CAMBRIDGE MATTERS

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

**Historic Planning Commission**

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June 10, 2017

This past Thursday evening I attended a meeting of the Cambridge Historic Planning Commission (HPC) that was set for the Commission Members to meet with LaSara Kinser, staff to the Commission, to discuss in a public forum some of the ideas from the Commission Members about community outreach and improvement of the HPC process. I attended the meeting as the City Council Liaison to the Commission.

Commission Members in attendance were Janice Olshesky, George Vojtech, and Susan Morgan along with Chair Ron Berman and Vice Chair Sharon Smith. LaSara Kinser, staff to the commission, was also present. The link to the Commission page on the city website is

http://www.choosecambridge.com/index.php/historic-preservation-district/historic-preservation-commission/

The first item for discussion was an idea that George Vojtech had for providing informational segments about the HPC on WHCP, the local community radio station. George offered an outline of some of the topics that might be discussed with the idea of possibly having a show every couple of weeks with members of the Commission talking about an issue and answering questions posed by the community. Ms. Kinser offered that with the new city website that will, hopefully, be up and running in August, there will be the opportunity to have a FAQ page that can supply information to residents or owners of property in the Historic District.

Those HPC members in attendance agreed to continue to work on this idea in order to provide another way to help the public understand the HPC process better. As part of this outreach effort, I offered to hold a meeting of people interested in the HPC and Historic Preservation issues and have a presentation by one of the HPC members with some time to ask questions. For any of you who receive this report and are interested in attending such a meeting, please email me at the email address above so that I can collect some names and then work with you to set up a convenient date and time to hold such a meeting.

The Commission Chair then moved on to a discussion of administrative matters to see what might be done to help make the HPC process be easier for those people in the community who own property in the Historic District. The first topic involved what matters might be handled by an administrative review.

Under the current guidelines, which will be reviewed and updated in the coming months, there are 13 items listed that are subject to administrative review for “contributing or non-contributing properties”. Those terms refer to whether the property in question is a structure that contributes or does not contribute to the historic nature of the district. Under the guidelines, “…an application for review must be filled out; however it will be reviewed by staff on behalf of the commission, instead of at a meeting”. These would usually be smaller projects. Some important questions were raised in this discussion that the HPC needs to make decisions about as part of the review process.

This led to a discussion of how long it has been since the city had a survey of the historically contributing properties in the Historic District. It has been a long time and it appears that a new survey would be appropriate. Included in the discussion was the need to develop a Pattern Book for the Cambridge Historic District that would help identify the various styles of architecture found in the properties built in the District and elsewhere in the city. As these are not projects that can be easily done, consideration of funding from state or foundation resources needs to be considered.

The next item for discussion was a brochure about the Cambridge Historic District that Commission Member Susan Morgan has been working on. She distributed a rough draft of the brochure for comment and suggestions of which there were a few helpful ideas. One suggestion was that there be a simple easy to understand brochure to introduce people to the Cambridge Historic District and possibly a second one with more detail on process and procedures. The second one might also be addressed by information on the city website.

Further ideas included providing copies of the brochure at the visitors’ center, Chamber of Commerce, Local Realtors, Mainstreet, and other places in town. Once the brochure is finalized and printed, that outreach will take place.

Susan Morgan then raised a concern about HPC members appearing before the commission with regard to projects involving their own properties. Ms. Kinser mentioned that there may be an ethics opinion that relates to that issue. After some discussion, I indicated that I would take a look at those Ethics Opinions that are on the city website to see what that opinion might say and get back to the Commission Members on that issue. I found an opinion that I wrote with advice from the city attorney that can be found at

<http://www.choosecambridge.com/uploads/Ethics/Ethics%2003-2013%20Final.pdf>

While I think that the opinion addresses a different but related problem, ultimately, one of the Commission Members may need to seek an opinion from the Ethics Commission.

The brochure regarding the Cambridge Façade Improvement Program was then handed out at the meeting, and I indicated that I would include it with this report to the community.

There being no further business, the HPC meeting adjourned.

Let me know if you have questions regarding any of the above.

Steve Rideout