

City of Keene
New Hampshire

Joint Meeting of the HERITAGE COMMISSION and HISTORIC DISTRICT
COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, May 13, 2026

4:30 PM

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

Heritage Commission Members Present:

Acacia Royce, Vice Chair
Rose Carey
Marilyn Huston
Councilor Molly Ellis
Louise Zerba
Cauley Powell, Chair
Connie Joyce, Alternate (Voting)
Kathy Halverson, Alternate (Voting)

Staff Present:

Megan Fortson, Planner, Heritage
Commission Staff Liaison
Evan Clements, Planner & Zoning
Administrator, Historic District Commission
Staff Liaison

Historic District Commission Members Present:

Anthony Ferrantello
Louise Zerba
Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Hope Benik, Vice Chair
Councilor Ed Haas

Heritage Commission Members Not Present:

Julie Emineth
Jill Bouchillon, Alternate

Historic District Commission Members Not Present:

Dave Bergeron, Alternate
Russ Fleming, Alternate
Peter Poanessa, Alternate

1. Call to Order and Roll Call

Heritage Commission Chair Powell called the meeting to order at 4:30 PM. Roll call was conducted. Chair Powell invited Ms. Joyce and Ms. Halverson to be voting members tonight.

2. Heritage Commission Updates
A) Downtown Video Project

Chair Powell asked Ms. Carey to give an overview of the downtown video project. Ms. Carey stated that the original vision was to document downtown as it is in 2026. She continued that the HC members have done a lot of research, collecting data on the history of buildings and writing short stories about the buildings, and adding in where we are right now in 2026. They have more work to do on that; they have mostly done the research and started the rewrites. They are doing Central Square all the way down to Railroad St. They have several ideas about how to use the information, such as QR codes on buildings.

Chair Powell stated that they had been thinking about all the changes that will be happening in the community with the Downtown Infrastructure Project, recognizing that a lot of what people look to as resources and materials that community members from a different time period captured to document the time as it was, 50, 100, 200 years ago, and wanting to make sure the HC is doing that work as well. They are taking it upon themselves to begin the process of thinking in that way. As Ms. Carey mentioned, they now have written and photographic materials, and they are considering video components as well.

Chair Powell continued that in a way, the HC's downtown video project also ties into the Monadnock 250 Event. They had been thinking about different things to do, and that kind of fell into their lap, thanks to Councilor Ellis, who is doing so much good work on Monadnock 250.

B) Monadnock 250 Celebration

Councilor Ellis stated that Mayor Kahn had originally asked the HC to think about Monadnock 250, and the HC decided not to take it on as a group. She continued that however; she was included in the group that formed. They are planning a parade at 11:00 AM on the 4th of July, followed by a sidewalk festival, mainly on Railroad Square and Gilbo Ave. There will be a free film at the Colonial Theater, an expanded Farmer's Market, programming from the Cheshire County Historical Society, and more. The SwampBats will have a spectacular fireworks display the night before, as a kickoff. The 4 on the 4th Road Race happens in the morning. The Monadnock 250 group is trying to not clash with anything that is already planned, and to instead work together and lift up everything that is going on that weekend. It is very exciting.

Chair Powell stated that in honor of the 250th, it is an opportunity for the HC to think about ways to recognize and consider Keene's heritage and what they can do to share the work the HC does with the larger Keene community. There is a lot to think about. For example, they have been thinking a lot about how to make use of the City's social media accounts and hashtags.

Chair Powell asked if anyone has questions about the HC's work.

Mr. Ferrantello stated that he has a question about maybe a connection between what Ms. Carey was talking about and Hope Benik's work with the HDC. He continued that Ms. Benik has several draft videos. Maybe they can work together on that. It leads to what the HDC is doing with Keene State College (KSC), which they had a cursory discussion about before, regarding the need to have snippets of video representation of the historical homes that KSC students

canvassed. He thinks it would be good for them to work together, instead of everything being isolated.

Ms. Carey replied that the HC has worked on the downtown, but they do not have specific homes on lower Main St. documented, because they only went from Central Square down to the railroad tracks. Discussion ensued. Mr. Ferrantello stated that the HDC has three buildings canvassed on Court St., and they have identified the developer who has done some of these buildings as well. Maybe they could contact him, and see what other sources he might have, in terms of video documentation and that sort of thing.

Chair Powell replied that that would be an interesting way to collaborate, because the HC has been doing a number of video projects. She continued that she did not mention earlier that one of the projects they had in mind, which she and Ms. Carey have been working hard on, is with the church at the head of the square, including interviews and writings. That is in the works. There is plenty of room for expansion. Mr. Ferrantello replied yes, the KSC students are not finished. He continued that they did the first wave of building inventories. They will be going further. The church at the head of the square is a huge, wonderful representation of many different architectural styles. That would be a huge project for students to document. It could include the history of it, previous uses, and how it has transformed over the years. He thinks there is a possible connection there between the students' inventories of houses, and what the HC has done. Ms. Carey replied that she would be happy to meet and see what they can do.

3. Historic District Commission Updates
A) Outreach & Engagement Efforts

HDC Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that people who want to make changes in the Historic District come to the HDC for permission to do projects, so the HDC's primary function is sort of as a judicial board. She continued that however, Mr. Ferrantello has shared with them some of the work the HDC is doing beyond that. The HDC does not get that many applications, so they were thinking about how else to serve the mission of the Historic District in the between periods. There is a perception that the Historic District is onerous to the people who are within its bounds, and there is not necessarily a broad understanding of the value of it. There was a public referendum on extending the district boundary down Main St. at one point, in the last five or six years. Mr. Clements replied that Rt. 12 was the proposed new southern boundary with a western boundary extension down Gilbo Ave. and Emerald St. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that she remembers that at some point, there was a question of continuing it down Main St., which was dismissed out of hand. The idea was very unpopular. The Historic District has a great deal of value, economic, cultural, all sorts. The HDC wants to help the public understand some of those and do some community outreach about how special it is that Keene has a Historic District and how valuable it is to the community.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos continued that Mr. Ferrantello's effort with the college was a part of the HDC's outreach efforts. Mr. Ferrantello has already spoken about it. Mr. Ferrantello stated that he had another conversation with the architecture professor, who will help the HDC access some illustrations that the students did. He continued that the HDC can give those to the Library to display. That is the first leg of the work. The second is, as Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos said, to

educate the greater community that Keene has historic fabric to look at and to be proud of, and to not be afraid of it or shy away from it. It is an educational process by which people can know that Keene has historic fabric here, in terms of architectural motifs. Ms. Benik will try and create short video clips about that to capture people's attention. As the students continue documenting, inventorying other buildings and giving reports, it is an ongoing education for the public.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Ms. Benik has taken the lead on some social media presence through the City's accounts, with short videos. Ms. Benik replied yes, the idea is to start very simple, with something like a 15-second video beginning with "*Did you know Keene has a Historic District?*" and explain what it is and why it exists. They need to start way at the beginning, because she believes most of Keene's residents do not even know it exists.

In response to the question, HDC members replied that they think the Historic District has about 60 properties. Ms. Benik stated that a couple of years ago, the HDC distributed a flyer to all Historic District residents to make sure they knew they lived in the Historic District. She will be putting together some video content and then giving it to the City to post on their social media channels.

Chair Powell asked if there have been any applications of note or anything happening with specific buildings in the past year that the HDC wants to share.

Mr. Clements stated that the St. James Church came to the HDC last year for advice and comment regarding installing rooftop solar on the southern exposure of the parish house. He continued that they have applied to do that. They are scheduled to have a public hearing next Wednesday. Staff is still working with St. James Church to get some more information, so they might end up requesting a continuance to June, but the notice to abutters has gone out and the agenda has been posted. They propose removing the existing slate roof and putting down a standing seam metal roof to then install the solar on top.

Chair Powell stated that Ms. Zerba generously serves on both the HDC and the HC. She continued that the HC helped to create the HDC. They are meant to always have someone serving in both capacities. If this is of interest to any of her fellow HC members, when Ms. Zerba's term is done, they could consider taking on that role. It is something to think about.

Councilor Haas stated that the HDC has a tentative site visit scheduled for next Wednesday. Mr. Clements replied yes, at 3:30 PM, open to the public. Brief discussion ensued. In response to the question of whether it is necessary to remove the slate to put in the solar panels, Mr. Clements replied that he does not want to editorialize before the HDC has had a chance to hear the application, but when St. James Church came for advice and comment last year, that was the big question. At this point, staff does not feel that St. James Church has provided enough information to allow the HDC to accurately evaluate that. He continued that the standards are very clear about when you can remove slate and the documentation that is required to prove hardship. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that she appreciates that the requirements are well laid out.

Chair Powell asked if anyone else had questions for the HDC about their work. Councilor Ellis asked what types of work the HDC must give permission for. She asked if it is correct that paint color is not something the HDC considers, but rather, it is more about construction. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that if someone is doing an addition to a home, there are criteria it must meet to be acceptable on a building in the Historic District of a certain classification. She continued that there are multiple classifications within the Historic District. Something like changing windows out would not necessarily come to the HDC unless it was a larger scale change. The HDC does not address the interior of a home, only the exterior. There are many regulations around keeping the exterior consistent to the period that they found it in, because sometimes before it became a historic building, it had already had some alterations over time. It is about stairs, siding, windows, grooves, and other elements that can be seen from the road. Ms. Benik added that another one is equipment put on the roof of a downtown building which is visible from the street.

Mr. Clements stated that there are different tiers of work. He continued that some are addressed administratively, and some are significant enough to go to the HDC for review and a public hearing. A project of note is the Timoleon's building on Main St., which recently had a lot of masonry tuck pointing repair work done. That was evaluated at staff level, and the review was to make sure that the mortar they used to repair the existing mortar in the brick was compatible with historic brick. Historic brick is softer and more porous, which is one of the reasons why the City restricts it being painted. For the tuck pointing repair, the mason brought a sample to a lab and used the lab results to create a custom mortar mix that chemically matched what was on the building. He gave more information about the mortar. Chair Powell stated that the work and the building look beautiful. Mr. Clements replied that there were some structural integrity concerns and the new owner was concerned about doing the work at first because of the reputation of historic districts. He continued that staff were able to talk him into doing the work, telling him the City would be accommodating and flexible. They were, for the most part, although one Councilor raised concerns because it was surprising. The process has changed from when they had to go through to do similar repair work, but the results show that the mason did a very good job.

4. Staff Updates
A) Downtown Infrastructure Project Updates

Chair Powell asked staff for an update on where the Downtown Infrastructure Project stands, specifically as it pertains to historic heritage. Mr. Clements replied that the City received two bids on the latest round of the project, which the Municipal Services, Facilities and Infrastructure Committee is evaluating. He continued that his understanding is that the low bid is about \$2 million over what was budgeted. The first time it went out to bid, all the bids were over, so staff adjusted the project scope and timeline to align with what the bids were looking to do. There will probably need to be another alteration of scope related to the last round of bids. He knows people hoped to see details of how the work would complement the historic character of Central Square and the downtown. Some of that has been rolled back, such as the pedestrian scale lighting bollards. He does not know what happened with some of the details that were proposed for Railroad Square. They will have to see what final budget and scope look like. He asked Ms. Fortson about CLG grants.

B) Certified Local Government (CLG) Grant Opportunities

Ms. Fortson stated that she has not inspected every detail of the CLG grants, but yes, they could potentially look into that for aesthetic changes. She continued that she does not know if they could use CLG grant funds for municipal improvements. Someone had come to the HC about putting a historic plaque along the rail trail, and the Division of Historic Resources (DHR)'s response was that they could help fund the design of it, but not the installation. Thus, that might have to come out of the HC's budget if they wanted that. Regarding the downtown project, the hope and plan is for it to begin this summer, even if it is over budget.

Ms. Carey asked if there is a way the HC could help with CLG grants. Ms. Fortson replied that they can discuss it at the June HC meeting. She continued that her understanding is that the DHR expects the grant application process to start in September, because they just submitted their notice to the Federal government to get the funding.

Mr. Ferrantello asked if it is correct that the City could still negotiate with the lowest qualified bidder to do some deductive alternates to get the price lower. He continued that then perhaps if they take out a few things, they could put in historically based things they want. Mr. Clements replied that there probably will be some amount of negotiations, but unfortunately from this group's perspective, probably it will be the historical and aesthetic details that are removed to make up the more essential infrastructure improvements. He continued that at one point, the City received funds from the Northern Borders Commission's "Timber for Transit," for the solar covered parking structure behind the transportation center. He does not know if they still have that grant, or if the adjustment to the timeline affected that. Ms. Fortson replied that she does not know, either. She continued that for CLG grants, you have to have a project ready to go. Mr. Clements added that the CLG grant would help with design. For example, if they wanted to come up with an aesthetic design document for Central Square or to identify the details of where to add things, the grant money could be used for that, but not the physical purchase.

Chair Powell stated that one of the opportunities she imagined they would have by joining together in this meeting is to discuss CLG grants. She continued that she knows the HDC has successfully had their own administered, and it is one of the bread-and-butter things the HC has been doing for a while now. They do not have a current project slated. Maybe they could brainstorm about things of interest or things happening in the community that they might want to focus on. The infrastructure seems like a good opportunity to revisit downtown, if there are specific projects to consider. It kind of leans into the T-Mobile Hometown Grant program, which might yield additional funding if they choose to pursue it, for the physical elements that are being removed from the plan. She thinks they would meet many of the technical requirements for the T-Mobile grant, but it depends on the timeframe and when the project would break ground. It might not make sense to pursue it for a year or two, but they could prepare. She asked how the group feels about trying to save some of the features that have been cut, and whether they want to pursue this. If so, maybe they could form a subcommittee/working group to begin researching other grant opportunities as well.

Mr. Ferrantello stated that he likes that approach. He continued that rather than having historic things play second fiddle to the infrastructure, he thinks they should be a focal point. The historic fabric is important, and they should find the funds to do it.

Ms. Fortson stated that at the end of the day, it is an infrastructure project that needs to happen to replace necessary utilities underneath Main St. first and foremost. She continued that she has invited the City Engineer to the June HC meeting and maybe they could discuss these types of things, but they need to let the project get underway first and then see if they can then “put some decorations on the cake at the end.”

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that having this conversation now, setting the intention to work together on this, is a good place to start. She continued that it sounds wonderful to her.

Councilor Haas stated that he does not think anything related to the Historic District or heritage was taken out of the project, so they should approach it with idea of putting things in. He continued that there are different kinds of lighting, some better than others, and he does not think the lighting that was taken out was necessarily historic lighting. The opportunity here is to add on. Discussion continued, and Chair Powell stated that right now, they cannot identify exactly what they want to be put in, because they do not even know what is currently going to be in, but it is about the principle of it all, and recognizing that maybe there is something to be said or done to commemorate this moment in the community’s heritage, and to find a way to visually make a cohesive addition. She likes Councilor Haas’s point about making additions.

Mr. Ferrantello stated that regarding Ms. Fortson’s metaphor, this is not about “decorations on a cake.” He continued that the cake is already baked. It is historic cake that they need to preserve, not add to as an afterthought. Discussion continued. Ms. Fortson stated that once the HC and HDC decide what it is they want to contribute or what changes they want, they can maybe use CLG funds as a starting point for designing something and maybe get a T-Mobile Hometown grant to implement it. Chair Powell replied that she loves that idea, and it is also an opportunity to consider community engagement. She continued that although they have not done it before, she thinks there is opportunity for tabling at community events, with representatives from the HC and the HDC, to connect with people and let them know what the groups are doing. If they are working toward something specific, such as getting benches for downtown, they could have ways for the community to get involved. Having a human connection with people creates that opportunity.

Mr. Clements agreed and suggested they could target a specific area, like Railroad Square, and come up with visions and goals. Ms. Fortson stated that the T-Mobile grants are flexible, because they are split into quarters and just keep rolling. She continued that they could apply at any point in the quarter and get notified within 60 days. Chair Powell stated that there are other grant opportunities to investigate if this is something they are interested in. Ms. Fortson replied that the County’s grant manager is a great resource. Discussion continued.

Chair Powell stated that Brandee Loughlin, the CLG grant representative from the DHR, came and spoke to the HC last month, and gave a presentation. She continued that they could pass along those slides to the HDC so they can have the information, too. There are some funding

concerns on the federal and state levels, so it would be great for people to express support for the CLG grant program, which has done a lot for Keene.

Chair Powell asked if anyone had a project idea today that they wanted to discuss. She continued that they do not need to discuss anything specific today. Councilor Haas stated that it is the end of the fiscal year, and reports to the City Council from all the City's boards and commissions come up annually. The reports are, in part, an accounting of what they have done over the past year and what their mission is, but also, it is a time for the boards and commissions to advertise/celebrate what they have done. It is another way of getting communications out. The report can be a simple, written document, or a verbal report presented to the Council in person. He recommends this be an agenda item for both the HC and the HDC in the next month or two. Discussion ensued.

Ms. Carey asked if the Downtown Infrastructure Project construction will interfere with the Monadnock 250 celebration on the 4th of July. Discussion ensued. Councilor Haas stated that his take, which he tells everyone, is that everything is in flex until ground is broken. Councilor Ellis stated that the planning group tried to base the parade route around what was anticipated six months ago to be the first phase of construction. She continued that much is unknown right now, but they are trying to work around the construction. Mr. Ferrantello stated that safety is the priority. Discussion continued about the parade route.

C) T-Mobile Hometown Grant Program

(Minute Taker's note: discussed in conjunction with the previous agenda item).

5. New Business

Councilor Haas gave information about an upcoming "Mayor's Bike Ride" at 11:00 AM on Saturday.

Ms. Fortson stated that she had a Teams meeting yesterday with Ms. Loughlin from the DHR, and both the DHR and NH Preservation Alliance are interested in hosting an "office hours" event in Keene in July, potentially July 10, about 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM. She continued that the intent is for them to do a 10- to 15-minute presentation on who they are and then answer people's questions. Rather than having to schedule presentations with individual groups, this is an opportunity for people to come and ask questions and do networking with other similar organizations. The DHR and NH Preservation Alliance are trying to do this on a zero-dollar budget. She told them she would bring it up to the HC. They are looking to use a City facility, such as the Library or Parks & Rec, and they hope that the HC's budget could cover the cost of such a room reservation, which would be about \$100. She will get more information about it, as details are still being finalized. HC members can let her know if they are interested, and/or if they know of other groups that would be interested. They expect about 30 attendees.

Chair Powell stated that the HC would be glad to talk about supporting this. She continued that she loves the idea of connecting with other groups. Ms. Fortson replied that she is sending Ms. Loughlin the contact information for the Southwest Regional Planning Commission, to spread

awareness of the opportunity to other towns. She continued that people can let her know if there are specific topics they want the DHR and the NH Preservation Alliance to talk about, and she will pass that along.

Chair Powell asked if there was any other new business, or anything anyone wanted to share.

Ms. Huston stated that she will be going to DC soon. She continued that she thinks they are about ready to close their grant period, and a new one will start. She will get all the paperwork. Chair Powell stated that for anyone who does not know, Ms. Huston is a leader in the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Ms. Fortson stated that the Bicycle Pedestrian Plan update is going on right now, with a live survey on the City's website. She encourages people to fill it out before the end of July.

Ms. Joyce encouraged people to visit the fabulous exhibit the Historical Society has right now.

Brief discussion ensued about the work that is happening with the Transportation Heritage Trail.

6. Adjournment

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

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,
Megan A. Fortson, AICP - Planner