

MELROSE HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES
Meeting and Public Hearing
Tuesday, September 10, 2019
7:00 PM
Aldermanic Chamber, City Hall, 562 Main Street

PRESENT: Brad Hutchinson, Justine Sterling, Michael Coleman, Kevin Erb, Charlene Marinelli and Judith Sullivan

ABSENT: Robin Peevey

Denise Gaffey, Director & City Planner, and Emma Schnur, Senior Planner, were present.

The meeting was called to order at 7:13 PM by Mr. Hutchinson.

In accordance with the Open Meeting Law, Mr. Hutchinson inquired whether anyone would be making a video or audio recording of the meeting. Mike Carraggi from the Melrose Patch indicated that he might make such a recording.

I. APPLICATION FOR CERTIFICATES OF APPROPRIATENESS

Application for Certificate of Appropriateness: Mark Carroll, 12-16 Essex Street (public hearing)

Property owner Mark Carroll along with his attorney, Robert Bell, and architect, Tim Johnson, were present to describe the redevelopment proposal for 12-16 Essex Street. Mr. Bell started the hearing by explaining that Mr. Carroll was the developer of the abutting Boardman Block, which was the last building on Main Street that was a real eyesore. Mr. Carroll eventually convinced the prior owner to sell the building to him and shortly thereafter, he also purchased the property at 12-16 Essex Street. Other successful redevelopments by Mr. Carroll in Melrose include 150 Green Street and Greywood Estates on Upham Street.

Mr. Bell explained that there are precedents for allowing demolition in the Historic District, such as the project recently approved by the Historic District Commission at 530 Main Street. In addition, he noted that in the past demolition has been allowed for parking lots and not for architecturally significant buildings that serve a broader purpose, such as creating badly needed housing, including affordable housing. He continued that the City should not change course in terms of growth, especially in the face of the 40B project proposed for Swains Pond Avenue. In terms of this specific property, it would be impossible to simply conduct a renovation that would make this a functional building. Specifically, it is not structurally sound and is not ADA accessible. If the building is renovated, it will have to come into compliance with the Building Code.

Mr. Bell asked what preservation would mean in the context of this building since it is “in pieces” and has been altered over the years. He feels that 12-16 Essex Street is the least significant building in the downtown. According to Mr. Bell, denying the demolition could be viewed as a regulatory taking as it is a constitutional issue if just compensation is not provided to a building with no economic future. He is troubled about the idea of preserving this building “like a fly in amber” because the Historic District Commission (HDC) was created in 1979 as a way to allow the downtown to become more prosperous and beneficial to the community. The proposed redevelopment would provide renewed attention to the downtown in an architecturally significant way. At the time that the HDC was formed, Essex Street

property was mostly boarded up. Businesses in the building have continually failed since then because it is not an attractive and competitive location.

Mr. Bell gave a slideshow presentation where he showed images of what Downtown Melrose used to look like. He explained that at the turn of the last century, the whole downtown had the height and mass of the Greenwood Building. However, there were no building codes when the area was developed so the construction was flimsy and there were fires. This is the reason why many of the buildings downtown are one-story, but they were never meant to be that way.

Mr. Carroll explained that he wants the best for Melrose, which is why he has put all his investment and his heart here. It was actually the Turner Family who encouraged him to purchase and redevelop the Boardman Block, which was his first project in Melrose. Based on his experience owning the building on 12-16 Essex Street for the last decade, the property is barely financially solvent. Further, it cannot be made ADA-compliant without using much of the small internal space for ramps.

There was debate about whether certain features on the building are actually historic. For example, the lions head above Beansprouts Gift was purchased by Mr. Carroll's wife at T.J.Maxx. There are two aluminum entrance frames on the building as well as plate glass and glazing that are not original to the building. Dental features are also missing. Mr. Carroll believes, and this is backed up by a report from a structural engineer, that the spaces at 12, 14, and 16 Essex Street were constructed at different times. He cautioned that if the HDC does not allow the demolition of the building, the property and future tenants will fail.

Tim Johnson, the project architect, presented about the design of the building. He explained that they were inspired by the Second Empire Victorian period, specifically the General Grant style used on many homes and public buildings. Melrose City Hall is a variation of this style, of which the defining features are a mansard roof, tower, and a strong cornice. The proposed building will include 1,600 square feet of commercial space with a 14-car garage. All the units will have a deck with northeast exposure. The new building will be entirely ADA-accessible, built onto the Stretch Code, and would follow the Dark Sky Initiative and WaterSense guidelines.

The HDC opened the public comment portion of the evening. Jeanine Venutti of 39 Altamont Avenue questioned if this is what we want this area to look like and if Melrose has a plan for development. She also voiced concerns about overloading the sewer system. She stated that she thought 42 units is too much density for this area, but attendees corrected her that only 14 units will be in building. Eileen Casey of 330 West Emerson Street said that she loves that building and the dry cleaner and computer shop. Attendees corrected her that neither business is in 12-16 Essex Street, they are next door. Either way, she is concerned about parking and additional traffic. Alana Nelson of 14 Summit Avenue stated that the Victorian character is one of the reasons she moved to Melrose. She feels that the owner should have known the limitations of redeveloping the site when he bought the property. Wendell Smith of 36 Cleveland Street said that he has installed many ramps in his lifetime and that if you can get a ramp onto a bus, you can get a ramp that will go into this building.

Three members of the Historical Commission spoke. Paul Cunningham of 83 Bellevue Avenue stated that the HDC is the only commission in Melrose that can prevent demolition, and he asked what kind of precedent we are setting. He feels helpless when buildings are razed in other areas of town that the City has no control over. Ward Hamilton of 87 East Emerson Street explained that he has a master's degree in historic preservation and does historical preservation rehab work. He believes the existing building should be preserved and that the proposed building would be incompatible with the existing buildings in the

downtown. He requested that HDC members not hold any more public debate and just deny the project. Jim Bennet of 45 Wentworth Road and the Chairman of the Historical Commission repeated this statement and also explained how this is a building with a great heritage. It was the location of the first business owned by a person of color in Melrose. He feels that Melrose Bank should not have threatened to sue the City if they could not build their parking lot and that the City should not have caved. He read the description of the Historic District Commission that is on the City website and stated that the demolition would be antithetical to the HDC's purpose. He also made the claim that Mr. Carroll has always wanted to demolish this building.

John McLaughlin of 41 North Avenue supports the proposed project and urged the HDC to think about Mr. Carroll's history in the city of rehabilitating properties that are eyesores. He feels that he done an amazing job with other properties and, from a citizen standpoint, you have somebody who has really invested in the community over the last decade. This is a valuable piece of real estate where people want to live. He also emphasized that the HDC has a successful developer in front of them that has a record of finishing projects.

Four residents of the abutting property at 534 Main Street spoke in support of the project and the developer. Sandra Fasules explained that she is one of the original owners of an apartment in this building and that she has been there for nine years. She feels that while Mr. Carroll has done an amazing job taking care of the building, the abutting area on Essex Street is not the same. As a resident of the downtown, she wants to see more buildings like the one that she lives in. Jamie Worley explained that she moved into the building in 2015 and she likes living on Main Street. While the nearby construction has not been terrible, she is looking forward to the end result. She pointed out the fact that it will be noisy and inconvenient for them while the construction at 12-16 Essex Street occurs but they are still very much in support of the project. Sandra Ventola stated that she grew up in Melrose and she really appreciates the way Mr. Carroll cares for his building. If there is a problem, he is always there right away, and that makes her feel secure living there. Nancy Tobin attested to the fact that Mr. Carroll is an excellent building manager and said that she is here to support the new structure.

Tanya Pellicchia of 409 Lebanon Street and the owner of Beansprouts Gifts and Music 101 stated that she is neither in favor nor against the proposal and she notes that her business would be displaced by the proposed development. She explained that she had not heard anything that night about the support for small businesses. With new buildings going in, it is harder for small business owners to afford to rent spaces.

HDC members asked questions after closing the public hearing. Mr. Coleman asked what materials are being proposed. Mr. Carroll and Mr. Johnson explained that they will use flat stock PVC, full bricks, fabricated stone for the lentils, Hardie board for the side walls, and traditional black windows (either fiberglass or clad). Mr. Carroll intends to use dark black aluminum for the first floor like on other buildings in the district. All exterior materials will be low maintenance. He is planning to use wrought iron for the balconies and copper throughout, including on the roof aprons and as detailing on the front façade. He will use a paver or stamped concrete for the heated driveway. Mr. Carroll explained that the most important thing about the design is the detailing of the building.

Ms. Sullivan explained that she thinks the HDC is getting ahead of itself by discussing proposed materials. She questioned why Mr. Carroll would buy a building in the district if you know the regulations. Having worked in historic preservation, she feels like any building can be rehabbed. She feels that the building is not compatible for this site and she would not support the demolition.

Mr. Erb reflected on the fact that Mr. Carroll has a good reputation and has contributed to vibrancy in Melrose. He questioned if the proposed building would dwarf City Hall. He stated that he is trying to understand the historical significance of the building and cannot make a decision at the moment. Mr. Hutchinson asked if there is any flexibility with the size of the building. Mr. Carroll explained that he could not decrease the size of the building. He needs to provide two affordable units and could not do a smaller building with what construction costs are. He mentioned that 530 Main Street was initially approved as a four-story building.

Mr. Bell stated that the mandate for the HDC is to preserve and enhance significant buildings. He questions the significance of the existing 12-16 Essex Street structure and why this is even a controversy. He believes that the Historical Commission is frustrated that they have no jurisdiction and he is aware that they have been trying to advocate for a Demolition Delay Bylaw. He would prefer to have that community process instead of the Historical Commission taking their frustrations out on Mr. Carroll. Mr. Bell explained that the purpose of the enabling legislation is not keep an uneconomic building uneconomic. He feels that Mr. Carroll should not be burdened for being an incubator and that he would work to include a small business in the new commercial space. He also talked about how the HDC was formed in order to get something moving downtown. If Melrose had qualified for Urban Renewal money, the City would probably have cleared the historic district like Malden did.

Ms. Sullivan countered that historic preservation has evolved since the HDC was created over 40 years ago. She believes that small, vernacular buildings still have a place in downtown Melrose. Mr. Bell explained that the City has a stake in the economic development performance of Melrose. With Prop 2 ½, you either need to have growth, conduct overrides, or make cuts; there is no fourth choice. He thinks that the City should try to make properties as viable as possible instead of preserving uneconomic projects that do not advance the mission of the district.

Mr. Carroll explained that he had no idea how much costs would rise when he bought the building. He told HDC members that the building does not work as it is. Mr. Bell referenced a proposed project on the two sites that came before the HDC and was approved, but City staff clarified that there was never a formal proposal approved by the HDC.

Ms. Sterling asked if there is a way to find some common ground. She asked if there are conversations that could be had to determine what could be incorporated into a new building and if there should be another meeting. Mr. Carroll said that he could mimic any element from the old building that the HDC wants but that there is no way to make the building smaller or have fewer units. Ms. Sterling also suggested that the history of the building and site could be preserved with plaques and pictures.

Ms. Sterling MADE a MOTION to continue the public hearing to Tuesday, October 1 at 7:00 PM (it is now being continued to Tuesday, December 3 based on member availability). Ms. Marinelli SECONDED the MOTION. All members voted in favor. None were opposed.

The meeting adjourned at 9:30 PM.