

**Amherst Historical Commission
Meeting
Tuesday, January 27, 2009
First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall
7:15 p.m.**

Present: James Wald, Chair; Michael Hanke, Vice-Chair; Louis Greenbaum, CPAC Representative; Lyle Denit; and Elizabeth Sharpe

Staff: Jonathan Tucker, Director of Planning; Nathaniel Malloy, Associate Planner.

Guests: Mark Israel, Jewish Community of Amherst; Roy Brown, Architect; Roy Rosenblatt, Community Services Coordinator; Ron Bohonowicz, Maintenance Director; and Linda Faye, member of the public

Mr. Wald called the meeting to order at 7:20 p.m. With Gai Carpenter, the Clerk, absent, there were no minutes from the January 5, 2009 meeting to approve. There were no announcements.

Jewish Community of Amherst

Mr. Israel presented a graphic printout illustrating signs proposed to be attached to the front of the synagogue of the Jewish Community of Amherst (located in the former Second Congregational Church building) at 743 Main Street. He explained that for thirty years the JCA has respected the building's architecture, and these signs are an appropriate attempt to make the public aware that this structure is a synagogue, not a church. The signs would require a special permit, for which he has applied, and would consist of: 1) a 36" bronze star inset into the central recessed panel above the fascia, and 2) 12" lettering along the fascia spelling out "Jewish Community of Amherst".

Ms. Sharpe asked if the lettering could be placed on a freestanding sign along the street and not on the building, so that just the star (a symbol) would designate the structure as a synagogue. Mr. Israel responded that a star alone might also represent a Unitarian church, and therefore needs accompanying text for clarification.

Mr. Greenbaum agreed that throughout its tenure, the JCA has been sensitive to the architecture of the building, which, regardless of the amount of signs, is clearly a church structure. He emphasized that as a church built by Calvinists, this building functioned initially as a meetinghouse, not necessarily solely as a religious church. Mr. Greenbaum declared that this structure was the masterpiece of its architect, Warren S. Howland, because of the architectural relief and articulation and the understanding of light and shadow. It is a contributing structure and the architectural centerpiece of the East Amherst Village National Historic Register District. The proposed signs would deface the structure and be less effective than a freestanding sign that could more freely use Jewish iconography. He also cited a Jewish community on Cape Cod that uses an old church as a synagogue and did not put any signs on its building; there is no rule requiring signs on a synagogue.

Ms. Faye, as a member of the public, commented that the signs may be considered temporary and could be taken down in future if the function of the building changed.

Mr. Tucker explained that signs needed to be clearly visible and easily attract the eye of passersby. He believed the proposed signs were set too high on the building (outside the typical cone of vision) and would not be easy to see. He suggested the front yard as a better location for a freestanding sign because it is across the street from the East Village Common and close to a major four-way intersection.

Mr. Israel asked if the Commission would be amenable to a star alone, without lettering. Mr. Denit opined that a star alone would not violate the building's architecture as it is a symbol (not literal like the lettering). Mr. Tucker believed the star alone worked with the building's formality, but as a sign, it would still be located too high on the façade to be easily visible. Mr. Hanke thought a white star would pick up light and shadows and be as visible and more appropriate than the proposed bronze color.

Mr. Wald suggested the JCA research an integrated, recognizable sign system that helped the public identify the structure, locate its entrances, direct visitors to the parking in back, and identifies the other structures on the property. He explained that this system could effectively use freestanding signs to educate the public and reinforce the structure's significant architecture.

Mr. Greenbaum opposed any sign (even a star) on the building and recommended the JCA continue honoring the history and architecture of this centerpiece of the East Amherst Village by placing nothing on the building. He made a motion to recommend to the Zoning Board of Appeals and Building Commissioner that no signs be allowed to be affixed to this building, and that ground-mounted signs (with lettering and symbols of the JCA's choosing) be explored instead. Mr. Hanke seconded the motion. There was no discussion and the vote was 4 in favor, 1 opposed, with 1 member absent.

Mr. Denit made a second motion to recommend only the star, without lettering, be affixed to the building as a sign, and the use of a ground sign with lettering. The motion was not seconded.

Mr. Wald summarized the discussion: the Historical Commission praises JCA's commitment to the preservation of this historic building but does not endorse the actual signs. The Commission would prefer that no signs be allowed to be affixed to this building, and that a sign system using ground-mounted signs be explored for the entire property. Ground-mounted signs and landscape treatments offer a more appropriate range of design options for declaring the synagogue's identity in a manner that would be compatible with the building's architecture and its historic village setting.

Local Historic District

Mr. Wald reiterated that the creation of a local historic district has the support of many town plans and studies, and town staff, and that it has 'teeth' to achieve historic preservation. He indicated that three people whom the commission suggested be contacted about serving on the Local Historic District Study Committee had all responded negatively to Mr. Wald's inquiry. He explained that there is not widespread opposition to a Local Historic District, just a cautious approach by citizens.

Mr. Tucker described establishing a Local Historic District as a public education process that may take longer than initially expected.

The Historical Commission moved its meeting to the Town Room, Town Hall, to view a presentation on proposed renovations to the North Amherst School.

North Amherst School

Mr. Rosenblatt explained that the Town's variance application to the Architectural Access Board to not construct a ramp on the front of the former North Amherst school building had been approved. The purpose of the presentation was to inform the Historical Commission of the proposed alterations so that they could decide whether or not to write a letter approving the work; this would release necessary funds.

Mr. Brown showed a brief PowerPoint presentation, mostly images of the current structure, and informed the Commission of future tasks: new front stoop; repointing many areas, new and improved lighting on the north side, new location for Handicap Parking at the rear of the building, new doors, improvements to the two existing wheelchair ramps, and minor modifications inside to make the structure ADA compliant. Mr. Brown estimated the work would take three months to complete and would be best completed during the summer when no kids are using the building.

The Commission liked the idea of updating and maintaining the building, but would like to see more detailed drawings and specific work items. Ms. Sharpe suggested that more historic photographs be located to inform the architect and the Commission about how the proposed work would align with the historic character of the building, especially with regard to the front entrance and vestibule. Mr. Tucker asked if the front vestibule would be returned to an open entry. Mr. Denit noted that the number of chimneys has changed over time, from two to three to one in the middle of the roof along the ridgeline.

Mr. Bohonowicz explained that, like the process of repointing Town Hall, each worker at the North Amherst School would be monitored and qualified to work on the historic structure, and the materials would conform with NPS guidelines.

The Commission agreed to approve the renovations and modifications as long as revised renderings and drawings (along with historic photographs) be sent to the Historical Commission for its review before work begins.

West Cemetery Signs

Mr. Hanke presented revised signs, with changes that include Caslon typeface, justified text on the smaller interpretive signs, and color improvements. Adding cemetery hours to the signs had not been resolved. Mr. Hanke assured the Commission that the Kimball "corn girl" funerary image was very striking but too fantastical for a public cemetery sign.

The Commission was unanimous in choosing the "winged angel" image to adorn the West Cemetery signs. It is hoped that these signs can be installed by Fall 2009 for Amherst's 250th Anniversary.

Community Preservation Act

Mr. Tucker explained that there is uncertainty by the CPAC about the appropriateness of using CPA money to fund interpretive signs. Under DOR guidance, the CPAC follows a strict, narrow definition of preservation that means direct, physical work to protect a structure. The Commission agreed to revisit the issue when Town Counsel and others could provide an opinion.

The Commission looked at photographs of the North Congregational Church, which showed the underside of the section of roof to be repaired and replaced. Mr. Greenbaum commented that serious fires in the 1930's and 1980's had damaged the structure, and smoke damage was visible inside the roof. The photographs revealed that old logs, some with bark still on, were used for rafters.

250th Anniversary

Mr. Denit reported that there are no longer separate executive committee meetings. He attended the first of twelve lectures to be held monthly throughout 2009, and thought it was excellent.

Mr. Wald pointed out that the Amherst Preservation Plan emphasizes that Amherst has few documented archeological sites and that inventorying those sites could be a potential CPA project. He also noted that a subcommittee of the 250th Committee would be putting on a spring performance in West Cemetery.

Aaron Warner House

Mr. Tucker explained that Mr. Denit's photographs of the exterior and interior of this historic house have been mailed to the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the Town is waiting for a reply. Mr. Denit reported that the occupant of the house, Mr. Richard Warner, had passed away in early January.

Demolition Notices

The University of Massachusetts will be tearing down two outlying structures in the wooded area on the Northeast section of campus behind Orchard Hill.

Mr. Wald reported that he will attend a meeting with Preserve UMass to review their preliminary inventory and assessment report.

Adjourn

Ms. Sharpe made a motion to adjourn. Mr. Denit seconded, and the motion passed unanimously at 10:03 pm.

Next Meeting

February 10, 2009