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Amesbury Historical Commission

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Amesbury Historical Commission (AHC) Meetings Minutes

Meeting Date: September 5, 2024

Location: Amesbury Council on Aging Senior Center, 68 Elm Street, Amesbury MA

Commissioners Present: Joe Finn, Chair, Chris Akelian, Dick Joltes, Steve Klomps, Jay Williamson

Meeting called to order at 7:06 PM

1. Review of past meeting minutes:
 - a. Minutes for the May 23, 2024 meeting were submitted by Dick Joltes for review. Steve made a motion to accept the May 23, 2024 meeting minutes as submitted which was seconded by Dick. The motion was passed by a vote of 5-0.
 - b. Minutes for the August 1, 2024 meeting were submitted by Steve Klomps for review. Chris made a motion to accept the August 1, 2024 meeting minutes with a minor typographical correction which was seconded by Steve. The motion was passed by a vote of 4-0.
2. Public Hearing - 230 Main Street – Demolition application. (Listed in MACRIS AME.200)
 - a. Joe explained the process for demolition applications to attendees and reviewed what was determined in the past meetings.
 - i. The AHC has deemed 230 Main Street to be historically significant.
 - ii. The only question is whether we allow it to be taken down or whether we put a demolition delay on it in the hopes that some resolution that's more satisfactory to the commission can be obtained. I don't know whether we'll vote on that tonight, it depends on how the conversation goes and what the sentiment of the commission members are. We're still well within the requirements of the bylaw in terms of responding to the applicant who is here.
 - iii. The applicant submitted a demolition packet at the last meeting and the AHC has had the opportunity to review that material.

Joe gives the public an opportunity to make their comments and/or statements at this time.

1. Peter Hoyt, District 1 - "I have the good fortune every year of taking new teachers of the Amesbury Public School System, on a historic bus tour. One of the things that gives me the greatest pleasure is pointing out to them actual historic buildings and to share their history as best I can.

It saddens me when I have to mention something as the site of, for instance, the former Osgood House, which is no longer standing on Congress Street.

My hope and prayer is that next year and future years, if I'm fortunate enough to take teachers on this tour, I can tell the story of the Valentine Bagley Tavern as it exists next to the Captain's Well and not have to talk about the site of the former Valentine Bagley Tavern. So, I thank you all for your hard work and opening it up for comments this evening. Thanks for your consideration."

Joe Finn added that the AHC, by city bylaw, can impose a demolition delay of up to 18 months on the project. That is the maximum length that any historical commission in Massachusetts can impose per state law. Joe hopes to be able to come to a solution that does not involve demolition.

2. Tom Murphy - "It's pretty hard to say anything without knowing where the issues have been or what the discussion is on. I might have questions after some of the discussion.

My problem is that I read this and it seems self-evident to me that this building should be preserved. So, what is there to say about this? It's historically important. We don't have that many buildings in town that have this sort of history to them. So, I don't know why there's any question."

Joe Finn: The applicant has had a structural engineer inspect the property and assess the structural integrity of the building and they have reported that in their opinion it would be cost prohibitive to preserve the building and that it should be demolished.

3. Malcolm McKay - "Could you describe what the demolition packet is? So, he wants to take the whole thing down, is that what he wants to do?"

Joe Finn: He wants to take the whole thing down as submitted to the building department.

Malcolm McKay - "I understand all that. But what does he want to do?"

4. Lars Johannessen, Kendrick's Court - "I spent most of my life working in old houses. We know the historical value but what about the structural value? I'm sure that the structural engineer that the applicant hired, being paid by the applicant to do this job that he wants will come up with a negative report on the structure. Whereas if the historic commission possibly could get someone in to look at the structure again, other than our laymen's eyes who say it's as strong as it can be, and stronger than many things that are built nowadays, why not opt for that as well, to seek another structural engineer that isn't tied to the applicant to figure out how severely compromised the building is? I don't think it is very compromised. Thank you.

5. Peter Bryant – “What is the town going to lose if that building goes, because there is something in there that's really unique, that we can't see anywhere else? Or is it one of many of the same sort of things? I just don't appreciate quite how unique it is.”

Steve Klomps: In general, the considerations for historically significant are two. One is architectural significance, the other is basically the social history of the property. In terms of this particular property, it consists of essentially two different buildings. the old building that faces, or is next to, Main Street, is probably one of the five oldest houses that still stands in Amesbury, probably dating from the late first period around 1730. Its frame is probably the most intact of any of the five houses of that period still standing in town. So, from that aspect, it's very important. It also shows very well its progression of modifications through the Georgian and Federal periods. And then we have the addition of the Victorian structure to the east side of the property, which was built by the Society of Friends, when it was turned into a shelter for the homeless. So that aspect is actually a very interesting addition to the social history of the property, aside from just being a good example of a Queen Anne Victorian house in town. The fact that it was owned and operated by the Society of Friends as a home for the homeless speaks very well to the Quaker influence that is rather unique to Amesbury. And then also there is the association of the house to Valentine Bagley and the Captain's Well, which is contiguous to the property. All these make it very historic, probably one of the most historic properties in town as far as I'm concerned.

6. Patty Hoyt, District 1 – “My question is, so you would be allotted 18 months, what are the kinds of options that would be considered? Is it fundraising to purchase this property? Is it trying to persuade the owner to change his mind? What are the options? What does that mean? Thank you.”

Joe Finn: There are a number of options. One option would be for someone to purchase the building and move it to a different site. Another option is if someone was willing to purchase it and the owner was willing to sell it and it could be saved that way. Another option might be to, through negotiation with the applicant, to get him to withdraw his demolition application and do something with the building itself to save it. There might be more options available, but those are some of the things. We want something to be done with the building, ideally to restore it to its previous condition.”

Patty Hoyt – “And I know it abuts the Captain's Well, but the Captain's Well is not part of that property? Is that correct?”

Steve Klomps – Yes, that is correct. The Captain’s Well is owned by the Amesbury Improvement Association. It’s a separate parcel. It was interesting researching the property that it was always assumed that the house was owned by the parents of Valentine Bagley who built the well. His mother was the daughter of Daniel Currier who purchased the home in 1745 and lived there for a long period of time. It was always assumed that the property was inherited by his parents and then so when he left to go to sea on the ship that ultimately wrecked on the coast of Arabia, that he would have left his parents’ home in Amesbury. It was four years later when he finally made it back to Amesbury, and to fulfill his oath or his commitment to the Lord that he would dig a well if he would survive the ordeal of crossing the desert, he dug it next to what we thought was his parents’ house. What we found out is that his father actually died 11 years before he went to sea and that the house was owned still by his grandfather. It is probable that his mother, himself, and his brothers went to live with his grandfather. So, it was grandfather’s house that he left, and his grandfather’s house that he came back to, which is why the well is located where it is.

7. John Macone, Kendrick’s Court – “I think the history of this house in Amesbury is clear. We also have to look at its history in a broader sense, its importance in history throughout this region, which is to say, look at how many houses there are around here that are attached to literary figures and also to literature. And there’s very few left in New England. We have the old Mane in Concord. There’s the Robert Frost House in Derry, New Hampshire, Whittier’s House in Haverhill, and there’s this house. This is one of those few survivors that we have, that we can attach to an important piece of American literature. And I think that pumps it up beyond the importance of Amesbury into this region.

I also want to say I hope that your decision is to extend this delay for as long as possible. I’ve been researching what the options are. I hope that the developer will look on this as a piece of American history that should be preserved. And if not, there are actions that the town can take that are legal, that have been used in other communities, that could be applied here, that would protect the house in perpetuity. We would need about a year to get it done, and it would happen within our town government. But it will protect this house, and it will severely limit the options for the person who owns it. So that’s something that’s also on the table that needs to be worked on.”

Joe Finn – Responding to Lars Johannessen’s comments: All the commission members have had the opportunity to visit the site to see the architectural elements and make an evaluation as to the structural integrity. Joe has lived in a house that was built in 1745 and it has structural supports in the basement, so seeing the supports in the basement of 230 Main Street was not a concern. As a layman there is a question whether the condition is as bad as the structural engineer has stated in his report. Joe cannot dictate to the commission, but he feels it would be incumbent on them to get a second opinion in the form of a peer review or second structural engineering report to see if there is agreement on the conclusions.

Lars Johannessen – added that the Holy Family Church had 2 buildings they wanted to demolish and luckily the Catholic Church decided to consult a historic architect with contacts to a historical structural engineer who was able to point out all the features and significance of the buildings, and how they were built really well. A building like this can withstand lots of years of abuse as long as it’s not planted in the ground. And this is not.

8. Nick Cracknell from the Office of Community and Economic Development in Amesbury – Knowing that a second opinion request from the AHC would be a logical extension of the demolition packet, Nick has reached out to 4 structural engineers who primarily inspect historic structures and sent out a draft scope of what would be requested from them. The scope is to review the structural report submitted by the applicant, number one, and to inspect the property, which would presumably require the authorization of the property owner for that structural engineer that you eventually hire to be able to get access to the property. Otherwise, it's going to be a very limited assessment. And I think that's what we're going to do. So, I'm going to leave it at that. Thank you.

The draft scope below was created to help the AHC:

- 1- Review the prior engineer's report.
- 2- Visit the site to review the existing conditions.
- 3- Prepare a written report to either confirm or refute the findings of the structural report.
- 4- Attend the public meeting to present the findings and answer any questions from the AHC that were not answered in the report.

Nick Cracknell – continues saying that there is a budget in his office for this, within reason, but that it could take a couple of weeks or longer to complete the process. Additionally, the planning department is looking to take an incentive-based approach to invest and protect its history. They are trying to work with people that come to Amesbury and invest in this community and invest in its history to protect its history, to enhance it. There's extraordinary historical resource value to this building.

Currently the zoning is not conducive to help the applicant in repurposing the building. The commercial district is not able to allow historical preservation special permits. There is an amendment in front of the city council to allow HPSP for commercial zoned properties. Building code requirements are another hurdle, but there are exemptions in the code at the discretion of the building inspector to facilitate repurposing.

This amendment is not being done just for this building. Everything on Elm Street that's historic from the Rocky Hill Meeting House all the way down to Cammett Engineering's building, are all in an office park district. They are not allowed to use that permit. We've added that in, not just commercial but office park, because we've seen there's gaps in what we're doing and the way we want to use that ordinance.

So, I think there is a pathway here to not have to sit here for 18 months. I think there's a pathway that will leave Bob in a better position so that all of us will be looking at that building for the next 200 years. I'm hopeful anyway. But I will need to bring you, per a vote, a motion, a second, and a vote in favor of a second opinion, these responses to the next meeting so you can select somebody and we can get that done.

Robert Zeraschi (applicant) – requested to submit the abutters list, certified mail receipts and the newspaper tear sheet for the two separate weeks, and the newspaper affidavit for this public hearing and wanted to make sure he didn't miss the opportunity to do so at this time.

John Macone – Is Nick’s comment the actual plan? Will the house be saved if the zoning amendment passes?

Nick Cracknell - No, not necessarily. The zoning would not necessarily save the building but it would take away the barrier for the applicant to do a preservation project.

Robert Zeraschi – The numbers have to work out. I’ve done many projects where the houses have been saved. This is a very tough project and it’s not financially feasible to save this. If something were to happen with the town to make it financially feasible, he would be open to preserving either as a residential project or something else.

Jay Williamson – wants to add to Nick’s comments: “I do feel that, like with our rights, they’re not taken all at once, they’re eroded little by little. And I’d say that the architectural heritage of the East Coast is unique to the entire country. There are only so many 18th century buildings that exist. And look at the campus as different assets, and some assets might be more important to preserve than other assets. I’m not going to get involved in that. But there’s somebody that I think that can, and might be familiar to some of you, is somebody that might be able to work in concert with the engineers. I don’t believe he’s an engineer.

A fellow by the name of John Cole lives in Merrimack, had been a property manager for Historic New England, and he worked extensively with Abbott Lowell Cummings, and some of you might know him as being the foremost American architectural heritage historian. John had overseen countless preservation projects in New England as well as Arkansas. And he even taught historical preservation at the Harvard School of Design. And if possible, and if I can get a hold of him, I’d like to maybe add him into the conversation.”

Joe Finn - Okay, would he be looking for a feed into this?

Jay Williamson - I don't know that. I think at this stage in his career, he might have an intellectual interest in doing so, but I can't speak for him.

Joe Finn - Okay.

Steve Klomps – makes a motion to contact and engage an independent structural engineer based on the criteria that were recommended by Nick Cracknell as listed below:

- 1- Review the prior engineer’s report.
- 2- Visit the site to review the existing conditions.
- 3- Prepare a written report to either confirm or refute the findings of the structural report.
- 4- Attend the public meeting to present the findings and answer any questions from the AHC that were not answered in the report.

Steve’s motion is seconded by Dick Joltes.

All in favor, the motion passes 5-0.

Dick Joltes – makes a motion to continue the public hearing to the October 2024 meeting.
Steve Klomps – seconded the motion.

All in favor – the motion passes 5-0.

New Business:

3. 201 Elm Street - (Listed in MACRIS AME.281)
 - a. Greg Southard has purchased the property. He will be coming to the AHC for a HPSP consistent with what he did on Center Street. He will restore the building and sell it as a single family and add 2 or more houses on the rest of the property.
4. A motion to adjourn is made by Dick Joltes and seconded by Steve Klomps.
 - a. Vote is 5-0 all in favor.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:30 PM.

Respectively submitted,
Chris Akelian