

HISTORIC AREA REVIEW COMMITTEE

New Castle Town Hall
2nd and Delaware Streets
October 15, 2014

Members Present: Leila Hamroun, Facilitator
Mike Connolly
Joe Day
Doug Lovett
Jim Meek

Ms. Hamroun opened the meeting at 7 p.m. Purpose of the meetings is to review the HAC process in place since 1990 and identify how to adjust and improve that process for the applicants and reviewers. She plans to engage the National Park Service early and use resources wisely. All meetings will be public meetings. She anticipates the review to be completed in about six months.

Committee members introduced themselves.

Leila Hamroun, AIA, LEED AP, Past Forward Architecture – Architect member of HAC. She holds degrees in architecture and urban planning.

Joseph Day – City resident, has experience with HAC via application for his house. Overall he considers the experience to be favorable, but there are things that can be improved upon. He is a Land Use Administrator with New Castle County. He manages support staff, the permit section and customer service section.

Mike Connolly – City resident, Director of the New Castle Historical Society. He is interested in updating the guidelines, overall process, contemporary and new architecture in the historic district, substitute materials, and demolition by neglect.

Jim Meek – City resident, Trustee of the New Castle Common. He does not speak for the Trustees on this committee. He has experience with HAC and found the process to be easy and clear, mostly because of the litany (contains information about acceptable materials that can be used in the historic district) that was handed out. There is topics he thinks should be included, noting demolition by neglect and what legal powers HAC should have to enforce rulings.

Doug Lovett – Is not a City resident, owns several mixed-use properties on Delaware Street. He has extensive experience renovating buildings, including historic buildings. He is interested in maintaining historic character while exploring alternatives to materials that can be expensive to replace. He is concerned with demolition by neglect.

A canvas of the audience revealed several people who have applied to HAC, some understood the process while others did not, some have read the HAC guidelines and understood them, and some attendees were aware of the litany that HAC uses.

Dorsey Fiske, former HAC member, said the litany is helpful but could be clarified. She cautioned against using composite materials saying they “cheapen” the town and decrease property values. The HAC process needs improvements, enforcement is an issue, and there should be term limits for members.

Janet Wurtzel has appeared before HAC. She suggested the library and New Castle Historical Society could explore the roots of houses in the City. She supports the use of substitute materials and wants more clear information. She would like to know about different architectural styles and periods. Many homes in the City are “worker” homes.

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Glenn Rowe suggested a process that addresses standard types of requests on a more timely manner rather than monthly face-to-face meetings. Some rules do more damage than good. He supports looking at substitute materials.

Steve Pedrick is a historic restoration contractor who works and lives in the City. There is a lot of inconsistencies in the City. He cited contractors in the City not doing things properly and he questions some of their qualifications.

Mr. Meeks enjoys history. He believes it is important for contractors to know what should and should not be done. It is important to understand the periods of houses. Not everything in the historic district is historic.

Ms. Hamroun acknowledges we need to determine how to address new construction with previous construction and keep moving forward.

Ms. Fiske suggested that every real estate agent working in the City should hand out pertinent information to potential buyers. At one time HAC discussed a form letter for violators. After a period time a fine would be assessed for inaction. The City code inspector is empowered to enforce HAC.

Concerning composite materials, Mr. Lovett said some are not durable, but there are some good alternatives. Manufacturers will not guarantee doors and windows for more than one year. Some siding is of poor quality. Ms. Hamroun thinks it would be helpful to have optional preliminary consultations before going to HAC with a binding application.

Mr. Meek wonders if periodic guidelines updates could be issued as changes are made.

Audience members were asked what their preference is for obtaining HAC-related information. Many said they would like hard copies and hard copies should be in various City offices (Administration, City Council, Mr. Bergstrom), New Castle Historical Society, and the library were mentioned. It should also be on the City website.

It is Ms. Hamroun's intent that all information about specific items (windows, doors) will be streamlined so applicants don't need to search.

Mr. Lovett said some the regulations currently in place were not in existence when some of these houses were built, citing storm doors as an example.

Meeting schedule – Ms. Hamroun said this is a working group at present so there is no set schedule. There will be some work sessions in the near future that will be public. There will be ample opportunity for public comment during the process. If recurring meetings are scheduled they will be advertised.

(End of public input portion of meeting.)

The committee discussed path forward. Ms. Hamroun is reviewing all ordinances and will develop an outline based on what we heard tonight. She thinks the current guidelines are heavy on history, text, and choosing examples that might not be relative to New Castle. Some of the guidelines descriptions are not relative. Guidelines need to be cleaned up and make them more indicative with pictures. Describe what the physical parameters are that are important that applicants need to be cognizant of. She encouraged practical recommendations (zoning, guidelines) from the committee.

By mid-November Ms. Hamroun wants to provide a beginning "skeleton" to work with. Public input will be allowed during the process. She has reached out to other HAC's and the National Park Service and distributed information on what other jurisdictions are doing.

The group did not express overwhelming interest in using alternative materials on front street elevations. Mr. Day would welcome a discussion; Mr. Connelly said 'no' generally speaking, but depends on the material. Many substitute materials do not have a proven track record over time and may not interact well with historic materials. Mr. Lovett added his concern with efficiencies (single pane glass vs. double pane).

Mr. Connolly noted the preservation ordinance for the City calls for preservation to be to the Colonial period. Is re-writing the preservation ordinance beyond this group's scope of responsibility, noting it is difficult to write guidelines when the ordinance reads contrary. Ms. Hamroun said everything needs to be in sync. Guidelines are part of a framework of other documents. The approach of preservation has changed over time. The Colonial heart of New Castle is not threatened because there is now a National Historic Monument and a central core. Over time, as you get away from that core there have been transformations from the Colonial character.

Mr. Meek -- What influence will the National Historic Monument have on this group's mission? He does not believe the City being a National Historic Monument has any bearing on protecting houses individually which is why demotion by neglect is occurring.

Ms. Hamroun responded that the National Historic Monument gives a level of protection and an added layer of visibility at the state and national level. HAC cannot address enforcement. Part of this committee's efforts will be to update the guidelines and provide strong recommendations/action items. As she drafts language she will distribute to the committee for input until everyone is comfortable. We need a very clear document (1-2 pages) of what is our guidelines preservation philosophy, i.e., where are we coming from, why are we giving these directions, what is important. That will give the committee a hierarchy and how we define it to build upon. She will provide the draft to the City Solicitor for his review and input.

The revised guidelines would become the new litany that would change over time. The National Park Service (Northeast Region) is willing to be an interactive partner with the committee and will do an informal preview. They want to be seen as a resource. As materials and references are gathered during this process, the committee will determine

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where to make that information available. Mr. Meek offered to set up a file on his server for this information.

Ms. Hamroun has developed a HARC email list that includes committee members, City Administrator Bill Barthel, City Council President Linda Ratchford, and City Council liaison to HAC, John Cochran.

Mr. Connolly said accessibility in the historic district is not addressed in the guidelines. Ms. Hamroun said the National Park Service will help us with ADA language.

This is Phase I. Phase II involves graphic design and web design. It has been put on hold because of budgetary reasons. To prepare for Phase II the committee can collect materials. The New Castle Historical Society did a complete photographic survey of every building (front elevation) in the historic district (river to 7th Street) that Mr. Connolly will make available.

Meeting adjourned at 9 p.m.

Debbie Turner
Stenographer