



**Schenectady Historic District Commission**

**Meeting Minutes  
May 23, 2019**

**I. CALL TO ORDER**

Commissioner Yager called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

**II. ROLL CALL**

**PRESENT:** Patricia Yager, Chair; Ben Wiles, Vice Chair; Shaun Andriano; Dr. Dean Bennett; Christopher Marney

**STAFF:** Avi Epstein, Zoning Officer; Jennifer Mills, Secretary

**ABSENT:** Frank Gilmore

**III. CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

None.

**IV. ADOPTION OF MEETING MINUTES**

Motion by Commissioner Marney, seconded by Commissioner Wiles, to approve the April 25, 2019 Meeting Minutes as submitted.

*Motion carried unanimously.*

**V. NEW BUSINESS - APPLICATIONS**

**A. Consideration for approval submitted by Gretta Pierre-Lewis to replace the railings installed by the previous owner without HDC approval. The premises are located at 1080 University Place in the Union Triangle Historic District.**

Gretta Pierre-Lewis and Robert Mortimore presented the application.

Ms. Pierre-Lewis explained that she had received a violation letter for replacing the porch railing, but she had been just trying to repair it and put it back the way it was. She noted that she had not been aware that she needed a permit to complete the work. Commissioner Yager asked Ms. Pierre-Lewis if she was repairing the individual spindles or replacing the whole railing. Ms. Pierre-Lewis replied that she was replacing what was there with a railing of the same design. She stated that she interpreted this as fixing what was there and not changing anything, and that although the repairs were costly, she felt she had to do them as soon as possible because the existing wood was rotting and falling down. Mr. Mortimore added that the existing railing was a safety hazard. Commissioner Yager stated that to avoid a situation like this happening again Ms. Pierre-Lewis should be sure to check with

the City before doing any work on the property, since she lives in an historic district. Ms. Pierre-Lewis stated that she had been unaware that her property was in the district, but now that she knew she would be certain to follow proper channels.

Commissioner Bennett asked if the new railing Ms. Pierre-Lewis was proposing would look the same as what was last there or would it be a new design. Ms. Pierre-Lewis responded that she had planned to exactly replace what was there. Zoning Officer Epstein clarified that the Codes Inspector had notified him because the original installation of the railing had never received the proper approval. Commissioner Marney distributed photos of the MLS listing for the house in 2004 which showed a different railing than photos from the property file dated 2013. Ms. Pierre-Lewis confirmed that she purchased the property in 2004. Commissioner Marney asked if the Commission would have to approve the previous porch as existing and the replacement as in-kind. Mr. Epstein stated that he did not believe that this application should be a staff approval because the Commission had never approved what was existing, so technically it was not simply an in-kind replacement. Commissioner Marney stated that the photos show that Ms. Pierre-Lewis changed the porch after she purchased the property, and it was not the previous owner who did the work. Ms. Pierre-Lewis stated that it was a former boyfriend of hers who changed it, and she had not been aware at the time that she needed approval from the City.

Commissioner Marney asked Ms. Pierre-Lewis if she had any photos of what the porch looked like before what was on the house when she purchased the property, which was obviously not original or historic. Ms. Pierre-Lewis stated that she did not bring one with her, but she had a photo at home, and had seen one in the assessor's file showing a full two-story porch across the front of the home. Mr. Epstein stated that no other photos were in the property file.

Commissioner Yager stated that she was not sure that she felt comfortable calling this an in-kind replacement since what was being replaced was never approved. Mr. Epstein stated that based on the information available to the Commission the existing porch was what was there and what should be considered. Commissioner Wiles stated that the two questions he was considering were if this is a change or an in-kind replacement and if it is a design that is compatible historically with the house. He stated that he does not think the style of spindles is appropriate and would prefer a plain square spindle. Commissioner Yager agreed, stating that she believes the square spindle would be more appropriate if the spindles are not placed too far apart. Commissioner Marney stated that the square spindles would be a definite improvement over the existing. The Commissioners agreed.

The Commissioners discussed the top railing and showed Ms. Pierre-Lewis a sketch of what a rounded and channeled top railing should look like. Commissioner Andriano pointed out that the bottom rail should be raised 4" off the

porch deck to allow for snow and water flow off the deck. Mr. Epstein asked what color Ms. Pierre-Lewis proposed. She responded that she had planned to paint the entire railing white. The Commissioners indicated that this would be acceptable.

Ms. Pierre-Lewis stated that she would eventually like to replace the railing along the stairs. Mr. Epstein stated that she would have to formulate a proposal of what she would like to do and return for a separate approval for any other work.

### **PUBLIC COMMENTS**

None.

### **RESOLUTION**

Motion by Commissioner Andriano, seconded by Commissioner Marney, to approve the application to replace the porch rails with the following conditions:

1. The project will be completed within one year.
2. The rail will comply with all necessary municipal codes. The spindles will be 2" x 2" (actual measurement 1.5" x 1.5") square spindles placed a maximum of 4" apart.
3. The top rail will be a standard top rail with a curved edge to help shed water and a channel to accept the spindles.
4. The bottom rail will also have a channel to accept the spindles and will be 4" above the porch deck.
5. The entire railing and spindles will be painted white.
6. The applicant will provide a final sketch and details of all the proposed products to be used to City staff for approval prior to beginning the work.
7. There are no other modifications to the porch or stairs and stair railing included in this approval. Should the applicant wish to modify any other portion of the porch or stairs she must return to the Commission for further consideration.

And with the following findings of fact:

1. This is a Type II SEQRA.
2. The applicant did not have evidence of the original or historic porch details present at the meeting. She provided evidence of the previous porch treatment that was present when she purchased the home, which was clearly not original or historic. She stated that when the current railings were added she had not been aware that she had to seek the Commission's approval to install them, nor was she ever aware that her property was in an historic district.

***Motion carried unanimously.***

**B. Consideration for approval submitted by Michael Dussault on behalf of Union Street LLC to install an aluminum sign above the front door. The premises are located at 414 Union Street in the Union Street Historic District.**

Michael Dussault presented the application.

Mr. Dussault explained that his engineering firm, which is based in Vermont but has maintained a small office at the rear of 414 Union Street for several years, will be moving to a larger space in the front half of the building and thus would like to have their sign over the front entrance to the new space. He noted that the proposed sign is an existing sign that they will be moving from a Vermont location.

Commissioner Yager asked if the silver color used on the sign is part of their corporate branding. Mr. Dussault replied that the sign is constructed of an aluminum structural channel, which is a direct reference to the type of work the firm does. Commissioner Bennett asked if any of the Commissioners have any objection to the sign being screwed to the wood on the building. Commissioner Andriano stated that he would be much more concerned if the sign were being attached to the brick, as the wood is much more easily repaired after the sign is removed. The other Commissioners agreed.

Commissioner Wiles asked if there is any proposed lighting being added for the sign, as it will hang under an overhang. Mr. Dussault stated that there is an existing light under the overhang, which he believes will be sufficient to illuminate the sign. Commissioner Wiles asked Mr. Dussault if his firm owns the building. Mr. Dussault stated that he is a principal in Engineering Ventures, but 414 Union Street LLC is the company that owns the building. He noted that his brother is a principal in 414 Union Street LLC and that the engineering firm expects to be a long-term tenant. Commissioner Wiles asked if Mr. Dussault had any objection to a condition of approval stating that if his firm were to vacate the building, they would remove the sign and repair the wood. Mr. Dussault stated that he has no objection to the condition.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS**

None.

**RESOLUTION**

Motion by Commissioner Marney, seconded by Commissioner Andriano, to approve the application to install the aluminum sign above the door as submitted with the following conditions:

1. The project will be completed within one year.
2. If the engineering firm vacates the building, they will remove the sign and repair the wood where it was attached.

And with the following findings of fact:

1. This is a Type II SEQRA.
2. The new sign is a temporary feature that can easily be removed.
3. As the National Park Service states in the Presentation Brief 25, The Preservation of Historic Signs, the National Park Service “encourages communities to promote diversity in signs – their sizes, types, colors, lighting, lettering and other qualities. It also encourages business owners to choose signs that reflect their own tastes, values, and personalities. At the same time, tenant sign practices can be stricter than sign ordinances.”

*Motion carried unanimously.*

#### **VI. MISCELLANEOUS**

Zoning Officer Epstein noted that he is still working to put together a meeting with the Commission and the team that is working on the Stockade flooding issues. He explained that things are moving along quite slowly due to the number of involved agencies and he believes it will be at least several weeks before the meeting can be arranged. Commissioner Yager stated that she had hoped that the Commission would have the opportunity to have some input before the flood mitigation plan is finalized. Mr. Epstein stated that there are many technical issues to be decided before any design ideas might be discussed, noting that the Commission’s main interest would be in the design phases.

#### **VII. ADJOURNMENT**

Motion by Commissioner Wiles, seconded by Commissioner Bennett, to adjourn the meeting.

*Motion carried unanimously.*

The meeting was adjourned at 7:54 p.m.