

Somersworth Historic District Commission

One Government Way
Somersworth, NH 03878

Minutes of Workshop Meeting of 27 April 2016 – Adopted as amended

In Attendance:

Madeline DeSantis, Chair
Albert Marotta, Vice-Chair
Councilor Martin Dumont, City Council Representative
Laura Barry, Alternate
Richard Brooks, Alternate
Arthur Hendrickson, Commissioner
Beth Poulin, Commissioner
George Poulin, Commissioner.
Tim Metivier, City Code Inspector
Pius Charles Murray, Secretary/Commissioner

Invited Guests Present:

Peter Michaud
Nadine Miller
Shanna Saunders, Somersworth Director of Planning and Community Development

Agenda

I. Call to Order: The Chair called the Workshop to order at 6:00 P.M.

II. Workshop Business

A. Discussion on the size of the Historic District and if the boundaries should be modified.

The Chair asked Councilor Dumont to provide background information to this discussion. Councilor Dumont reported that one year ago the City Council wanted the size of the Historic District and the two overlays to be re-evaluated. Part of the reason was that Somersworth, which is geographically a very small city in area, has one of the largest historic districts in the entire state; it actually has the state's largest contiguous historic district. In addition (and perhaps more importantly), the Council is interested in implementing a Tax Incentive Finance District and the restrictions of the historic district might interfere with the economic growth expected from the TIFD. The Council is interested in discerning what having an historic district in Somersworth means and what does it contribute to improving the quality of life to the city's residents. Specifically the Council is looking for guidance for all the buildings in the Business Historic District, some of which could be renovated or even torn down. Thus the Mayor and City Council

seek some recommendations from the Historic District Commission. Furthermore, the Hilltop School which is located in the midst of the historic district could also be part of the proposed TIFD as the city considers options for its re-use. What the Historic District contributes to the economic growth and well-being of the city and when were the goals of the HDC last re-evaluated are important questions to be answered.

Mr. Metivier asked the HDC to refer to Councilor Paradis's letter from the Vision 20/20 Committee which asks the HDC to extend the historic district in the Mill Section to include two historic buildings currently excluded.

Mr. Poulin asked if the City had submitted a formal written request. The Chair said that only a verbal request had been received.

The Chair invited Peter Michaud and Nadine Miller to address the HDC. Both speakers advocated employing a carrot-and-stick approach, which would include a package of economic incentives to help businesses lower costs on building renovation in the historic district. Mr. Michaud's office offers a 20% tax credit, which has been used locally by Dover, and in the conversion of Newmarket Mills, and will be used in the renovation of Durham's old City Hall. This program is primarily geared to buildings already listed on the National Register of Historic Buildings. However, there is another qualifying option by which a district (and its ordinances) are certified by the National Park Service; however if the boundaries of the historic district or any city ordinances change, there must be a re-certification.

In addition to the 20% Tax Credit, the state of New Hampshire offers the 79E (NH State Tax Credit). There are three qualifications: (a) a building must be located in an eligible district; (b) there must be substantial rehabilitation; and (c) there must be a public benefit.

Ms. Miller said that there are 21 certified governments in New Hampshire. In order to get certified, a broad macro-level survey is required. Her department each year has \$65,000 in grant monies, yet only five or six communities apply which means that her department is scrambling to find potential recipients. To the question how to address the City Council's concerns about the historic district's contributions to the vitality of the city, Ms. Miller replied that it takes outreach and education. Her department will fully fund at 100% the survey that must be done for certification; for public education, her grants contribute 60%; the other 40% comes from the local community but is not necessarily cash but could include volunteers, in-kind gifts, etc.

The Chair expressed concern that, without the protections offered by the historic district designation, historically important buildings could be torn down. Outreach and public education become invaluable. Mr. Michaud further responded that demolition would depend on the controlling law or ordinance; 79E, for example, is explicitly for the rehabilitation and re-use of historic buildings. Both Mr. Michaud and Ms. Miller recommended consulting the National Preservation Society's CAMP which can help plan outreach and public education events. In order to co-ordinate goals city-wide, Mr. Michaud recommended that all land-use boards meet together with the Mayor and the City Council.

Ms. Barry inquired whether the National Register process was for individual properties or entire historic districts. Mr. Michaud responded that its process is for individual places of historical importance. It is considered an honorific designation that opens up certain benefits for the owner.

Mr. Marotta stated that the City Council has occasionally criticized the HDC for interfering with the historic district to the detriment of the city's economic well-being. In Mr. Marotta's opinion, the HDC has taken its responsibilities to maintain historical features on city buildings seriously. Ms. Miller responded that this is why the city of Somersworth's entire government and its ordinances should be certified by the National Park Service. In addition, using the CAMP staff will allow for the development of workshops and other public education activities to let citizens learn about the benefits of rehabilitating their houses.

Mr. Metivier inquired for whom is the 20% tax credit program aimed: at private property owners or businesses; to which Mr. Michaud replied substantial commercial buildings. Mr. Metivier then asked if there was any program available for individual property owners; to which Mr. Michaud said, not now although discussions are taking place at the state level. Mr. Murray asked what type of time commitment would be required to obtain certification – especially since the City Council appeared gun ho on the TIFD. Ms. Miller replied that it was virtually impossible to state a time since each case, each community is unique. She furthermore explained that certification would cost some money (unless the city applied for and received a grant from her department which grant covered 100% of the survey cost), and it would require re-surveying the historic district, updating photographs, and re-examining boundaries, the reason(s) for those particular boundaries, and comparing them with local ordinances. Mr. Michaud added that the form to use, the Historic District Area form, was available from his office in Concord.

Ms. Barry and Councilor Dumont re-iterated a lack of knowledge and information among the Mayor, City Council, and land-use boards. At the end of the this process, said Councilor Dumont, the Mayor and City Council will want recommendations as to what to do with Somersworth's historic district.

B. No additional Workshop Business

III. Adjournment

The Chair adjourned the Workshop at 7:07 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Charlie Murray

(Mr.) Pius Charles Murray, Secretary