

BELMONT HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes
July 11, 2007
Town Hall

Commission Members attending: Michael Smith (chairing), Paul Bell, Peter Gunness, Lisa Harrington, Linn Hobbs, Arlyne Levee, Richard Pichette, Nancy Richards

Also attending: Brian R. Burke, Edward S. Porzio (both for item 1), Peggy Gunness

1. CENTRAL FIRE STATION REHABILITATION

Mr. Burke, representing Burke Land Company and accompanied by its architect Mr. Porzio, outlined his plans for conversion of the Central Fire Station to commercial use. Mr. Smith confirmed that Mr. Burke has applied for two building permits from the Town: the first a demolition permit, which has been issued; the second for building construction, which has not been issued. Mr. Pichette reminded the Commission that two documents were to have accompanied the purchase and sale agreement: a land development agreement, which had been signed; and a preservation restriction, which exists in draft, had not been signed. Mr. Smith informed Mr. Burke that the developers of the Waverly fire station, Urbanica, Inc., had entered into a voluntary agreement for an ongoing design review, which had proved advantageous for all concerned, and he hoped that an agreement could be worked out with Burke Land Company.

Mr. Burke indicated his intention to remove the fiberglass flag pole and all exterior plates and bolts which were foreign to the original structure. He plans to install granite bases at either side and in the center of the front façade and also to remove the central steel column between the doors and to hide a new column between a wider brick pillar that would replicate the width deduced from an 1899 photograph. New front carriage doors would be folding and match in style and color the original doors. The three front windows would be replaced by 6/1 windows in period style, glazed using normal (not low-E) glass. Mr. Burke further reported that the weather vane had been cleaned and sealed and that an antenna and a vent had been removed. It was his intention to scrape the railings and repaint all trim in the original color. He wished to re-hang the bell, which had been removed by the Town, and rig the bell rope so that the bell could be rung from the lobby. He noted that the building had been somewhat carelessly re-pointed with a Portland-cement (hard) mortar about five years ago but proposed to let the pointing weather further before attempting any redress. Ms. Harrington, citing an incompatibility well known to the Commission, expressed concern over the use of Portland cement, which could seriously compromise the integrity of the older historic brick, and suggested at least a partial re-point to remove the offending hard mortar.

Dr. Hobbs commended Mr. Burke for his attention to these historic details of the building and for his sensitivity to preserving some of its interior historic features.

Mr. Burke and Mr. Porzio then outlined their plans for substantial modifications to the building exterior. He proposes to raze the rearmost portion of the station, a later two-storey addition (the first substantially underground) with flat roof, rendered in 4-inch brick veneer. In its place, he proposes to build a three-storey wood frame structure (the first storey substantially underground) with additionally a tall (not flat) hipped roof to hide the air-handling system. Several Commission members noted that this plan was substantially different from what had been proposed in Burke Land Company's purchase bid and also from a subsequent modification proposal that had been submitted after purchase. It was also confirmed that the envisaged rear addition is indeed meant to be a three-storey one referenced to the ground floor level of Leonard Street.

Additionally, Mr. Burke and Mr. Porzio indicated plans for a glass atrium connecting the adjacent building at 46-48 Leonard Street (the "Green" building that Mr. Burke has renovated and owns) to

the south side of the Fire Station, housing a lobby and staircase to provide access to the rear of the ground floor, behind the restaurant to be sited in the front, and to the second storeys of the original building and the proposed addition behind it. Additionally, an extensive elevated walkway was to be constructed on the north side wall of the building to provide egress.

Mr. Pichette remarked that when a third-floor addition had been mentioned to the Town Center committee at the time of the purchase bids, reaction had been very negative. Mr. Burke replied that the response was due to a misunderstanding; he had always intended to make the rear building separate and "to remain only two storeys, one largely below grade, one above." Dr. Hobbs pointed out that the drawings presented by Mr. Porzio indicated a second storey considerably above the grade level at the rear of the building, a third storey on top of that, and a tall hipped roof.

Mr. Smith invited Commission members to express their opinions about the proposed modifications to the original structure. Mr. Smith began by indicating that the building "façade" that merited historical restrictions was not just the front of the building, but the whole of the building exterior, especially any parts of the structure that could be seen from the public way. Those visible would include both sides of the building, viewed from Leonard Street, and the rear of the building, viewed from Moore Street and even Pleasant Street. He then enumerated the Secretary of State's Guidelines for renovation, restoration and modification of historic properties.

Mr. Bell expressed particular concern about the atrium, which was being proposed to be constructed against nearly the whole south side of the building and would potentially obscure a large portion of the tower, one of the most characteristic features of the fire station. He also questioned how much of the new structure in the rear could be seen and whether it might overpower the historic building in front of it. Ms. Richards was also concerned that the tower would largely disappear, when viewed from both directions, with the proposed additions.

Mr. Gunness liked the restorations proposed for the front of the fire station but questioned the amount of new building being proposed behind. He asked if the stone wall between 56-58 Leonard Street and the fire station, which would be razed to make room for the atrium lobby and staircase, was an historic wall. He also pointed out that the proposed new construction immediately bordered the Historic District.

Dr. Hobbs expressed concerns over both the atrium and the three-storey rear addition. The proposed atrium would cover up three windows on the fire-station second floor and more than half the tower, hardly preserving the historic appearance of the building. The planned walkways would have similar impact on the north side of the building. The rear addition, with its wholly different architecture, amounted to a new separate structure (with its tall hip roof, as tall as a three-storey house above the rear grade) being built in back of the existing commercial buildings of Leonard Street. The structure thus represented a large intrusion of the commercial district right up to the edge of the historic district, with a significant impact on at least five of the historic houses bordering on Pleasant and Moore Streets. He was especially concerned that the tenants proposed by Mr. Burke for occupation of the highly-visible third-storey of the addition would utilize the building significantly at night, so that the many building windows would remain lit at night, facing directly into residences. He doubted that the Town would be happy about a building of house-like proportions being built behind the present commercial buildings and felt that it represented a substantial imposition on all the District's historical properties adjacent and overlooking.

Mr. Pichette emphasized that, in light of what the Commission had heard, it was of some urgency that a preservation restriction be finalized and signed.

Ms. Levee was also concerned about the atrium. Though recognizing it as a clever solution to access, she felt it was aesthetically too complicated and, with its staircase and its many pieces, took away from the integrity of the recently restored building at 56-58 Leonard Street (the "Green

building"), whose careful restoration by Mr. Burke the Commission lauded. She appealed to the Secretary of State's guidelines governing proportions and integrity of shape and line.

Mr. Smith expressed serious reservations about both the atrium and the proposed rear building. He, too, felt that the massing and complexity of the atrium detracted from the historicity and scale of the fire station. Siting it only 18 inches from the front face of the fire station was too close to the street, and if it were built he would favor pushing the atrium behind the side door into what would be the restaurant. He thought that the suggested "transparency" of an atrium would prove an illusion, with all the involved staircase structure it principally contained, and he was additionally concerned about strictly structural issues, such as snow loads on a tall and substantially glass construction. He expressed concern, too, about the volume of what, from Leonard Street, amounts to a three-storey addition (plus an additional tall roof) and suggested that any addition at the rear not be brought right up against the tower, nor compete with its height and proportion. He found the idea of a fountain and curb in front of the proposed atrium an interesting idea that would come off better if the atrium entrance were set back farther than proposed. He thought the return of the fire bell to the fire station a fine idea and liked the restorative treatment of the front doors and column, though he was concerned that there might not be enough salvageable brick to effect the necessary match there. He urged that the Commission and the Burke Land Company try to work together to arrive at an optimal solution to the design issues raised. He invited Mr. Burke to meet with a sub-committee of the Commission before its August 1 regular meeting.

2. CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS FOR EXTERIOR PAINT COLOR CHANGE AT 710 PLEASANT STREET

The owner asked to change the color of the body of her house by repainting it with "Lyman Camellia", a color appropriate to the period of the house which she had selected from the Historic Colors of America brochure published by Historic New England. Her selection was approved unanimously, and a Certificate of Appropriateness was issued for the change in color.

3. DISCUSSION OF BSC GROUP'S REQUEST FOR REVIEW AND COMMENT ON THE TRAPELO ROAD-BELMONT STREET CORRIDOR IMPROVEMENT PROJECT.

BSC needs to supply a copy of their report with plans to the Commission to enable the Commission to comment.

4. SELECTION AND APPROVAL OF SIDEWALK AND HANDICAP RAMP PANELS FOR PLEASANT STREET WITHIN THE HISTORIC DISTRICT

Ms. Levee reported that the Commission has requested a darker shade of sidewalk concrete within the Historic District. Photographs were produced of a darker, brushed concrete, with a contrasting red-colored embossed handicap ramp panel, from a location near Toscanini's on Main Street, Cambridge near Massachusetts Avenue. Commission members expressed a preference instead for clean, simple pavement, without the multiply embossed edges or busy brushed finishes going in multiple directions that were evident in the sample photograph. Colonial red was agreed as the preferred ramp color.

5. ARCHITECTURAL SURVEY OF HOUSES OLDER THAN 50 YEARS IN THE TOWN CENTER REQUESTED BY BELMONT CENTER PLANNING GROUP.

Several Commission members wondered if a planning survey grant could be obtained to initiate such a survey from the Massachusetts Historical Commission of Preservation Mass. It was suggested that MHC no longer has funds for this kind of grant. The cost of a survey could amount to \$5,000-10,000.

6. UPDATE ON 40R OVERLAY PROPOSAL FOR OUR LADY OF MERCY PROPERTY

Commission members were encouraged to consult an article appearing in the current issue of the Belmont Citizens' Forum.

7. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETINGS OF MAY 2 AND JUNE 6, 2007

Minutes for these two meetings were presented and approved.

8. OLD BUSINESS

Dr. Hobbs raised the issue of the burying of power lines underneath the new Pleasant Street paving. The issue again arose because some unknown agent (Verizon? Light Department?) recently came through Pleasant Street in the Historic District and severely pruned the trees from around the overhead power lines. With a number of the trees along Pleasant Street already removed because of the Pleasant Street reconstruction, the pruning effect was devastating to the tree canopy. He said it was his understanding that one of the compromises that the Commission had made about the Pleasant Street reconstruction was that some trees could be taken down if the power lines were buried. It had been reported to him by a Pleasant Street resident that some sort of "conflict" with the storm sewers had been cited.

Glenn Clancy had indicated that the conflict was at Clifton Street and beyond, not between Clifton Street and Concord Avenue, and that the conduits have not been installed. Ms. Levee noted that Verizon had never agreed to bury their lines, though the local electric department had agreed to bury theirs. The issue for the electric company was that individual residence lines would still have to be brought up above ground and go overhead to the houses.

There was some recollection that rules do exist regulating tree trimming by power companies, particularly in historic districts. Dr. Hobbs volunteered to contact Mr. Clancy to see what could be learned about the existence of the conduits, any plans to bury any lines, and rules governing tree trimming in the Historic District. Mr. Pichette undertook to obtain whatever plans and agreements addressed burying of lines, arising from the initial negotiations of the Commission with the Town and Massachusetts Highway Department.

Minutes recorded by Linn Hobbs and compiled by Michael Smith and Linn Hobbs.