



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS
HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION
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MINUTES
RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION
February 11, 2015

I. MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr. Michael Abbott, AIA
Ms. Morgan Devlin
Mr. Mohamad Farzan, AIA
Ms. Caitlin Greeley, Statewide Planning, representing Kevin Flynn
Mr. Michael Hebert, NR Review Board
Mr. Karst Hoogeboom, Chairman
Dr. Patrick Malone
Dr. E. Pierre Morenon
Mr. Pieter N. Roos
Mr. Clark Schoettle
Mr. Jonathan Stevens, State Historic Preservation Officer
Ms. Ruth Taylor

STAFF PRESENT

Ms. Joanna Doherty, Principal Architectural Historian
Mr. Jeffrey Emidy, Principal Project Review Coordinator
Ms. Virginia Hesse, Principal Historical Architect
Dr. Timothy Ives, Principal Archaeologist
Ms. Michaela Jergensen, Senior Reviewer for RIDOT Projects
Mr. Edward F. Sanderson, Executive Director

MEMBERS ABSENT

Mr. Al Cocce, AIA, representing John P. Leyden, State Building Commissioner
Ms. Janet Coit, Director DEM
Dr. Ronald Onorato
Mr. Marcel Valois, Executive Director EDC

GUESTS

Mr. Edward Connors, National Register Consultant
Mr. Tim Sandiford

II. AGENDA

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:30 A.M., Karst Hoozeboom, Chairman, presiding.

2. Minutes of January 14, 2015

On a motion by Ms. Taylor, seconded by Ms. Devlin, the Commission unanimously

VOTED to approve the Minutes of January 14, 2014.

In response to a question, Mr. Sanderson suggested that the Commission might have a preliminary discussion about strategic planning at the April meeting, and a presentation on technology could be scheduled for May or June.

3. Executive Director's Report

a) Ms. Doherty reported on the progress of Hurricane Sandy Disaster Relief grants. The Bristol Ferry Lighthouse project has revised construction cost estimates that will increase the budget by \$17,453. Mr. Schoettle suggested that staff confirm that proposed site grading and drainage work qualifies as storm damage repair. On a motion by Mr. Farzan, seconded by Ms. Taylor, the Commission unanimously

VOTED to approve the increase.

b) Over the past year, the Town of South Kingstown has considered a proposal to demolish the historic Larchwood Inn in Wakefield and replace the structure with a health care facility. RIHPHC did not have regulatory review jurisdiction for the project, but at the request of the Town, RIHPHC architect Virginia Hesse has provided technical design assistance. The historic structure is deteriorated and cannot accommodate the health care facility program (although an alternative use might use historic preservation tax credits to rehabilitate the structure). However, Ms. Hesse has persuaded the developer to consider design modifications that would make the new construction less visually intrusive and would better preserve the landscaped site.

c) The loan for the Ashton Mill House in Cumberland has closed, and the project is proceeding to construction.

d) Mr. Sanderson is representing the Commission as a member of a special Senate

Commission to study redevelopment of commercial and historic properties. The study Commission has focused on the historic preservation tax credit program.

4. State Historic Preservation Officer's Report

Mr. Stevens expressed regret at the demolition of the Elizabeth Mill in Warwick. He noted that as Warwick Planning Director he had worked to add the property to the City's list of protected historic properties but was not successful.

Mr. Stevens introduced his guest Tim Sandiford to describe a technology needs assessment he had prepared for the RIHPHC. Mr. Sandiford noted that RIHPHC and the RI Department of Transportation have been working together for several years to develop a shared information system that would use Geographic Information System technology to locate and map historic properties. The project has been slowed by infrastructure issues related to extremely limited band-width available to RIHPHC and by limited inter-agency resources. Mr. Sandiford predicted that the State will move toward online digital permitting and that RIHPHC could get left behind. Mr. Sandiford advocated for RIHPHC to add a fulltime GIS technician to its professional staff.

Following Mr. Sandiford's presentation, Mr. Sanderson further explained the long-term commitment of the Federal Highway Administration to state departments of transportation to participate with the development of environmental and cultural data management in order to streamline environmental review and permitting. Mr. Hoogeboom expressed caution about RIHPHC adding GIS personnel without further integration into the statewide information system, and he questioned whether RIHPHC's current data technology would require a fulltime technician, potentially at the expense of historic preservation staff expertise.

Mr. Hoogeboom thanked Mr. Sandiford for his presentation.

5. National Register of Historic Places

Preliminary presentation: Prospect Heights Housing Project, 560 Prospect Street, Pawtucket

Mr. Sanderson introduced the presentation by noting that evaluating the National Register eligibility of this 1941 public housing project raised issues that RIHPHC has not addressed previously. In preparation for evaluating Prospect Heights, Commissioners were sent a draft National Park Service study of federally-assisted mid-20th-century housing projects. The NPS study helps to provide a historical and architectural context.

Prior to the presentation, Mr. Schoettle stated that he would recuse himself and not

participate in evaluating the significance of Prospect Heights because the Providence Revolving Fund could potentially become involved in a historic rehabilitation project at the property. He remained in the meeting to hear the presentation and to be available to answer factual questions if asked.

Mr. Connors presented information about Prospect Heights.

Prospect Heights was built in 1940-41 by the Pawtucket Housing Authority (PHA) to provide housing for low-income residents, a function it still serves today. Similar efforts were undertaken across the country in an effort to address a severe shortage of affordable housing during the Great Depression and, later, during World War Two. The Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937 authorized the creation of local housing authorities that could receive financial assistance from the Federal government. The PHA was the first housing authority established in Rhode Island and Prospect Heights was among the earliest public housing complexes built in the state. Further, it is the only public housing complex in Rhode Island that was constructed in partnership with the U.S. Housing Authority, which operated for just three years; all others were built to house defense-industry workers.

Designed by local architect John F. O'Malley, Prospect Heights is comprised of 35 two-story, rectangular-plan, brick-vener apartment houses and a community center located on a 21-acre former industrial site. The site plan reflects standards promulgated by the Federal government in the 1930s. For example, the buildings occupy less than 25% of the site and most are laid out in rows, roughly parallel to one another, to promote light and ventilation and to create shared green space. The buildings' design is also typical of public housing from the period, which generally followed the tenets of "functional modernism" and included minimal ornamentation. At Prospect Heights, architectural details are limited to the door surrounds, which feature polychrome brick laid in a moderately decorative pattern and shallow, cast-concrete hoods embossed with a chevron design.

All of the apartment buildings survive, though they have been altered with the addition of hipped roofs (to replace the original flat roofs) in the 1980s and shed-roof door hoods in the 1990s. In addition, the original double-hung, wood window sash and doors have been replaced with modern units, though the fenestration patterns remain. The circulation system has been altered with the introduction of a semi-circular road and parking lot at the north end of the site, the construction of parking lots to the rear of the apartment buildings, and the removal of walkways. In addition, 12 small, one-story, hipped-roof, brick utility buildings were constructed throughout the site in the 1990s. Overall, however, Prospect Heights appears to retain good historical integrity and appears to be the most intact public housing complex from this period in Rhode Island.

During discussion, Mr. Roos asked if Prospect Heights is the only federal housing project of the 1940s in Rhode Island? Mr. Connors explained that several other projects were built using

Defense Housing Program funds, but Prospect Heights was the only example of non-defense federal housing development. Among the Defense Housing projects, all have been altered. Mr. Hoozeboom noted that the original design is basically intact. Mr. Shoettle reported that during discussion with the Pawtucket Housing Authority there have been some preliminary ideas about making extensive remodeling changes that would alter the 1941 design. During the discussion, the PHA began to consider whether a historic rehabilitation might be more desirable. Ms. Taylor stated her opinion that Prospect Heights has great significance to the social history of Pawtucket and Rhode Island, particularly seeing it as an expression of community decisions about how to house working people. Mr. Roos agreed that public housing has been an important issue of the twentieth century, and Prospect Heights continues to fulfill its original purpose. Dr. Morenon noted the collapse of social systems in the 1930s and 1940s, and addressing housing problems is part of our social history. Mr. Hoozeboom noted that Prospect Heights and other housing projects really were early planned communities that affected later development patterns. Mr. Abbott thought Prospect Heights paralleled the garden apartment movement, and he noted how the project was distinct from the established city street grid. Dr. Malone felt the history of housing, particularly in industrial communities, was a very important historical process. He noted that the NPS document omits some earlier important housing projects. He suggested that further research could look at the transition from providing housing for working families to housing destitute families; and he wondered what research might show about the reaction of real estate developers and others in the Pawtucket community to the Prospect Heights development.

As the Commissioners' discussion continued, a general consensus emerged that based on assessment of the property's history and state of preservation, Prospect Heights is a good candidate for listing on the National Register. According to the National Park Service's draft context statement, "Public Housing in the United States, 1933-1949," public housing complexes are typically eligible for the National Register at the local level and, therefore, eligibility evaluations "must be grounded in a thorough understanding of the local context." The excellent research completed to date indicates that Prospect Heights was built in response to a severe housing shortage in Pawtucket, with the collapse of the textile industry and the onset of the Great Depression forcing many low-income residents into substandard housing. Prospect Heights was one of a number of New Deal-era projects in Pawtucket, whose mayor, Thomas P. McCoy, was adept at securing Federal dollars. Additional research is needed in order to place Prospect Heights more firmly in Pawtucket's early- to mid-20th-century social and political context. Additional information on the following topics would be helpful:

- How were the original goals for Prospect Heights described in terms of benefits to the project residents and to the City at large?
- Why was this site on the southern edge of the City selected and how does this site relate to the goals of the project?
- What was the public reaction to or support for the project?
- What guidelines determined how project residents were selected? Did the resident population change over time?

- When completed, did Prospect Heights meet the project goals and expectations?
- Given the passage of time, what conclusions can be drawn about Pawtucket's experience with public housing in relation to the Prospect Heights project?

Following thorough discussion, on a motion by Mr. Farzan, seconded by Mr. Roos, the Commission

VOTED preliminary approval for a Prospect Heights National Register nomination, subject to the comments and questions articulated during the Commissioners' discussion.

Mr. Schoettle did not vote.

6. Other Business: There was no other business.
7. Next regular meeting date: Wednesday March 11, 2015 at 9:30 AM.
8. Adjourn: The meeting adjourned at 11:30 AM.

Minutes recorded by,



Edward F. Sanderson, Executive Director
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer