

Kenneth J. Hopkins
Mayor

Steven Torregrossa
Chairman



Eric Army

Jillian Finkle

Laura Kline

Michael Landry

Amy Ricci

Brent Wiegand

HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
Cranston City Hall
869 Park Avenue, Cranston, Rhode Island 02910

MINUTES
6:00 PM, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 1st, 2022
CRANSTON CITY HALL – 3RD FLOOR CONFERENCE ROOM

1. Call to Order

Chairman Steve Torregrossa called the Historic District Commission meeting to order at 6:11 p.m. in Cranston City Hall, 869 Park Avenue.

The following Commissioners were in attendance for the meeting: Co-Chairman Eric Army, Jillian Finkle, Laura Kline, Amy Ricci, and Brent Wiegand.

The following Planning Department members were in attendance: Doug McLean, Principal Planner; and Alex Berardo, Planning Technician.

Chairman Torregrossa asked the Commission to begin the evening's discussions at Agenda Item #3.

2. Application for Certificate of Appropriateness
Property: 150 Scituate Avenue, AP 12, Lot 3109

Applicant: NPM Realty

Contractor: Jamie Harrington

Project Description: Application to make numerous exterior improvements to single family dwelling, detached garage, and other fences/structures on property.

Chairman Torregrossa began by reminding the Commission that they familiarized themselves with the project during a site visit in June. Mr. McLean noted he was not present for the meeting but said he has worked with Mr. Harrington since that time to ensure the feedback that the Commission provided during that meeting was incorporated into the plans.

Mr. Harrington then reviewed the final shape of the proposal in response to that feedback. Regarding sewers, he said he was working with Nick Ritchie of Rhode Island Construction Equipment to determine the best option for the sewer system. Mr. Harrington suspects the house will need an E-5 connection but the lateral could come in from two directions: one directly from the right-of-way, and the other crossing over a neighboring property. After speaking with Chairman Torregrossa as well as Edward Tally, the City's liaison to Veolia Water, he feels "95% sure" the best option will be to connect directly from the right-of-way. Mr. McLean reminded the Commission that its interest in this matter was whether the connection involved any changes to the exterior of the property, namely the potential replacement of a fence. Mr. Harrington then added no changes to the foundation of the house would be needed for the connection.

Mr. Harrington also said he planned to lower the existing grade in the front of the house by 5-6 inches and to remove the existing bushes to ensure their roots don't cause further deterioration. Aside from re-glazing the sashes, replacing those sections of siding that have deteriorated beyond repair (i.e. AZEK skirt boards replacing existing plywood skirt boards), fixing a curtain wall, and installing a 36-inch rear door (slightly wider than existing), the house would be essentially unaltered.

Mr. McLean asked if the large tree on the property would be impacted by the work, as the Commission would have jurisdiction over major landscape alterations, but Mr. Harrington said no.

Lastly, Mr. Harrington asked for confirmation that he could install a steel door on the detached garage, as he raised during the site visit. Mr. Army said he could, but should ensure it is appropriate to the garage's time period (c. 1950s). When asked whether the Commission had any input to offer regarding color, Chairman Torregrossa said it is not officially in their purview. Mr. Army said he'd seen some colonial-era properties make use of a bright ochre color, as an example of what might be appropriate, but Chairman Torregrossa said the overall emphasis should be to find a color that complements the original house.

Upon motion made by Mr. Army, and seconded by Ms. Ricci, the Historic District Commission voted unanimously (6-0) to approve the project as presented.

- 3. Application for Certificate of Appropriateness**
Property: 238 Wilbur Avenue, AP 18, Lot 1784
Applicant: Sarah Kern
Contractor: LOPCO Contracting
Project Description: Application to replace basement access door with new steel door and frame to match existing style and dimensions.

Chairman Torregrossa said the Commissioners received photographs of the project by email prior to the meeting, and Mr. McLean said all replacements will be in-kind.

Tom Lopatosky, of LOPCO Contracting, explained that there had been a moisture issue which resulted in the frame for the basement door rotting out. He also noted that there is no boiler or mechanical equipment behind the door, but rather an unfinished basement. He passed around printed copies of the relevant photographs.

Chairman Torregrossa asked if the existing door was a double-wood door, but Mr. Lopatosky said it was double-steel, but that they want to keep the wooden frame. When asked why he wasn't proposing a switch to a steel frame, Mr. Lopatosky said a frame could be treated in ways that a door could not, so it wouldn't be an issue to leave the wooden frame. He offered to check with the manufacturer to determine whether it would be advisable to switch to a steel frame. Mr. Army said if he were replacing a wooden door, the conversation would be different, and Mr. McLean said the proposal would replace both door and frame in-kind (material, dimension, style). Mr. Army asked what style was on the door; Mr. Lopatosky said it was a six-panel. Upon motion made by Mr. Army, and seconded by Mr. Wiegand, the Historic District Commission voted unanimously (6-0) to approve the application as presented.

- 4. Application for Certificate of Appropriateness**
Property: 238 Wilbur Avenue, AP 18, Lot 1784
Applicant: Sarah Kern
Contractor: Heritage Restoration
Project Description: Application to restore front door, back door, back windows, and six arched attic windows.

After noting the previous property was the subject of this agenda item as well, Mr. McLean said that the applicant decided to replace the wooden door with another wooden door instead of fiberglass after speaking with Staff and the Commission during the pre-application process.

Chairman Torregrossa asked if the style would be maintained, to which a representative of Heritage Restoration said yes. The representative said it was a French-style door with glass, which is not well-insulated and difficult to replace. The replacement window would have two panels instead of four. The other set of "doors to nowhere" would be replaced with windows. He also explained that the only side of the building that has been modified is the rear side, so that's why they initially wanted to replace with a fiberglass door.

Mr. Army asked if the existing windows were all 1 over 1; the representative said that was correct for the most part (the front sash had more snowflake-style windows and a few others). Mr. Army also asked for

more information about the doors being replaced with windows. Ms. Sarah Kern (applicant) said the replacements would mirror the dimensions and style of the adjacent window. Mr. Army then asked if the applicant was intent on retaining the “divided light” (15-pane) glass in the doors – he said it would be fine to replace in-kind as they currently propose, but since they were not historic, there was no firm requirement that they make this selection.

Upon motion made by Ms. Kline, and seconded by Ms. Finkle, the Historic District Commission voted unanimously (6-0) to approve the application as presented.

5. Application for Certificate of Appropriateness

Property: 5 Turner Ave, AP 18, Lot 481

Applicant: Pam and John Lawson

Contractor: Genesis Remodeling

Project Description: Application to seek preferred option between 1) removing “stack” on top of detached accessory building, or 2) demolishing the entire detached accessory building and replacing with new accessory structure.

Mr. McLean said the applicants (John and Pam Lawson) originally intended to submit a full plan for consideration at this meeting, but ultimately decided to seek the Commission’s preliminary input before preparing a final plan. He encouraged the Commissioners to keep an open mind to all potential solutions to the applicants’ situation, as the HDC’s regulations call for repairs before replacements, but also has carve-outs for fiscal constraints.

Ms. Kline asked the applicants to speak to the structure in question. Mr. Lawson said he believes the building was built in 1887 and that it is listed in the historic register as “the old Pratt workshop.” He noted there were a few other examples in the state, with several being used as firehouses. His building is used as a two-car garage, with a cement pad floor that was poured after the structure was built. Mr. Lawson said electricity to the house comes through the building.

Mr. Lawson also said the building was not built on a foundation, so the weight of the large tower on the building’s northeast corner has caused that corner to sink to the extent that the applicants have had to trim the garage door twice to compensate for the change in elevation. The tower is accessible via a ladder stairway up to the first level; the ladder goes further up, but the Lawsons don’t allow anyone to climb higher than the first level. Mr. Torregrossa noted that the applicants had an engineering report prepared, which found the garage did not have a foundation and considered the matter a public safety issue.

The Lawsons explained that they sought quotes for how much it would take to resolve the public safety issue that the building presents, and when they realized how many ways that issue could be resolved, they decided to ask for the Commission’s input on which courses of action would be acceptable from the historic standpoint. They passed around documentation for one such work estimate. They explained that one engineer believed the structure needed to come down, which he estimated would cost somewhere around \$48,000, but he later noted it could be stabilized from the inside. That option would involve placing the building on 8-10 concrete piers, with sonotubes 40 inches below grade.

Mr. Torregrossa asked the Lawsons whether the building was safe in its present condition; they said it was not, but it has been standing for 140 years. Mr. Army asked if the tower’s internal structure stopped at the roofline or continues to the ground. Mr. Lawson confirmed it stops at the roofline. Mr. Army observed that their quotes indicate somewhere around \$150,000-\$200,000 for tower restoration. He also asked if they found the current configuration of their garage acceptable, which they confirmed.

Speaking to the garage itself, Mr. McLean said that if the garage were to be demolished, they could not build another one in its place by-right, as City Code does not allow garages to be built in the front yard as this one is. He said they would need to seek a variance in that case, but Mr. Torregrossa said they could essentially transfer the “grandfathered” status of the old garage to a potential new one as long as they left at least one wall of the old garage standing.

The Lawsons said they would prefer whichever option is least expensive, but acknowledge the historic nature of the building, and asked if the Commission would consider compromise options, such as retaining the garage but eliminating most of the chimney. Of the options that would retain the garage, their current preference would be to support it from underneath and keep as much of what currently exists as they could. In that option, they said, at least some reference to the tower would remain, and they could use that area for storage space.

Mr. Army said the tower was a character-defining feature and the applicants are stewards of the historic structure, so he felt the Commission should work with them to thoroughly assess whether it's feasible to preserve that element. He noted that any option that will leave the Lawsons with a garage, whether retaining the existing structure or demolishing and building a new one, will set them back \$100-150,000, so there is room to consider what outcome everyone would like to see for the value. Ms. Lawson noted that the engineer hadn't considered options that would preserve the tower in full, and that even the pylon option assumes removing the tower. Mr. Lawson asked if the modification would take the property off the historic register; Mr. McLean said the local historic zoning district would continue to apply to the house and property even if the garage were demolished.

Mr. Army then described how he envisioned the process working in a potential demolition scenario. He said the Commission would want to see a cost comparison of demolition vs. preservation/rehabilitation, boiled down to the applicant's and the Commission's respective first preferences. Ms. Lawson said they have estimates for a demolition option as well as a preservation option and explained that she and her husband were asking for the Commission to confirm whether or not it realistically expected the Lawsons to pay for a full preservation option. Ms. Kline and Mr. Army said the Commission will need to examine the cost comparison before making a decision, as the way the Commission handles this matter could set a precedent for how it approaches other comparable situations in the future. Ms. Lawson then asked again if the Commission could imagine accepting a compromise solution in which the tower is removed and the garage is retained through supporting it from underneath. Mr. Army said it would be better to have some preservation than none, but noted compromise could come in other forms, such as eschewing the incorporation of more historical materials in order to preserve the structure for a longer period of time.

Mr. McLean reviewed the process of submitting a formal application and its relationship to the building permit process, and finally thanked the Lawsons for discussing their ideas with the Commission.

6. Commission Feedback on DRAFT Comprehensive Plan Update – Historic Preservation Element

Mr. Torregrossa said there weren't many changes made in the new draft version of the Historic Preservation Comp Plan element compared to the version currently on the books. Mr. McLean agreed and described the new draft as a "light touch" that primarily reviewed and updated the historic inventory.

Mr. McLean noted that one of the only major proposed goals was to pursue the creation of new historic districts and asked if that was still a goal for the Commission, given the lack of success in recent efforts. Mr. Torregrossa said there's no clear potential for new districts at the moment but opportunities sometimes open up when the personalities who form the most vocal opposition leave the picture for one reason or another. Ms. Finkle said she didn't want to remove that goal from the element in case circumstances change in the future and people become more open to creating new districts. Mr. Torregrossa echoed Ms. Finkle's logic and said he believed all potentially-viable historic districts should be mentioned in the element to leave as many options open as possible.

Mr. Army called attention to a section towards the end of the draft element which noted that setback regulations in the City's zoning code do not support the character of existing National Register districts. Mr. Army asked if the element should call for the Commission to study this matter in greater detail and propose the creation of an overlay district for these historic areas that would establish more appropriate setback standards. Mr. McLean said under the existing Zoning code, applicants have the option to conform either to the baseline minimum setback for a given zone or to an alternative setback that is determined by the average of all setbacks within 200 feet on the same street. Mr. Army said he was picturing a mandatory

setback range; Mr. McLean said if the City's code were to speak to that degree of specificity on setbacks for historic areas, it would probably take the form of regulations associated with new local historic districts. As an example, Mr. Army said Providence has different setback standards for "A Streets" and "B Streets;" Mr. McLean said it's been difficult recently to reach consensus on any zoning changes, even those which are fairly mundane or administrative in nature.

7. Next Meeting

The date of the next Historic District Commission meeting is to be determined.

Prior to adjournment, Ms. Kline informed the Commission that a law passed in June requiring members of Historic District Commissions to complete a 3-5 hour training at some point within two years of appointment, as well as a 1-hour continuing education session once per year.

8. Adjourn

Upon motion made by Ms. Finkle, and seconded by Ms. Kline, the Historic District Commission voted unanimously (6-0) to adjourn the meeting at 8:11 p.m.