

Cambridge Association of Neighborhoods: HPC Update – May 20, 2017

CAN Board Member Sharon Smith, who also serves as Vice Chair of the Cambridge HPC, presented an update on the HPC's current vision and goals. She noted that while she and Chair Ron Berman are continuing as HPC members, the City Council recently appointed three new members (Herschel Johnson, Susan Morgan, and George Vojitech) and that the HPC has developed an improvement plan to (a) increase efficiency and effectiveness, (b) initiate a more interactive program of community contact, and (c) take a more activist approach in encouraging preservation of homes in the Historic District.

Sharon noted that although the waterfront and the Historic District constitute two of the most important attractions for bringing visitors to Cambridge, Commissioners have traditionally received little or no training related to their duties, and current Commissioners are paying personally to participate in an upcoming workshop in Rockville on the use of synthetic materials in preservation projects.

The HPC recognizes that there is a great need to update its guidelines (which are legally binding inside the Historic District) because the existing guidelines fail to address certain frequently encountered questions (e.g., solar panels and sheds) and are, in many cases, difficult for homeowners to understand and equally difficult for the Commissioners to interpret. A small grant has been obtained for help in re-writing the HPC guidelines, which the HPC hopes will result in increased clarity and consistency in interpretation and implementation, as well as a simplified application process and an increase in the kind and number of projects that can be approved administratively.

To enhance community contact, Susan Morgan has designed a brochure for homeowners, prospective homeowners, and real estate agents to make HPC requirements more widely understood and transparent. In addition, George Vojitech is working with WHCP to produce a weekly 15-minute feature spot to describe HPC requirements and procedures and to answer questions from the Community. HPC hopes to use the City's new website, which is scheduled to go live in August, to interact proactively with Community. HPC also hopes to develop a Customer Satisfaction Survey to obtain substantive feedback about the HPC experience.

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In an effort learn more about programs for homeowners in the Historic District, Sharon announced that HPC is sponsoring an Historic Tax Credit Seminar at 6 pm on May 24 in the City Council Chamber. The seminar is open to the public at no cost, and Sharon will provide an article and web links for the CAN Newsletter to help disseminate useful information.

Susan Morgan reiterated that she would like to see application processes streamlined, procedural deadlines established, and administrative approvals expanded. She would also like for HPC to develop lists of acceptable materials, user-friendly checklists for homeowners and Commissioners, work more closely with contractors to clarify standards, and minimize any potentially negative economic effects of HPC procedures and requirements.

In response to questions from attendees, Sharon explained that HPC guidelines categorize buildings as (i) historically significant, (ii) contributing, and (iii) non-contributing structures, and that the HPC tries to interpret its guidelines within this categorical context. Designations of individual properties are available on the Maryland Historical Trust (MHT) website at <http://mht.maryland.gov/mihp>. The list of properties (known as the *Paula Reed Report*) is available in a single PDF document, which can be accessed by going to the link, choosing “search by MIHP No,” and entering “D-699.”

[Thanks to HCP Chair Ron Berman for the following additional information: PDFs for individual properties in the Cambridge Historic District are available using the same link (above). Choose “search by address” and enter the street address you want. This information is based on a study done circa 1975 by Catherine Moore. It also includes updates done by individual researchers after 1975. FYI, an example of a property that features a major information update is 402 Race Street.]

Sharon indicated that practical considerations have sometimes made HPC’s determinations more subjective than she would like, and that the current HPC is attempting to adhere to the objective language of the requirements. She noted that the City is very lax on enforcement and many unauthorized changes have occurred without consequences, which just complicates the HPC decision process because Commissioners have to balance the current

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standards with legacy problems over which they have no control.

Sharon indicated that HPC members are appointed by the City Council and that the HPC receives staff support from the Planning and Zoning Office within the Department of Public Works.