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April 12, 2017

Town Meeting
Town of Amherst, MA.

Dear Town Meeting Members,

As Chair of the North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset Local Historical District Study Committee, I am writing to respond to the objections raised in the Planning Board's minority report on Article 25.

“Public Interest vs. Private Property Rights”

With all due respect, the minority report's opinion on this topic is irrelevant and not within the Planning Board's purview. LHDs are supported by state and town law, as well as explicitly mentioned and supported in the town's Master Plan.

The Study Committee has been scrupulous in following the procedures outlined in MGL ch 40C and state procedures delineated by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. The 2010 Master Plan for the Town of Amherst notes the importance of preserving historical neighborhoods as a counterweight to its support for density and development. The 2005 Amherst Preservation Plan makes similar observations. And the 2012 Amherst Local Historic District Bylaw, passed as Article 27 at the Spring 2012 Town Meeting, stipulates the qualifications, authority, powers and duties of the Commission Members in considerable detail. It also details Commission procedures and criteria for decision-making.

“Adequately Regulated”

Again the minority report overreaches its purview, seeming to question the very validity of Local Historic Districts as entities themselves. If the protection and preservation of historic neighborhoods were deemed to be “adequately regulated” by existing zoning or design review regulations, then the state, town and master plan would not have provided for LHDs.

“Overreaching Boundaries”

As the minority report correctly notes, much of the area in the proposed LHD has been judged by the United States Department of the Interior to be of such significance to be included in two National Register Districts. What the authors of the report don't mention or may not understand is that a national designation provides little, if any, tangible protections.

Not only were the proposed boundaries endorsed by the Massachusetts Historical Commission, but, in its letter dated December 20, 2016, the MHC states that the “study committee should investigate protecting additional significant historic resources through a larger district or additional local districts in this area.”

The average LHD in Massachusetts is 100 properties. The Provincetown LHD contains over 1000. The entire island of Nantucket is an LHD. Many towns in Massachusetts smaller than Amherst have multiple LHDs.

At the study committee's two public hearings, in fact, some citizens requested that the LHD be increased to include Lincoln Avenue on the south side of Amity Street, an area that the Study Committee has excluded

for the time being as it was deemed to be of a different scale and character than the rest of the proposed LHD.

It is also the case that expansion was raised as a possibility by other members of the Planning Board itself at its January 18, 2017 meeting.

“Less Than Even A Plurality”

Technically, there is no mandated threshold for neighborhood support for an LHD so again the minority report overreaches its purview.

That said, neighborhood support for the proposed district has been overwhelming. The LHD isn't being imposed on the neighborhood because the neighborhood generated the effort to have an LHD. 80 percent of respondents to the questionnaire supported the idea of an LHD. Over fifty people attended the Study Committee's two public hearings. At the second hearing, there was only a single voice of dissension and by the end of it, even Dan said he was coming around. In a town where voter turnout is typically under 15%, a turnout of 25% is exceptional. Also, one thing I think we can all agree about Amherst is that no one who lives here is shy about voicing opposition. There has been minimal, if any opposition by the property owners who would be affected by the creation of the proposed district.

“Differs from Dickinson District”

The minority report's view that the proposed LHD “does not rise” to the same historic importance as the Dickinson District, is in direct contradiction to the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, the United States Department of Interior, the Amherst Historical Commission, the Massachusetts Historical Commission, and the head of the historical preservation department at UMass, just to name a few authorities with more experience in the field. Furthermore, there is no standard in MGL 40C or the Amherst Bylaw that one proposed LHD has to be as “important” as another.

“A Town-Wide Commission”

Actually, if the proposed LHD is approved by Town Meeting, it wouldn't be administered by a town-wide commission, but by a commission which would only have jurisdiction over the properties in the LHDs. The rest of the town would be unaffected.

It is worth noting that the properties in the existing Dickinson LHD and the proposed LHD share a wide range of similar architectural styles from the same general time periods, so the added administration of the proposed LHD is hardly a stretch of the Commission's expertise.

In terms of workload, the existing Amherst Historic District Commission that currently administers the Dickinson LHD (the only LHD currently under Amherst LHD Bylaw), has convened just 17 times in 4 years, not excessive by other town committee standards. This commission has voted to welcome the proposed LHD as a second historic district within its jurisdiction.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Steve Bloom
Chair
North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset LHD Study Committee