

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, January 18, 2023

4:30 PM

**Council Chambers,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Russ Fleming, Chair
Sophia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Vice Chair
Councilor Catherine Workman
Hope Benik
Gregg Kleiner, Alternate
Peter Poanessa, Alternate

Staff Present:

Evan Clements, Planner
Jesse Rounds, Community Development
Director

Members Not Present:

Andrew Weglinski
David Bergeron, Alternate
Hans Porschitz

1) Call to Order and Roll Call

Mr. Fleming called the meeting to order at 4:30 PM. Mr. Clements called the roll.

2) Election of Chair and Vice Chair

Mr. Fleming nominated himself as Chair. Mr. Poanessa seconded the nomination. The Commission unanimously approved Mr. Fleming as Chair. Mr. Fleming nominated Sophia Cunha-Vasconcelos as vice chair. Councilor Workman seconded the nomination. The Commission unanimously approved Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos as Vice Chair.

3) Minutes of November 16, 2022

Ms. Benik made a motion to adopt the minutes of the November 16, 2022 meeting. Councilor Workman seconded the motion. The Commission passed the motion. Vice Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos abstained, as she was not present at the November 16, 2022 meeting.

4) Staff Updates

A) List of 2022 Minor Project Approvals as of December 31, 2022

Mr. Clements noted he would be providing two updates that were not included on the agenda.

Mr. Clements stated that work was done on the property at 34 Court Street, including tuckpointing and minor maintenance to the existing brick façade. Since the property is a Primary Resource, the work required review. The owner of the property, Paragon Digital, LLC, was easy to work with because they were motivated to maintain the property's historic character. Mr. Clements expressed that the work came out well.

He stated that the Diplomat Cigar Bar wanted a seasonal patio at 21 Davis Street. The Diplomat was motivated to ensure the patio was a benefit to the District. The Diplomat chose materials to partition the patio that considered the District's character. Mr. Clements thought the work came out well.

Mr. Clements stated that he was less familiar with the work done for the Edward Jones office at 43-45 Roxbury Street. The property is ranked as a Non-Contributing Resource in the Downtown Core District. Existing vacant space was converted into an Edward Jones office. A condenser was installed along the southern building façade and screened.

Post Offices, LLC proposed installing seven condensers on the roof of the loading area of the building at 34 West Street. The mechanical equipment was screened. The property is a Primary Resource.

The Monadnock Area Peer Support Agency proposed installing an outdoor seating area at 24 Vernon Street. As part of its conditional use permit, it was required to screen the area. A vinyl stockade fence consistent with District standards was installed to screen the area.

Chair Fleming asked Mr. Clements whether the Edward Jones office was a ground floor office. Mr. Clements stated he was not familiar with the project but could find out and follow up. Chair Fleming stated it was not necessary, as he was just curious.

For the first new staff update, Mr. Clements stated that the Community Development Department is proposing a budget for the Commission to create and mail an informational pamphlet to property owners in the District. After researching the cost of such a project, staff would budget an appropriate amount for the project. There would be an initial mailing to all properties within District. As a property ages into the period of significance, the owner would receive a mailing alerting it to its obligations to the District. As a property changes ownership, the new owner would also receive a mailing.

Mr. Poanessa asked for clarification about the period of significance. Mr. Clements responded that the period begins 50 years from today's date. Chair Fleming asked whether the Commission has jurisdiction over the current post office in Keene, which he recalled was built during the Nixon administration. Mr. Clements stated he believes government use is exempt from zoning and therefore likely to be exempt from Historic District regulation.

Chair Fleming commented positively about a suggestion made at the November Commission meeting to include a cover letter with the mailing that states, “You are in the Historic District.” Mr. Clements agreed.

For the second new staff update, Mr. Clements stated the certified local government (CLG) grant cycle for 2024 is beginning. The Heritage Commission is working on two grants. One is for a neighborhood story mapping tool through ArcMap’s story map website program. The second is for a project with Cheshire County, the Recovering Black Stories program, which will kick off soon. A professor and her students from Northeastern University will be collecting information and weaving it together into stories about the Black community in Keene over the last 100 years or so.

Mr. Clements stated that in 2011, the Historic District was extended down Gilbo Avenue, but the properties were never properly inventoried. There are CLG grants available to fund historic preservation activities, like conducting the inventory. Mr. Clements asked if any Commission members were interested in working with staff on a grant application. He believed they would be in a better position to discuss the historical significance of the area than him, as he has only been with the City of Keene for about eight months. Once the application is completed, staff would work on follow-up activities, such as working with a professional to conduct the inventory. Councilor Workman expressed support for seeking grant funds for the inventory but indicated she did not have time to work on the application. Chair Fleming expressed support for seeking funds for the program. He also expressed interest in volunteering his time.

Vice Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos made a motion to undertake the grant application, which Mr. Kleiner seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

5) Discussion Items

A) Downtown Infrastructure Improvement Project Update

Chair Fleming stated that he asked Mr. Clements to include this item on the agenda, not for the Commission to debate options or take any positions, but for the Commission to be informed of what is taking place in Keene. He noted WKBK asked if it was appropriate to ask questions about the project at the meeting. He said it was not appropriate.

Mr. Rounds showed the City of Keene’s webpage with frequently asked questions (FAQs) about the project. Commission members should direct people with questions to the page for the time being. They should also direct them to a public workshop with the consultants working on the conceptual design for the project, scheduled for January 30, 2023 at 5:00 PM. at Heberton Hall or to a public comment meeting with the City Council, which is the decision-making body for the project, scheduled for February 21, 2023 at Keene High School’s auditorium.

Mr. Rounds showed a timeline for the project from the FAQs webpage. The issue of infrastructure beneath Main Street was first raised in 2017 when the City Council was discussing

capital improvement plans, which the Council used to approve every year and now approves every two years after public hearings. Last year, the Public Works Department requested bids for a conceptual design and hired Stantec to produce conceptual designs. That was the first step in what started as an infrastructure project. It became clear all of Main Street had to be torn up from building-front to building-front, while respecting Central Square – not a right-of-way – to complete the infrastructure work. This became an opportunity to address issues like sidewalk width, accessibility, parking, and movement through the area. At its core, though, this is an infrastructure project to address issues like 100-plus-year-old water lines and sewer lines connected to the storm water system, which federal law no longer allows. Early in the design stage, the Mayor initiated an ad hoc steering committee to review designs. In December 2022, the committee voted to support a specific set of designs.

Now is the stage for public comment. January 30 and February 21 are those opportunities. This is the first step. The City Council may schedule more such opportunities. The current design is very conceptual. More design work will be done. Details like the type of curbing or lighting will come during the next stage. The Public Works Department will want input when the time comes, after the City Council decides on a design direction. Since much of the project is located in the Historic District, this Commission's input will be important during the next stage.

Mr. Rounds has heard a lot of speculation about the budget for the project. This design phase was bid out for \$520,000, a tiny amount of the larger project budget. About half the budget has been spent thus far. There will be more to come from Stantec, which has provided a lot of information that staff has pushed out to the public as quickly as possible.

Mr. Poanessa asked whether the \$520,000 bid included engineering. Mr. Rounds stated that he believed it included the initial engineering but would need to follow up to confirm whether the physical engineering was included. Mr. Poanessa asked if there was a rough budget for the entire project. Mr. Rounds stated he did not have the figure in his head and directed Mr. Poanessa to the FAQs webpage.

Chair Fleming asked if there were slides with an overview of the conceptual designs. Mr. Rounds showed renderings from about two weeks ago from the FAQs webpage. He noted the green space of Central Square is unaffected in the design. He noted the addition of public space from the north end of the existing greenspace to the sidewalk in front of the church. The public space would remain accessible to emergency vehicles.

Mr. Rounds noted there was a lot of discussion in the technical review committees and the ad hoc committee about options for the south end of Central Square. The City Council will decide what makes the most sense for the intersection. Mr. Rounds showed drawings of the existing intersection and a proposed mini-roundabout. The drawings indicate how long cars might be backed up at the existing intersection versus the proposed mini-roundabout. He noted it was a mini-roundabout and not a roundabout because a roundabout contemplates a specific geometric design. Mr. Rounds stated there was a separate project website with more information, including

renderings of additional designs. He believed the website was still accepting comments. A link to the project website is on the top of the FAQs webpage. Staff will continue to post updates on the FAQs webpage up to or through the public information sessions. There is a link to the FAQs webpage on keenenh.gov.

Ms. Benik asked whether proposals were sought from engineering firms other than Stantec. Mr. Rounds stated there was a national search.

Chair Fleming asked what the red area on the right of the rendering was. Mr. Rounds clarified it was the public space accessible to emergency vehicles. The space is meant for walking, cycling, and maybe even skateboarding. The red on the rendering is not meant to indicate brick but to differentiate it from the road.

Mr. Poanessa asked whether there would be a slip lane for the mini-roundabout. Mr. Rounds indicated there was at least one in the rendering, but he was unsure whether the mini-roundabout would end up with any. He noted a lot was still subject to change. More engineering decisions would be made after the City Council decides on a direction to pursue.

B) Neighborhood Heritage Districts

Mr. Fleming stated that, at a recent public meeting, a woman discussed neighborhood preservation districts, noting there was a publication on the subject. Mr. Rounds confirmed an online publication by a preservation specialist on “neighborhood preservation districts” that discussed the pros and cons of such districts, as well as the process for creating them.

Mr. Rounds explained that a neighborhood preservation district differs from a historic preservation district. A neighborhood preservation district seeks to preserve the character of an area rather than the specific architectural and design features of the buildings in an area. A preservation district is focused on an area’s rather nebulous character or feel. A historic preservation district is focused on the time significance of buildings in an area.

Mr. Rounds discussed the process for creating a neighborhood preservation district. The master plan must reference the preservation of a neighborhood. A group of residents must propose a neighborhood preservation district to the Commission or another body, which must then propose the creation of a neighborhood preservation district to the Planning Board for approval. If approved, the group of residents would draft a proposal and ordinance to be approved by the City Council. If approved, the Planning Board and the neighborhood’s advisory committee would work together to review and approve projects for adherence to certain criteria meant to maintain the district’s character, such as the type of house. Unlike a historic preservation district, a neighborhood preservation district would not be so concerned with window or door styles, for example.

Chair Fleming stated that the woman at the public hearing mentioned School Street and Summer Street. He noted part of Island Street is primarily an Italian neighborhood. He noted they are all outside the Historic District. He noted neighborhood preservation districts are very grassroots-driven but involves Planning Board approval. Mr. Rounds concurred, indicating the Planning Board and the advisory committee could, for example, hold a joint public hearing.

In response to Chair Fleming's question, Mr. Rounds stated he was not aware of any neighborhood preservation districts in New Hampshire and was not aware of any official proposals for them in Keene. He noted New Hampshire statute allows innovative land use controls, which a neighborhood preservation district would fall under. While neighborhood preservation districts were often discussed, none were created in the end.

6) New Business

Councilor Workman stated she was getting a lot of questions about the sale of the Ramunto's building and, in particular, about any changes to the existing patio area. She asked staff whether any changes were in the Commission's purview. Mr. Clements stated that staff would determine whether any changes would affect the site plan, and, if so, whether the Planning Board or the Commission or both would be best-suited to consider the changes. As an example, Mr. Clements mentioned the Commission and not the Planning Board considered the Diplomat Cigar Bar's seasonal patio plans. He stated, ultimately, it would be the Community Development Director's call. Councilor Workman stated the Ramunto's sale was in the news a lot lately, and she foresees public concern about the property.

7) Upcoming Dates of Interest

- A) Next HDC Meeting: February 15, 2023 – 4:30 PM, City Hall, 2nd Floor Council Chambers**
- B) HDC Site Visit: February 15, 2023 – 3:30 PM (to be confirmed)**

Mr. Clements stated the deadline to submit applications for consideration at the February 15, 2023 Commission meeting is Friday, and he is not aware of any applications in the pipeline. He indicated he would advise the Commission about any applications early next week. He stated he is trying to be more communicative with the Commission, including about the need for a meeting if there are no applications to consider.

8) Adjournment

There being no further business, Chair Fleming adjourned the meeting at 5:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Wendy Chen, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,
Evan J. Clements, AICP – Planner
Additional edits by,
Katie Kibler, Clerk's Office