash receptacles, and so on and so forth.

Regarding the short pillars that the chain link attaches to, around the perimeter, Ms. Ellis suggested “old, raggedy looking granite blocks” instead of the sharp, new ones. Discussion ensued about the granite blocks. HC members agreed that maintaining uniformity is preferable, such as using weathered granite blocks for any new pillars that are needed, so they blend in with the others. Chair Powell asked if the HC is interested in encouraging the use of local materials whenever possible, like granite. Ms. Ellis and Ms. Huston replied yes. Ms. Huston spoke of how old granite can be cleaned very nicely.

Mr. Clements asked what the group thinks about Railroad Square elements, such as the walkway. He continued that one of the designers’ ideas was a railroad track pattern for the walkway, or embedding actual railroad tracks. Discussion ensued. HC members agreed that the two rails embedded would be preferable than actual tracks with cross ties, and would be easier to maintain than paint that would wear.

Regarding the archway into Railroad Square, Ms. Huston stated that she would like it to look like the one at Ashuelot River Park. Others agreed, and spoke of how the Railroad Square one would be good with colors and materials appropriate to Railroad Square, with a design like the Ashuelot River Park one. Mr. Clements asked if they are interested in a weathered look, more than shiny. HC members replied yes.

Ms. Huston stated that she would like to see benches/seating under the small canopy they propose putting bikes under. Discussion ensued, and the HC members agreed that they encourage seating options across the downtown spaces, whenever appropriate, particularly where people will be able to appreciate the new spaces. Regarding the materials used for seating, they encourage a more traditional look, and they encourage aesthetic cohesiveness throughout the corridor.

Chair Powell stated that she does not know which of the paving styles shown as examples would be the most traditional or classic. Discussion ensued. Discussion continued about a general desire for more/better lighting on Main St. and around Central Square to help drivers at night and in the rain, such as crosswalks that light up while in use. Chair Powell suggested their letter, to stay relevant to the HC's focus, say something about how the HC encourages safety components that would encourage people to spend time downtown and increase pedestrian traffic, and they do not believe the safety components would detract from the historical character of the area. Regarding accent lighting, like the overhead string lights, the HC prefers warm/yellow light, nothing harsh.

Ms. Ellis brought up Gilbo Ave. HC members spoke about really looking forward to the revitalization of Gilbo Ave. and its potential. Chair Powell spoke positively about additional public art if it is historically minded. Discussion continued about how positive the Wall Dogs murals are. Ms. Ellis suggested the HC say something to encourage cohesiveness between however many archways there end up being. Others agreed. Ms. Zerba stated that she does not like the modern-looking walkway (shown in a photo as an example).

Chair Powell asked the group to talk about plants. Ms. Ellis suggested as many lilacs as possible. Ms. Zerba stated that she thinks the City does well with its plants. Mr. Clements agreed and suggested something like "continue the tradition of a robust landscaping." Discussion continued. Chair Powell expressed interest in having food/edible plants in the downtown planters, which would go to the community, such as the Community Kitchen. She asked what others think. Others agreed that it is a good idea, if there are places where it could work, like Gilbo Ave. Some foods, like leafy greens, look beautiful. Chair Powell spoke of supporting community members who are food insecure. Ms. Ellis stated that the HC could encourage integrating edible plants into the scope of plantings; it does not have to be all or nothing. Mr. Clements stated that plantings can be edible and ornamental.

Chair Powell asked about curbs. Discussion ensued, and HC members expressed preference for granite curb, not natural stone. Ms. Zerba stated that she likes the idea of stone blocks for people to sit on. Chair Powell replied that those seem more modern. She continued that if overall, they are trying to maintain the historical, traditional New England aesthetic, maybe one of the zones could be a bit more modern, specifically Gilbo Ave. Discussion ensued about how that might be nice but the biggest goal is cohesion.

Ms. Zerba made a motion for the Heritage Commission to authorize Chair Cauley Powell to write and send a letter to the City Council, detailing the Heritage Commission's discussion tonight. Ms. Ellis seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Chair Powell asked if there is anything else that the group should discuss, that has not been brought up yet. Ms. Huston stated that it is wonderful to see so many trees, but she wants to make sure the ones near intersections do not interfere with pedestrian visibility and safety. Chair

Powell replied that she will write something about sightlines for safety, and prioritizing pedestrian/public use of the space.

Chair Powell asked Mr. Clements about the fountain re-design and the art and decorative elements, which she heard would be a separate undertaking. She asked if the HC should try and differentiate anything. Mr. Clements replied that might be a good sign-off for the letter, saying something about how the HC recognizes that the design elements will be ongoing beyond just the reconstruction, and how they look forward to continued collaboration with City Council to make good decisions in the community. Ms. Zerba replied yes, they hope the City Council continues to consider the HC in their decision-making processes. Discussion continued about wording for the letter.

Mr. Clements stated that it sounds to him that the HC is giving good guidance, and he thinks they also sound more or less aligned with Stantec's design team and Public Works. Chair Powell asked if anyone had anything else to add. If not, she will work on drafting the letter.

4) Staff Updates

Mr. Clements stated that the master plan update continues. He continued that they have just launched the six strategic pillars: livable housing, thriving economy, connected mobility, vibrant neighborhoods, adaptable workforce, and flourishing environment. Those all surround "regional magnetism," which is the city of Keene being the loadstone for the economic and cultural pulse of Cheshire County. He encourages them to go to keenemasterplan.com and get caught up on everything on there. There are discussion boards for each pillar. He asked the HC to spread the word about these message boards to as many people as they can. He, Mari Brunner, and Megan Fortson are offering "office hours" in the Library, so people can come talk with them about the master plan.

Chair Powell asked how the message boards will be used, and what the next step is for using the information staff gets from the message boards. Mr. Clements replied that he thinks it will all be put together as part of the larger public engagement. The consultants will read through everything. The message boards will be up for at least a month, maybe longer. There is no specific closing date.

Mr. Clements stated that a letter came from the Department of Natural Cultural Resources, saying the Unitarian Universalist church on Washington St. was entered into the National Registry of Historic Places. He continued that the HC had written a letter of support when the UU church was nominated. Chair Powell stated that maybe they can do something to celebrate, and remind people about the historical places in Keene and their stories.

5) **New Business**

Mr. Clements stated that the HC does not have any CLG grant projects going on. He continued that they have been weighing in on the downtown project. At some point, they will have to brainstorm what is next.

Ms. Zerba asked if the Italian Neighborhood Project is going to be on their website at some point. Chair Powell replied that that website is not quite done. She continued that she herself has failed to deliver a written component for that, which she is working on, with Will Schoefmann. This project has been long, but very rewarding and well executed.

6) **Next Meeting – January 8, 2025**

Chair Powell stated that the next meeting will be a joint meeting with the Historic District Commission (HDC). Mr. Clements replied yes, they need to pin down (the date) for that. Chair Powell stated that the HC will help with the HDC's project. Mr. Clements replied yes, they will help with assigning local rankings to the properties, now that the inventories are done.

Chair Powell stated that the next meeting is January 8, 2025, unless they hear otherwise.

7) **Adjournment**

There being no further business, Chair Powell adjourned the meeting at 5:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,
Evan J. Clements, AICP
Planner