

BELMONT HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

December 13, 2006
Meeting Minutes
Town Hall

Commission Members attending: Co-chair Richard Cheek, co-chair Lydia Ogilby, Paul Bell, Peter Gunness, Linn Hobbs, Richard Pichette, Nancy Richards, Michael Smith.
Also in attendance: Mark Allen (for item 4), Arthur Wolfson

1. DEMOLITION OF RACHEL RAYMOND HOUSE, 12 PARK AVENUE

This 1931 house, designed by noted modernist architect Eleanor Raymond, was a rare local example of the International style and pre-dated the Walter Gropius house in Lincoln by 7-8 years. It was sold by the previous owners, the Bairds, to Belmont Hill School, who clearly had the intention in purchasing it to have it razed.

Richard Cheek reported on his 1 ½ hour meeting with Headmaster Richard Melvoin on the morning that the demolition permit was issued. Mr. Melvoin permitted him to read the report on the property by John McConnell that the School had commissioned, but he declined to provide a hard copy of the report to the Town of Belmont as requested by Mr. Cheek. (The School had already refused to supply a copies of the report to any of the parties interested in preserving the house, including its own alumni.) Mr. Cheek lamented the School's decision not to make the report public, particularly because the School had based its decision to tear down the house on its conclusions. By not allowing the report to circulate, the School denied concerned citizens, other architects and architectural historians, and experienced preservationists the opportunity to respond to its conclusions or to offer reasons or methods for preserving the house which the School may not have previously considered.

During the meeting, Mr. Cheek also repeated his offer to help arrange a summit meeting between School officials and the various design, history and preservation professionals who had written the School to plead for saving the house, but Mr. Melvoin politely declined. By refusing to allow such an interchange, the School was preventing the open dialogue which Mr. Cheek had expected would be part of the "due diligence" that the School said it was observing in determining the future of one of the State's designated historic assets. Such a meeting might well have calmed the School's anxiety over the cost of restoring the Raymond House (estimated at \$5-700,000 by Mr. McConnell) since it would have given the petitioners the chance to emphasize that they were only asking the School to save the building, not to restore it.

In effect, Mr. Cheek said, the Belmont Hill School had condemned the Rachel Raymond House without publishing or substantiating the charges against it, a lack of due process regarding the future of a National Register eligible building that was compounded by the absence of any demolition delay by-law in Belmont. Legally, the School had the right to tear down the house as soon as the demolition permit was

issued, and it chose to do so, cutting off the exchange of ideas that might have resolved many of the problems cited by the School and have persuaded it to postpone the destruction of the house pending further examination of alternative solutions.

It was proposed that Messrs. Bell, Cheek and Smith write an article for the Belmont Citizen-Herald about the significance of modern architecture and the desirability of historic preservation. An article will appear in the *Architectural Record* about the unfortunate loss of the Raymond house.

2. LAND DEVELOPMENT AGREEMENT FOR THE CENTRAL FIRE STATION

The closing for the Central Fire Station occurred on Monday, December 11, 2006. Town Administrator Thomas Younger has suggested to Richard Cheek that he telephone or meet with Kathy O'Donnell, Town Counsel, to resolve any perceived ambiguities in the Land Development Agreement and the Preservation Restriction attached to it. For example, did "façade" imply only the front of the building, or the front and sides? With respect to the proposed third floor, what Town board or agency would be responsible for approving it? What role has the HDC been designated to play in the design approval process?

Richard Pichette will join the meeting with Ms. O'Donnell to address some of the concerns he has with the language of the Land Development Agreement and the Preservation Restriction and to ensure that the latter document permanently protects the exterior of the 1899 Fire Station.

Linn Hobbs looked forward to a mutually cooperative relationship between the new owner, Mr. Burke, and the Commission because of the sensitivity to preservation issues that Mr. Burke had recently shown in his renovation of the building adjacent to the Fire Station. Mr. Cheek noted that the HDC was ready to assist Mr. Burke in retrieving the fire poles and bell that had recently been removed from the Station.

3. REQUEST FOR REVIEW OF SIGNAGE DESIGN AND PLACEMENT FOR THE NEW LEONARD STREET FIRE STATION

A member of the Belmont Center Planning Group who objects has asked the Commission to make enquiries about the approval process for the installation, but Mr. Pichette could not identify any regulatory basis that would allow the Commission to become involved with the issue.

4. FUTURE USE OF 721 PLEASANT STREET

This property, the old Orchard Hill School across Pleasant Street from the Police Station, is being sold by the present owners, the Tanners. The house occupies a large lot, more than 1 acre, but mostly on a steep uphill slope, and (including the semi-basement) comprises about 5000 ft² of living space. The house was originally built by

Dr. Mack, the founder of the Town library. The Tanners did considerable work recently on landscaping the property and on the kitchen. The previous owners, the Callaghans, had had work done on the interior.

Mark Allen, the real estate broker for the house, came to the Commission to inquire about the possibility of converting the house to two condominiums. Though the house was assessed as a two-family dwelling, the Town's Building Inspector indicates that such a division would be against the spot zoning laws of Massachusetts. The Building Inspector has also suggested that the house could become a bed-and-breakfast establishment or a dormitory.

The Commission thanked Mr. Allen for informing members about his attempts to find an appropriate use for the house, even though the zoning issue in question is beyond the Commission's purview.

5. PRESERVATION OF OUR LADY OF MERCY CHURCH AND RECTORY

Mr. Cheek reported that no new information had been received about the disposition of these properties. Those concerned were counting on working with the Town and prospective developers to arrive at acceptable solutions.

6. EDITOR FOR THE DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR THE PLEASANT STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT

Mr. Cheek reported that he has continued to pursue contact with Candace Jenkins to ask if the Commission could persuade her to serve as final editor for the Design Guidelines.

7. REVIEW OF MINUTES FOR THE MEETING OF NOVEMBER 1, 2006

The minutes for this meeting were amended and approved as amended.

8. OLD BUSINESS

a) Stephen Frost House, 467 Pleasant Street

Mr. Cheek reported that there had been no final inspection of the addition and renovations to this house yet, and that builder Thomas Blake was no longer employed by the owners. Glenn Clancy has written to the owners about the matter. Mr. Cheek will contact the architect, Mr. Rovinelli, to inquire about the present status of the project.

b) Town Hall

Mr. Smith reported he had met with Thomas Younger and Kevin Looney to establish ground rules for restoration of the Town Hall side entrance doors. Mr. Looney requires a third bid.

c) Homer Building

Both Dr. Hobbs and Mr. Bell have spoken to Kevin Looney about the auxiliary compressor and emergency generator placements for the Homer Building. Dr. Hobbs reported Mr. Looney's proposal to camouflage the cooling pipe to the third floor as a copper drain pipe symmetrical to the existing one. Commission members remained opposed to installing any further equipment on the east side of the building, and Mr. Looney was reported to be investigating alternative placement in the side door well.

Minutes recorded by Linn Hobbs