

BELMONT HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

November 7, 2002 7:00 p.m.

Town Hall, Conference Room 3

Meeting Minutes

ATTENDING:

Commission Members: Richard Cheek and Lydia Ogilby, Co-Chairs; Paul Bell, Linn Hobbs, Richard Pichette, Nancy Richards, Michael Smith, Jonathan Treat, Sharon Vanderslice. Absent: Arleyn Levee.

Donham and Sweeney Architects, Inc.: Tadhg Sweeney

Town Hall Complex Building Committee: Betty Wrightson, Joanna Hilgenberg.

Belmont Residents: Arthur Wolfson and several others.

PLEASANT STREET RECONSTRUCTION

The Commission reviewed a draft of its recommendations to the Board of Selectmen regarding the Pleasant Street reconstruction project. The recommendations concern stone walls, guard rails, street lighting, paving material, sidewalks, curbing, signage, buried wiring, trees, and other landscaping specifications. At the suggestion of several members, the recommendations were expanded to request preservation of two trees slated for removal and to ask that grassy borders be installed next to sidewalks where none are currently indicated. Arthur Wolfson of Pleasant Street asked that any trees that are removed from his property during the rebuilding of his stone wall be replaced and that a grassy strip be left between the wall and the new sidewalk that is to be installed. (Plans currently call for an asphalt strip between the curb and the sidewalk in front of his property.) The recommendations were approved by the Commission with these additions and are to be submitted to the Board of Selectmen. A copy is attached.

TOWN HALL RENOVATION

Michael Smith, the HDC's representative on the Town Hall Complex Building Committee, and Tadhg Sweeney, representing Donham and Sweeney Architects, asked that the Commission approve a Certificate of Appropriateness for the remaining renovation work to be done on the Town Hall. This work, due to commence in May, includes the repair and restoration of two leaking cupolas, some minor roof repairs, installation of fabric-covered urethane panels on the ceiling of the auditorium to reduce "auditory confusion," finishing of the second floor to permanently house certain town offices, rearrangement of the Town Clerk's office on the ground floor to make it more accessible to the public, and the temporary installation of a carpet on the floor of the auditorium. (The Office of Community Development is to be relocated into the auditorium while the Town Hall Annex is undergoing renovation.) This carpet will be removed and the wood floor refinished once the Annex is completed.

Tadhg Sweeney reported that construction bids to complete the Town Hall work were ten percent lower than estimated. This means that there may be funds available to make other needed repairs to the building, particularly the installation of a drainage system around the perimeter of the building to prevent moisture from seeping into the ground floor conference rooms, which are currently showing signs of effluorescence. If money is available, the Building Committee would also like to restore the leaded glass windows on the Pleasant Street side of the auditorium, repoint portions of the exterior wall

not done in 2000, and make changes to the auditorium stage so that scenery and stage lights can be hung properly.

After studying the drawings, the Commission unanimously approved the Certificate of Appropriateness, subject to HDC review of colors and millwork shop drawings when submitted.

TOWN HALL COMPLEX LANDSCAPING

Betty Wrightson presented minutes of a joint meeting held on October 29 with the landscape architect for the Town Hall Complex, the Shade Tree Commission, the Tree Warden, one member of the Historic District Commission (the landscape consultant Arleyn Levee), and two members of the Town Hall Complex Building Committee: Joanna Hilgenberg and herself.

At that meeting, attendees requested that a smaller number of trees be specified in the landscape plan so that the grounds would have a more sunny, open feeling. The only exception to this was the Moore Street side, where they agreed that trees needed to be added. All agreed that Valley Forge Elm would be a better choice than London Plain Trees for perimeter plantings because they are historically appropriate and more resistant to disease than other elms. The group's second and third choices were Oak and Silver Maple.

To screen the Memorial Park on Concord Avenue from the Town Hall Annex parking area, the group suggested the installation of Inkberry, Holly, Viburnum, or Douglas Fir. They recommended the use of a sturdy ground cover rather than grass around the School Administration Building and the Annex. They also recommended that the two proposed side paths to the School Administration Building be eliminated and that there be just one wide path leading to the lower door.

The group agreed that too many different kinds of pavers were shown on the landscaping plan. Asphalt paving only should be specified for the drive in front of the Town Hall, with granite pavers used near the building entrances on the drive between Concord Avenue and Moore Street to help delineate pedestrian areas. Arleyn Levee suggested that the asphalt be lightened with stone dust and any concrete walks be darkened with lampblack.

After discussing the landscape plan, the Historic District Commission agreed with the landscaping group's recommendations and made the following additional comments:

Lighting. Rather than installing lamp posts along walkways and near entrances, Michael Smith suggested that the designer consider the use of hidden sources of general ambient lighting mounted on trees or light poles. Special lighting could be used to highlight specific architectural features such as the tower of the Town Hall. Historically, there were no lamp posts in this area and adding them now may contribute to visual clutter.

Bollards. Rather than the fluted bollards shown on current drawings, Michael Smith suggested the use of either metal bollards similar to those at the Town Hall or tapered granite.

Sitting Walls. Commission members liked the idea of using a concrete sitting wall outside the Annex and suggested that a similar wall be used at the lower entrance to the School Administration Building.

Memorial Benches. Richard Cheek suggested that the plan provide for the future installation of memorial benches.

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION BUILDING & TOWN HALL ANNEX

Working drawings for these two buildings are at the 90% stage. Michael Smith informed the Commission of several design details that remain to be worked out, including those pertaining to the cupolas on top of the Annex.

MINUTES

The Commission reviewed and approved the minutes of its October 9 meeting.

It will meet next on Wednesday, December 4 at 7:00 p.m. in the Town Hall.

Minutes prepared by: Sharon Vanderslice

PLEASANT STREET DESIGN COMMENTS

November 11, 2002

Board of Selectmen
Town Hall
450 Concord Avenue
Belmont, Massachusetts 02478

Re: Historic District Commission Comments on Pleasant Street Reconstruction

The Historic District Commission is aware that the Town has had to make many design concessions to the state in order to secure funding for this important project.

Our mandate as a Historic District Commission, however, is to preserve, as much as possible, the rural character of the Pleasant Street Historic District, which extends from the Clark Street Bridge to Stella Road. Ideally, the design plans for this project would specify narrower travel lanes, tighter turning radii at all intersections, and preservation of all significant trees. As it does not appear to be possible to make any further changes to the architecture of the roadway at this stage, the Historic District Commission strongly urges the Board of Selectmen to consider the secondary design changes outlined below.

The very concept of an historic district assumes that such an area will be differentiated in some way from the neighborhoods that surround it. If it is not, then we have failed utterly in our mission to preserve it. The law allows for adjustments to design plans within a historic district (as we noted in our comments to the Massachusetts Highway Department at the 25% design stage). With that in mind, we recommend the following changes to the plans.

I. Stone Walls.

All of the walls on this street were originally dry stone walls; that is, they were constructed without mortar. Therefore, any repairs made to existing walls should be dry. Missing stones should be replaced with stones of like kind and color.

In areas where new concrete-backed stone walls are specified, in some cases as retaining walls, the mortar should be applied from the back side only and all joints on the back side should be raked. From the front, these walls should appear to be dry. This means the mortar must be held back several inches from the face of the wall so that it can't be seen. The boulders used to build these walls should match the stones of the original walls on the street. The mason chosen to construct these walls should be someone with experience in the appropriate reconstruction of historic stone walls.

Anywhere that an existing stone wall is to be rebuilt (in front of the Wolfson property, for example), the existing stones should be reused and laid in the same manner. Any additional stones should be of the same type, size, and color. Care should be taken to preserve the private trees behind the wall, and any that absolutely must be removed should be replaced.

II. Guard Rails

Guard rails should be heavy wooden timbers rather than aluminum alloy. Any chain link fence that is installed should be coated with black vinyl.

III. Street Lighting

There were no lights on this road until recent times. The most appropriate lighting fixtures, therefore, are ones that you hardly notice. These are sometimes referred to as "no see-ums." Within the historic district, we should specify:

- a) Brackets that are matte black and attached to existing telephone poles.
- b) Metal halide ("white" light) lamps, rather than the current sodium ("yellow" light) lamps.
- c) Matte black, full cut-off (IESNA definition) fixtures that light only the roadway and the sidewalk, and nothing above the horizontal. Illuminance levels should be kept at the lowest absolute level that is consistent with roadway safety; a maximum of 0.3 footcandles is the recommended level for IESNA Zone E2 (outer urban). An engineering study should be conducted to determine the appropriate depth and cut-off angle for the fixture, and this fixture should be specified uniformly throughout the district. The current cobra-style fixtures shine light all over the place. Excessive glare is unsafe for drivers, annoying for residents, and wasteful for those who pay the bills.

Should we succeed in burying the overhead wires in the district (see comment VIII below), the Historic District Commission should be consulted before light poles and fixtures are specified. According to one official at the Metropolitan District Commission, reproductions of historic fixtures are not much more expensive than standard highway fixtures, and the latest models allow for a recessed lamp.

IV. Paving Material

Rather than bright black bituminous concrete, the stretch of Pleasant Street between Stella Road and the Clark Street Bridge should be constructed with an aggregate that includes bluestone chips, for example, to give the roadway a gray-flecked appearance.

As you enter the district from either end, granite pavers should be installed across the roadway to alert drivers that they are entering a historic district. This has the added benefit of moderating vehicle speeds through the area.

V. Sidewalks

Bright white sidewalks are totally out of character for this neighborhood.

The concrete used to construct the sidewalks proposed for the district should be mixed with lampblack, at least one pound per yard, to gray down the color of the sidewalk. It's been said in the past that coloring concrete in this way can add as much as 30% to the cost, but calls to local sand and gravel companies have turned up much lower figures. While the standard cost for concrete is \$75 per yard, adding lampblack costs only \$4 per yard more. This is insignificant relative to the total cost of the project. It is also relatively simple to do. The lampblack can be added right into the concrete mixer, as each batch is prepared.

On the north side of the street, sidewalks should not extend all the way from the curb to the stone walls. At least some green space should remain, which can be seeded by the Massachusetts Highway Department and/or filled with appropriate plantings by residents of the Historic District. In some locations (in front of the Wolfson property, for example), the plans call for a bituminous concrete (asphalt) strip between the sidewalk and the curb. We recommend, instead, that the sidewalk abut the curb and a green strip be left between the sidewalk and the stone wall. Even if this green strip is only a foot wide, it is worth doing.

On the south side of the street, where sidewalks currently exist, the plans call for eliminating the green strip between the sidewalk and the street in some locations (in front of the Bell property, for instance). This strip should be preserved whenever possible, even if it means reducing the width of the sidewalk in those locations.

VI. Curbing

To soften the appearance of the curbing, the Commission recommends that the proposed granite curbing be sloped or chamfered. This will take away the hard-edged appearance of the curbing, and retain more of the ambience of a rural byway. It also makes it easier, in emergency situations, for bikes to get off the road.

We are aware that, if sloped curbing is used, catch basins must be found that work well with this style of curbing. If no such catch basin is readily available, then vertical curbing must be used next to all storm grates.

VII. Signage

Signage within the Historic District should be kept to a minimum and mounted on existing utility poles whenever possible to prevent a cluttered appearance.

There should, however, be distinctive signage as you enter and exit the district to advertise the fact that this is an historic district. Private money should be found to add historic district signage on major side streets that cross the district, such as Clifton, Concord, and Leonard.

VIII. Buried Wiring

Aside from preserving the tree canopy, nothing will do more to enhance the historic district than the burial of its utility wires. Not long ago, the Town of North Reading was able to get a PWED (Public Works Economic Development) grant to bury wiring in its historic district during the reconstruction of Route 62. Their state representative was influential in securing this grant, which took about four months to get. We should seriously investigate the possibility of doing this.

IX. Trees

At least eight significant trees will be removed during reconstruction. This is a huge loss to the district, which has always been noteworthy for its tree canopy. The trees that will replace these old trees will be tiny in comparison, with calipers of 8 or 9 centimeters (three to three and a half inches) at most. To avoid a newly naked look, it is extremely important that whatever new trees are planted be ones that can survive harsh road conditions and have branching structures tall enough to avoid being sheared off by passing trucks.

Appropriate species include honey locust, pin oak, northern red oak, red maple, and linden (so long as it does not hang over a parking area). Some of the same species specified for the grounds of the Town Hall Complex (Valley Forge elm, for instance) should be used elsewhere on Pleasant Street in order to unify the landscaping of the district.

Equally important is the method of planting these trees. Nearby sidewalks must be constructed so that the fill beneath them is loose enough to allow roots to grow through it. This will require daily inspection at the work site. Trees should also be planted in such a way that their roots are not obstructed by underground utilities. Sufficient space must be allowed for the root ball. After the first year, the Town of Belmont will be responsible for staking and watering these trees. Diligence will be required to ensure that they survive.

Existing trees must be protected during construction, and contractors who damage them must be required to replace those trees with ones of equal caliper. Too many trees in Belmont have been lost because their roots were severed during road or sidewalk construction. The Historic District Commission would like to review the wording in the Mass Highway contract to ensure that trees that are to be retained are adequately protected.

Following is a list of detailed comments on landscaping, in places where the Commission believes changes must be made to the current plan.

Sheet No. 20

- a) Ledge on the north side of the road is very steep. What is retaining it?

Sheet No. 21

- a) White oak is a poor choice for this location. Reject and get substitute.
- b) A sweetgum tree is indicated at the Shaw's Market Drive. Add choice as "onsic."

Sheet No. 22

- a) Hay bales are indicated across the street from the Farrell property. This is a very steep slope. What retains it? How long will the hay bales be there?
- b) Need some trees in front of the DeMilia property.
- c) Plants listed in the key are not shown on the plan. Where are these plants intended to go?

Sheet No. 23

- a) It would be lovely to have sugar maples here, as indicated, but it is unlikely that they would survive.
- b) Cotoneaster is an unlikely choice for this location unless it is put in planters.

Sheet No. 24

- a) It is unlikely that shadbush will survive here (north side of street across from Zarren property).
- b) White oak is also questionable in this location.

Sheet No. 26

- a) We need to see the specifications, including the type of stone, for the proposed cemented stone masonry wall west of Snake Hill Road. Joints need to be raked.

Sheet No. 27

- a) It's unfortunate that we cannot find a way to plant trees on the south side of the street, just east of the Clark Street Bridge. How can we fix this?

Sheet No. 28

- a) Yellowwood is a poor choice for the triangular island at Concord and Pleasant. It's low branches and dense foliage reduce visibility. Also, yellowwood does not like traffic.
- b) A tree should be added to the "bump-out" in front of the Belmont Woman's Club, near the corner of Concord and Pleasant.

Sheet No. 29

- a) A tree should be added to the “bump-out” southwest of the Woman’s Club driveway.
- b) There are two significant trees, currently planned for removal, that could be saved if they were allowed to protrude into the roadway shoulder. We refer to the maple in front of the Bell property and the ash in front of the Garfinkel house (shown on the plan as the Davies property). Admittedly, this would briefly interrupt the one-meter bike shoulder at these points, but the tradeoff may be worth it. Granite curbing could stop on one side of the tree and resume on the other.

Sheet No. 30

- a) Trees at the corner of Pleasant Street and Alexander Avenue should be placed in conjunction with house views.

Sheet No. 32

- a) The linden trees proposed for the south side are too close together and will compete with private trees.
- b) Katsura is totally inappropriate for the “bump-out” in front of the Allen house.
- c) On the north side, below the condominium development, there should be a green strip with trees—not just a stone wall, sidewalk, and curb.
- d) The easternmost driveway that leads into the condominium development is an historic drive treatment. It should NOT become bituminous.

Sheet No. 35

- a) Spirea shrub (misspelled on the plan as ‘spinea’?) is a poor choice and four of them together (west of Brighton Street) is a peculiar planting that will block sight lines.
- b) The Serrulata ‘Royal Burgundy’ cherry trees proposed for the sidewalk in front of the retail building are low-branching and do not like pollution. Substitute something else.

Sheet No. 36

- a) Plantings on the median strip at Frontage Road are a nice idea, but who is going to water and maintain them? Are these perennials? It is better to simplify and use hardy material.
- b) Sugar maples proposed for south side are not likely to survive this close to Route 2. Depending on the water table, you could use red maples here.

Respectfully submitted by:

The Historic District Commission

Richard Cheek, Co-chair

Lydia Ogilby, Co-chair

Paul Bell
Linn Hobbs
Arleyn Levee
Michael Smith
Richard Pichette
Nancy Richards
Jonathan Treat
Sharon Vanderslice