

D R A F T

Historic District Commission, notes from discussion 1/11/11

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GOALS

At the macro level, the HDC has three broad goals, which are part of their state-defined mandate: *[I didn't catch the precise wording of what Kathy said – please edit as appropriate!]*

- 1) Preserve the heritage of Acton by protecting the architecture and integrity of our three designated Historic Districts.
- 2) Enhance the Historic Districts by encouraging appropriate new structures and/or the recovery of historic resources which both improve the appearance and facilitate appreciation for the Districts.
- 3) Educate Acton citizens about the history of the buildings in each District and about strategies for the care of historic structures.

It's important to note that the HDC is the only Acton committee whose legal mandate includes the protection of Acton's historic architecture which is so tied to our sense of town character.

Each member is assigned as the main point of contact for petitioners seeking to make changes to their properties within the districts. Their 2010 Application log lists 21 applications. In addition, they are working on projects related to education, research, and the administrative management of the Committee and coordination of project permitting efforts with other Committees. Projects include developing walking tours and arranging lectures of interest, and researching bylaws, as well as providing advice or serving as liaisons to other boards/committees (e.g. CPC, HC, Acton2020). They are also hoping to expand the Districts since the most effective way to insure historic preservation is by providing legal protection, that is to include them in a district or to designate individual buildings or landscapes as stand-alone historic districts.

CHALLENGES:

Individual members of the Commission shared their own ideas about challenges which the HDC faces:

- Public perception of the HDC as a bureaucratic hurdle or as idiosyncratic members of the aesthetic police, even if driven by a vocal few. However, their experience is that their individual work relationships with homeowners are generally productive.
- The HDC is trying to perform tasks that are aesthetically based in an environment where decisions are made primarily on an economic and political basis.
- We need to figure out how to translate historic preservation and enhancement goals into bylaws which support those goals. Current bylaws are not always enforced nor correctly interpreted.

- Commission members need to become well versed in the law to learn how to use their authority strategically within the legal framework in which their authority is understood. They also need support from Town Counsel as to how they can use that authority.
- The Commission appreciates the recent increase in support from staff, including the Clerk's willingness to help processing paper applications, and using email to notify them when applications come in. The building department, more recently, has been helpful in acting on suspected violations, and keeping them in the loop. But they don't get nearly the support that other “regulatory” boards get, like Conservation Commission, the Planning Board, or the BoS.
- There seems to be a disconnect between what people in town want (e.g. preservation of historic buildings and landscapes) and what actually occurs. They offered the recent T.D. Bank design approval as an example, observing that nothing about how that project evolved reflects the spoken goals about preservation and the importance of preserving town character. Another example was a barn on Robbins Street which is outside the historic districts but which the HDC was hoping to save. The ZBA said they were bound by town bylaws which gave them no authority to encourage the property owner to save the barn. [*not sure I described this last example correctly*]
- Town staff only inform the HDC about projects when the property is within an historic district. The HDC is not given any advisory role or opportunity to educate property owners about alternatives to demolition or fundamental changes to the historic fabric of their buildings.
- The HDC is often treated as an after thought, brought in to review a project after major decisions and investment in design decisions have already been made which may not be in the best interest of an historic preservation approach. Good ideas, informed by the experience in architectural design and historic preservation which members of the HDC can offer, often don't have a chance to be considered. One strategy might be to provide early review to people from any interested board.
- A related concern is the more general problem of town governance processes which tends to compartmentalize decision-making.
- There are only 190 HDC properties, out of a total of over 8,000. How can we save what's save-able and even try to improve things? [ck note: draft inventory indicates there are currently 8,667 housing units, although I'm not sure how that translates into # of properties or buildings. Only 11% of Acton's housing units was built in 1939 or earlier].
- The public doesn't understand the economics of preservation. We need to take out the built-in incentives for tear down and new developments. [This comment was in part related to how tax money from new developments are used if received after town meeting has already approved the budget. Terra explained that there is a “built in” incentive for staff to help developers demolish buildings and put up more/bigger buildings. If a project creates more tax revenue, then the “new

growth” money is able to be spent by staff that year.]. The point was also made that preservation of historic assets can actually generate money. There’s a sense that many in town simply equate preservation with losing money.

- The Cultural Resource List is meaningless if it doesn’t lead to protection (and it doesn’t right now).

OPPORTUNITIES and GOALS

- The master plan process is an opportunity to create town-wide awareness about what’s at stake and what can be done to preserve town character.
- Change the review process so that the HDC can participate with other interested Boards in early review of projects.
- The master plan should use visuals to make the effects of different types of decisions clear.
- New bylaw suggestions: Prohibit the removal of stone walls. Emphasize the importance of preserving buildings, even if they have to be relocated. Hold the granting of special permits to a higher standard. Create a land clearing limit bylaw which, given that it can be a town bylaw rather than a zoning bylaw, can go into effect immediately without grandfathering.
- Extend the boundaries of the historic districts to insure more properties are given legal protection. Create stand-alone districts for other historic buildings and landscapes as appropriate to further extend protection.
- Help property owners preserve their properties in a financially viable way. The HDC is hoping to write a CPC grant to create a loan program for home owners.
- Get assistance from the Town (they mentioned the possibility of a new .5 FTE preservation planner) and consider increasing the number of committee members to improve response time and their ability to offer educational programs and assistance

NOTE: The Committee hasn’t yet been contacted by a member of the Planners Collaborative for information about historic resources or to describe their role, and they look forward to that conversation. The description of the HDC role in the draft inventory chapter on Historic & Cultural Resources is incomplete and contains inaccuracies.