

MELROSE HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES
Meeting and Public Hearing
Tuesday, February 9, 2021
7:00 PM
Remote

PRESENT: Brad Hutchinson, Kevin Erb, Justine Sterling, Liz Ryan, Michael Coleman, Richard Curl

ABSENT: None

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

The meeting was called to order at 7:02 PM by Mr. Hutchinson.

Pursuant to Governor Baker's March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §18, and the Governor's March 15, 2020 Order imposing strict limitations on the number of people that may gather in one place, this meeting of the Melrose Historic District Commission was conducted via remote participation to the greatest extent possible. Specific information and the general guidelines for remote participation by members of the public and/or parties with a right and/or requirement to attend this meeting was found on the City of Melrose's website. No in-person attendance of members of the public was permitted, but every effort was made to ensure that the public could adequately access the proceedings in real time. An audio or video recording, transcript, or other comprehensive record of proceedings was posted on the mmtv3.org website as soon as possible after the meeting. Meeting access information was found at the following link and the plans could be requested by emailing the Senior Planner: www.cityofmelrose.org/remote-meetings.

I. MINUTES

Mr. Erb MADE a MOTION to approve the minutes from December 8, 2020. Ms. Ryan SECONDED the MOTION. All members voted in favor. None were opposed.

II. OTHER

12-16 Essex Street Comprehensive Permit Application

The Director & City Planner explained that the owner of 12-16 Essex Street was previously denied a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Historic District Commission to redevelop the property so they are instead applying for a Comprehensive Permit via MGL Chapter 40B. This law allows developers to circumvent local regulations in communities that have not met the 10% affordability threshold on the Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI) if projects provide a certain amount of affordable housing units; Melrose is currently at 8%. In this case, 25% of the 24 proposed units will be affordable, though all 24 units will count on the SHI because they are rentals. All permitting for Comprehensive Permits occurs via the Zoning Board of Appeals. The ZBA has opened the public hearing and they are accepting comments. While the Historic District Commission does not have regulatory jurisdiction, they are encouraged to submit comment. Ms. Gaffey referred to a letter that the Historical Commission submitted to the ZBA and wanted the Commission to have in which they detail improvements that can be made to the building to improve the historic character.

Mr. Erb stated that he attended the ZBA hearing and is frustrated because the developer knew this was a building in the Historic District. He felt like the developer told the Commission that if they did not do

what he wanted, we would abide by a different set of rules. He is upset that they could tear a building down. Mr. Coleman echoed these comments. Mr. Curl, who was not involved in the Commission's review of this project, said that he also felt bad because the Historic District is so small so it is a loss when a building is demolished. Whatever replaces the building needs to be of high quality. Planning Staff recalled that, while the developer was not willing to negotiate on number of stories or density, he was more than willing to accept feedback related to the building's design.

Ms. Ryan, who has also joined the Historic District Commission later, reflected on the building as somebody who grew up in Melrose and moved back to the community a few years ago. She stated that she never looked at that building and saw it as a historical site. The building has never been particularly embraced compared to many others in the downtown and it is not unreasonable to think that something would happen there. She suggested trying to find a happy medium in which the Commission provides suggestions for ways the building's design can be improved and historic features better incorporated. Ms. Sterling explained that she has similar feelings to Ms. Ryan. She does not love the design and would like to see what suggestions the group can make to improve it. That is where they should be expending their energy.

Mr. Hutchinson said that it was a slap in the face that the developer is now proposing a more modern building. Ms. Schnur Battaglia explained that the changes to the building design were not made to be personally offensive to the Commission. Rather, the need to meet the heightened affordability levels have necessitated a more slimmed-down design. She encouraged the Commission to provide their expert feedback to the ZBA as they do care and they will listen.

Mr. Coleman pointed out that the northwest elevation in particular is terrible because it will just look like a blank wall until the laundromat next door is redeveloped. He said that he never thought about the significance of this building until it was going to be torn down. Ms. Ryan suggested that a mural could be painted on the northwest wall that reflects the history of the building and/or district. Ms. Gaffey explained that the developer is getting pushback for that elevation from the ZBA, as well as MassHousing's architect, and it is likely to change.

Ms. Ryan brought up the storefront area and mentioned that this area is often overlooked by developers of mixed-use buildings. More thought is needed for the retail component because that is on the ground floor and where the eye immediately goes as you pass the site. The current proposal for the storefront area makes it feel more like a shopping center or grocery store.

Mr. Curl offered other suggestions that the Commission could provide to the ZBA, such as discouraging painted brick and showing more detailing. Ms. Sterling agreed that the architecture is beckoning for articulation and details. Right now, the rendering looks more like a schematic 3D massing.

Mr. Coleman reflected on the collaborative processes that took place in reviewing the developer's other building at 534 Main Street as well as that of the neighboring building at 530 Main Street. He worries about the canyonization happening on Essex Street since the proposed building is as big as City Hall, as well as the precedent being set that will encourage other developers in the Historic District to demolish their buildings. He feels like this proposal is too tall and too dense for the street. He would prefer if the top floor was set back a bit. The building also needs a lot of attention detail-wise, but a high quality of detail does not have to be expensive.

The group discussed what they should put in their letter to the Zoning Board of Appeals. Mr. Erb stated that they will regret it if they say nothing about the proposal. The letter should say that it was the

Commission's preference that the building was preserved. Ms. Ryan said that she would like to see more attention paid to the street-level. An elevated design will help the owner obtain a higher quality tenant and provide the uniqueness that tenants are looking for. Members are aligned on some items and unanimously agree that the building design needs more detail.

The Historic District Commission decided that Michael Coleman would work with Planning Staff to draft a letter to the ZBA and that they would meet the following week on February 17, 2021 to review the draft. It would be a violation of the Open Meeting Law for members to review the letter over email.

New Member Welcome

Ms. Gaffey welcomed Richard Curl, the newest member of the Historic District Commission, to the group. He is an architect that currently has a studio in the downtown. Mr. Curl introduced himself and said that his office is over the former Whittemore Hardware. Mr. Coleman said that he appreciated Mr. Curl diving in right away to the discussion as Ms. Ryan did when she first joined the Commission.

The meeting adjourned at 8:36 PM.