

BELMONT HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

January 1, 2005

Town Hall

Meeting Minutes

Commission Members Attending: Co-chairs Richard Cheek and Lydia Ogilby, Linn Hobbs, Arleyn Levee, Richard Pichette, Nancy Richards, Michael Smith, Sharon Vanderslice. Absent: Paul Bell, Lisa Harrington, Matthew Genta.

20 SOMERSET STREET

Attending: Joe and Sarah DeStefano, prospective buyers; Don Thea, owner; Frank Aguilar, neighbor; Angelo Firenze, Board of Selectmen.

Mr. DeStefano came before the Commission to seek permission to demolish this 1956 split-level house, which has a 1978 rear addition. In its place, he wanted to construct a house 31 feet high and 45 feet wide, with an attached two-story barn measuring 25 feet square, the design of which would harmonize with the antique homes that abut the property.

Angelo Firenze spoke in favor of the demolition, saying that there were 50 other split-level homes like this one in town. Frank Aguilar also spoke in favor saying that there was a cluster of 19th century homes in the neighborhood and that 20 Somerset was out of character with these and not extraordinarily distinctive in its own right.

Commission members expressed reservations about the plan, however, saying that the duty of the Historic District Commission was to preserve the buildings within the Historic District, regardless of their size or relative level of historic and/or architectural merit. The mix of periods and house styles within the District is part of the character of the neighborhood, they said, reflecting the differing needs and ambitions of past generations of homebuilders in Belmont.

Although 20 Somerset was a non-conforming house (less than 50 years old) when the District was established in 1975, the passage of time has added to its architectural value. Split-levels of this kind are no longer popular, and although a good number still survive, their small size and unpretentious appearance make them prime candidates for demolition in today's housing market. Consequently, as a good example of a 1960s split-level, 20 Somerset may one day become one of the few survivors of its style in Belmont. It is this possibility that underlies the need to preserve buildings that are representative of all periods within the District, including those homes that may be modest in size and elaboration.

Michael Smith agreed with Mr. DeStefano that some inappropriate changes had been made to the house since it was first built in the mid-1960s, but that this was not a reason to tear it down. Mr. Smith cited the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation

of historic buildings. “Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings shall not be undertaken.”

Among the distinctive architectural features of 20 Somerset, Mr. Smith said, are the Roman-style bricks in the front facade, which were commonly used to emphasize the horizontality of a home – a technique first employed by architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright during the Prairie Style era of 1900-1920. The residence next door at 585 Pleasant has similar Roman-style bricks. In addition, Mr. Smith said, 20 Somerset fits its small frontage well with beautiful, original stone retaining walls leading to a still-intact front entrance.

Arleyn Levee said that 1950s-era houses were now considered eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Other members said it was important to preserve the distinctive landscape surrounding this house.

No formal vote was requested or taken, but the Commission said that it was not likely to approve an application for demolition.

20 CHURCH STREET TELECOMMUNICATIONS ANTENNA

Attending: Adam Sullivan, Sullivan Consulting Group.

Mr. Sullivan said that his firm had been hired by T-Mobile to work with the Massachusetts Historical Commission to secure approval for the installation of telecommunications antennas on the roof of 20 Church Street, a triple-decker built in 1910 and the former home of Corbett’s Drug Store. The building is in the Waverley Land Company area, which is considered to be a historic asset of the Commonwealth. This means that any rooftop antenna is subject to review under Section 106 to determine whether it would have an adverse effect on the neighborhood. For the purpose of this review, EBI Consulting identified an area of effect extending 250 feet out from 20 Church Street.

At the request of the MHC, Mr. Sullivan came before the Belmont Historic District Commission to get comments on two proposed artificial chimneys that would encase the antennas and hide them from public view. The chimneys would be 10 feet tall and made of fiberglass manufactured to look like brick. Mr. Sullivan said that the installation would be completely reversible and would not require the removal of any existing building fabric. Michael Smith asked that Mr. Sullivan provide photographs and/or locations of other such installations in the area, and Mr. Cheek requested a copy of any historic photographs that showed the prior existence of chimneys on top of the building. Mr. Smith then made a motion that the installation be approved subject to the fulfillment of these two conditions. Mr. Sullivan agreed to comply with both requests and the motion was approved unanimously.

WAVERLEY FIRE STATION REZONING

Richard Cheek reported that the Massachusetts Historical Commission had suggested changes to the Request for Proposal drafted by Lisa Harrington. Ms. Harrington will incorporate these changes and send the RFP to the Waverley Fire Station Re-use Advisory Committee for approval. The rezoning of the Waverley Fire Station for residential use will come up for a vote at the Special Town Meeting on February 7.

DISTINCTIVE ACCESSORY STRUCTURES PRESERVATION

Sam Knight and Kit Dreier, representing a group of citizens interested in encouraging the adaptive re-use of barns and carriage houses in Belmont, came before the Commission with the final draft of a proposed bylaw that would make it possible to renovate and re-use such buildings as residences or home offices without a variance from the Zoning Board of Appeals. The bylaw would require only that a special permit be secured. Linn Hobbs made a motion to approve the language in Ms. Dreier's Draft #11 of the proposed bylaw. Richard Pichette and Arleyn Levee seconded the motion, which was then approved unanimously. Ms. Dreier will now send the draft to the Belmont Planning Board and request a public hearing.

OUR LADY OF MERCY CHURCH

The Commission discussed how it could help protect other historic assets in the town, specifically Our Lady of Mercy Church, which has been suppressed by the Archdiocese of Boston. The church, rectory, parking lot, and parish hall are expected to be offered for sale. Richard Cheek reported that the church was designed by McGinnis and Walsh, one of the most distinguished ecclesiastical architects of their time. Richard Cheek said that the Commission needed to be pro-active in suggesting adaptive re-uses that are reversible. Angelo Firenze said that he would like to see the Belmont Center Fire Station re-used too, perhaps as a restaurant with garage doors that open up in the summertime. He also said that he would like to see the granite railroad bridge in the center of town—now nearly 100 years old—cleaned, repaired, and re-landscaped with the help of the Belmont Lions Club and the Belmont Garden Club.

Minutes recorded by Sharon Vanderslice.