



Schenectady Historic District Commission

Meeting Minutes
May 28, 2020

I. CALL TO ORDER

Commissioner Yager called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m.

Due to the closure of City Hall because of the Covid-19 Virus, the meeting was conducted online via WebEx.

II. ROLL CALL

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

STAFF: Matt Smith, Senior Planner; Jennifer Mills, Secretary

ABSENT: Frank Gilmore

III. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Commissioner Marney recused himself from the consideration of Miscellaneous Item A, the review of the potential nomination of the George Washington Carver Community Center to the State and National Register of Historic Places.

IV. ADOPTION OF MEETING MINUTES

Motion by Commissioner Wiles, seconded by Commissioner Andriano, to approve the April 23, 2020 Meeting Minutes as submitted.

Motion carried unanimously.

V. APPLICATIONS

There were no new applications submitted for review this month.

VI. MISCELLANEOUS

A. Review of the potential nomination of the George Washington Carver Community Center to the State and National Register of Historic Places. The premises are located at 700 State Street.

Senior Planner Matt Smith asked the Commissioners if they had any questions regarding the materials submitted. Commissioner Wiles asked Mr. Smith who had submitted the application to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). Mr. Smith responded that the Miracle on Craig Street organization submitted the

Nomination. He explained that SHPO has been working with the organization to edit and strengthen the nominating form to help improve the quality of the submission to the State Review Board and National Park Service. Commissioner Yager noted that she was disappointed that Commissioner Gilmore was not present at the meeting as he knew the architects of the Community Center and might have been able to offer some further information about its design. Mr. Smith stated that he will speak to Commissioner Gilmore and see if he has any additional comments that he would like to add to the discussion.

Commissioner Bennett asked if the building will be eligible for tax credits and protected from demolition if it is designated to the State and National Registers. Mr. Smith stated that additional tax credits would be available, as well as additional public funding sources, but he is not certain about the details of restrictions on demolition. He noted that a building is subject to Historic District Commission review if it has a local historic designation, which is a separate issue.

Commissioner Yager asked if someone would like to make a motion or if the Commissioners would like the opportunity for further discussion. Commissioner Bennet stated that he had not yet been convinced to support the designation. He explained that the building is a typical example of Brutalist architecture, which he has nothing against, but he does not believe that it is a remarkable example by any means, and questions whether it should merit historic protection. Mr. Smith noted that the fact that the nomination has gotten to the point of review by the Commission means that SHPO supports the nomination, otherwise it would not have gotten this far along in the process.

Commissioner Andriano agreed that he does not think that the building's architectural style is enough to support the designation, nor does he think it is a particularly good example of a community center design given its closed up courtyard and lack of windows into the community. He explained that he does think that if one considers the use and history of what went on in the building one might make a stronger case for the nomination. Commissioner Wiles stated that he agrees that along with the architecture what happened historically in the building is also important. He gave the example of a building being given historic significance because George Washington slept there, regardless of the actual historic importance of the building design. He added that he believes it is important to consider the building itself but also the historic story that the building tells about its use and the surrounding community.

Commissioner Yager stated that she agreed with Commissioner Wiles, noting that the architects may have chosen the brutalist style because of the buildings intended uses; thus, the style might have been driven by the function of the building. She noted that specific aspects of the brutalist design might have made it a useful style for this site, given the concrete exterior, which is low-maintenance, and the lack of large windows which might have been desirable for security purposes.

Commissioner Andriano stated that in his opinion the question comes down to whether the historic significance of the use of the building and its place in the community is enough to designate it historically, because he does not believe that the design of the building alone is enough to make it historically significant. He explained that he understands that the designation will help the organization get tax credits and possible funding assistance but the building is in need of significant repair, and if this group cannot afford those repairs it could perhaps leave the City with a property that has historic designation but is unused and vacant because of the additional protections that have been afforded it. Commissioner Bennett agreed, adding that he questions whether that situation, which could be an unintended result of the designation, would be the best outcome for the City or the community.

Commissioner Bennett asked Mr. Smith if he has gotten the impression that this building is beloved by the community. Mr. Smith responded that he has heard more positive comments about what went on there than about the building itself. Commissioner Andriano asked if there has been any opposition to the designation. Mr. Smith stated that he is not aware of any.

Commissioner Yager stated that the designation could very likely help the community by supporting the rehabilitation of the building and its services and also fueling other improvements in the neighborhood. Commissioner Bennett stated that he questions if it is necessary to protect a building that is not really historically significant in order to show respect for its history in the community. He asked Mr. Smith if the intended use of the building is for a community center. Mr. Smith responded that it is.

Commissioner Yager noted that she personally does not care for the Brutalist style of architecture, but she does not believe that she has to admire a building aesthetically to recognize its historic significance. Commissioner Bennett stated that to him the question is whether the building is an important example of the style. Commissioner Andriano stated that he does not believe it is a great example of this style, citing the Schenectady Public Library building, the Schenectady Police Station, and the Amsterdam Public Safety building as much better examples of this style and of the architects' work.

RESOLUTION

Motion by Commissioner Wiles, seconded by Commissioner Yager, to proclaim the Historic District Commission's support of the nomination of the George Washington Carver Community Center to the State and National Register of Historic Places.

Motion failed, with Commissioners Andriano and Bennett opposed.

Commissioner Bennett asked Mr. Smith how the outcome of the vote will affect the process moving forward. Mr. Smith stated that the Mayor will consider the Commission's decision and he may agree with them or not and will convey his opinion to the Review Board and National Parks Service. Commissioner Wiles asked Mr. Smith to convey to the Mayor that the vote was a tie, and to explain the discussion and positions of the Commissioners, both for and against, to him. Mr. Smith stated that he will do so.

VII. ADJOURNMENT

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

Motion carried unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:38 p.m.