

Kensington Heritage Commission Meeting

February 23, 2022

Minutes

The meeting was held in person at the Town Hall. The meeting was posted on the Town's website, so the public was able to attend.

In Attendance:

Present: Regular Members: Lynne Monroe, Chair; Bob Gustafson, Treasurer and Selectmen's Representative; Meghan Gross, Secretary; Elaine Kaczmarek, Joni Praded, and Steven Mallory

Alternates: Frank Whittemore and Alan Tuthill

Absent: Planning Board Representative

Guests: Rebecca Mitchell and Nathan Merrill, Stratham Heritage Commission

Call to order at 7:04 PM

Minutes: The minutes from the January 26th meeting were reviewed. Lynne Monroe made the motion to accept the minutes, seconded by Bob Gustafson. Approved unanimously.

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS

Membership: Two persons have been contacted to fill the vacant seats for a regular member and a representative from the Planning Board. One has declined and the other is still considering. There is ongoing conversation with the Planning Board.

As there were guests present, other business was waived.

NEW BUSINESS

The Stratham Commission (SHC) has been active for over twenty years and offered to come to Kensington to talk about ideas for projects and best practices for Heritage Commissions. The conversation began with introductions. Nathan Merrill is a farmer in Stratham and the Chair of the Heritage Commission, Rebecca Mitchell is the past Chair of the Heritage Commission and a board member of the NH Preservation Alliance, with an interest in helping other Heritage Commissions. The members of the Kensington Commission also introduced themselves.

Stratham Heritage Commission (SHC) was created in 1997. The first 5 years were not very productive, as they did not understand their mission and undertook researching genealogy and writing a new history for the town. A talk from the NH Historical Society clarified the difference between a Heritage Commission's mission and a Historical Society's.

They stressed how fortunate they have been that their Selectboard members have been supportive to the mission of the SHC. The Kensington Heritage Commission (KHC) reported that our Selectboard has been extremely supportive and that all three of the current members have served on the KHC. The Stratham Planning Board has valued SHC's input on masterplan revision. KHC will arrange a meeting with the Planning Board regarding the upcoming revisions to the Master Plan.

There was considerable discussion of RSA 79D, the barn easement program and RSA 79E which

helps in agricultural towns. KHC has written articles for Community News on this subject, but another would be a very good idea!!

SHC has found that it's good practice to write a warrant article for something you'd like to do even if it's not perfect, because it opens the discussion and can be improved for the next year. For instance. The Bartlett Cushman house on Portsmouth Avenue was up for sale and likely would have been demolished at the time when their demolition delay ordinance was on the warrant. Now the house has been saved and they have a demolition delay ordinance.

In Stratham Demolition Delay Ordinance, to be considered a building must be "historically significant", but that's a loose definition; it doesn't have to have been officially determined eligible for the National Register by the NHDHR. It just needs to be a substantial building, as they do not wish to prevent someone working on a shed for instance and be 50 years old or older. If demolition is proposed, it automatically goes to the Demolition Review Committee. The Committee then has a week to determine whether the building is significant and if so, it then has 30 days to find an alternative, negotiation, documentation or moving. Stratham has saved all the very significant historic properties that have come up for demolition. Although, some marginally significant properties have been lost.

Demolition by neglect is another topic for discussion, and Stratham has a couple of properties that they are concerned about. SHC discussed having a small grant or community loan fund to help homeowners with the costs of maintaining their historic buildings, but they decided that maintaining a loan fund was beyond their capabilities.

SHC started their townwide inventory project a few years ago and recently they have hired a consultant to update and complete it. KHC has a complete townwide inventory, but it was completed in 1997 and should be updated. KHC has planned to do that, but the pandemic got in the way. They intend to do that before the next Master Plan is completed.

Meghan Gross asked how they get the word out to the community about the mission of the Heritage Commission. SHC utilizes everything they have available including a Selectboard newsletter, social media, newspapers. Joni Praded asked what's the conversation starter with homeowners? SHC suggestion: Identify the most significant properties and suggest Listing them on the National Register. (Stratham pays to hire consultants to do this. Occasionally, the homeowner helps.) Joni asked what are the other major tools in your toolkit? Suggestion: Try to make a connection with new homeowners who buy historic properties. (KHC did that with the Church Parsonage to good effect.)

SHC feels that having a budget is important. The SHC has a capital reserve fund. In 2008 they asked for a "few hundred thousand" (\$250,000). Initially the town voted to set up a fund, but not to put any money in it. Then after a few years and the town voted YES on the \$250k. Steven Mallory asked what amount they'd recommend as an amount for a fund in a town like Kensington. SHC suggests starting small, perhaps \$20,000. Expenditures of fund \$\$\$ have to be approved by the Selectboard. SHC money has been used to buy a preservation easement on their old town hall and the Bartlett-Cushman house. SHC keeps asking for the money every year and they usually get it. They feel that their success has been due to the fact that they are not thought fanatical and are reasonable people to deal with.

The job of the Heritage Commission is to build awareness and to educate people about the resources that they have. “Lead to horses to the preservation trough.”

This is paraphrased from the enabling legislation.

Ideas: Update and advertise 79D, the historic barn easement. Help educate people about this resource and how it can help them and the broader community. SHC will send out letters to barn owners to solicit 79D enrollment. In exchange for granting a 10-year easement on your barn to the town, the town will give you a tax break on the assessment of the structure and land it sits on 25-75%. (KHC has mentioned this in Community News, but not made direct contact with barn owners.) More help for barn owners might come from barn assessment grants from NHPA. (KHC has helped one owner obtain an assessment.)

Steven Mallory expressed an interest in conducting an interiors survey in Kensington. Kensington is known to have been home to extraordinary builders and joiners in the 18th and 19th centuries. This might be a good project in conjunction with the survey update? SHC suggested putting on a public program about historic interiors, how to identify them and the history of technology. Also significant to the master plan to identify and protect community character, is recordation of historic landscapes. Coordination with the Conservation Commission about easements on properties that include historic structures. SHC asked if we have an ordinance that protects stone walls? Heritage Roadways or Heritage Corridors? The answer was no, but this can be discussed with the Planning Board. Suggestion to consider tours? KHC has a walking tour booklet of the town center, but nothing for rural properties. Thought—maybe a historic driving tour? Maybe QVC codes linked to a write up or small talk about properties? That could be a great thing to do in Kensington.

Joni asked if they’ve seen an uptick in people who are looking to preserve a property while converting to solar, etc. SHC said that they have not seen much of that and when they do, they direct people to the NHPA resources.

At next year’s town meeting (2023) KHC should submit a warrant article for a demolition review ordinance and ask for a budget for a capital reserve fund.

Frank Whittemore made a motion to adjourn at 8:29 pm; Elaine Kaczmarek seconded it. Approved unanimously.

Next meeting will be Wednesday, March 23, 2022, 7:00 at the Town Hall.