

Smithfield Historic Properties Minutes
Thursday, October 17, 2019
3:00 P.M., Town Hall, Conference Room

Members Present:

Chairman-Dr. Oliver Johnson
Vice-Chair-Art Andrews
Mary Nell Ferguson
Paul Worley

Members Absent:

Deanna Simmons
Jan Branch
Rachel Ayers

Staff Present:

Stephen Wensman, Planning Director
Julie Edmonds, Admin Support Specialist

Staff Absent:

Mark Helmer, Senior Planner

Call to Order

Approval of September 19th, 2019

Dr. Johnson requested that Art Andrews be noted as Vice-Chair of the HPC under members present and to change Planning Board on the bottom of page 3 to Planning Department.

Dr. Johnson asked Stephen Wensman if he had heard anything further about the Historic Properties Commission name change from Town Council.

Mr. Wensman stated that Article 3 was tied up in a larger change for Conditional Zoning. He has an attorney looking at it, making sure what has been proposed is legal. Once completed, everything will get changed at once. That will include the HPC name change.

Paul Worley made a motion to approve the minutes from September 19, 2019; seconded by Art Andrews. Unanimously Approved

Approval of 2020 Meeting Schedule

Mary Nell Ferguson made a motion to approve the 2020 Meeting Schedule; seconded by Paul Worley. Unanimously Approved

Public Hearing

None

New Business

David Stephens of 211 N. Second Street presented information on plaques for Historic homes. He asked what the single most consequential endeavor the Historic Properties Commission could undertake to enhance the viability of residential housing in the older Smithfield neighborhoods. His answer is to develop and manage a program for awarding plaques for old homes in the historic areas north and south of Market Street.

Mr. Stephens said there are 9 colonial towns established before 1775 in North Carolina. He named Edenton, Wilmington, Bath, Beaufort, Fayetteville, Hillsborough, Halifax, New Bern and Salisbury. Smithfield is considered a revolutionary town because it was started during the

Revolutionary War. It was established April 23, 1777. There are only a few antebellum homes in town; the Bingham House and the Hastings House are all that he's aware of. Bill Creech led efforts to relocate and restore the Hastings House and transfer its ownership to the Town of Smithfield. This was in 1965 and, as far as Mr. Stephens is aware, it remains the only organized, collaborative effort to preserve an historic home in the Town.

Mr. Worley said the Lee House was moved from downtown to 1115 Outlet Center Drive.

Mr. Stephens said I believe you're right; you should count that as another historic home.

Mr. Stephens mentioned the State Historical Markers such as Congressman Edward W. Pou, Sherman's March and Ava Gardner. He pointed out over the years the Historic Properties Commission of Smithfield had white yard-installed signs designating historical buildings or homes. Tom Lassiter paid for the Sherman sign in front of the Johnston County Courthouse. There is also the Prominent African-Americans plaque on the Town Hall. The Johnston County Heritage Commission has approximately 8 new signs planned for installation throughout the County.

Mr. Stephens went on to say that up through the 1960's Beaufort, NC was just another small municipality. But in 1960 the Beaufort Historical Association was founded and one of its goals was to place plaques on residential houses 100 years old or older. Today, more than 150 homes have such plaques. They provide a distinctiveness that makes Beaufort a special place. Studies have shown that named houses add value. Now, homes in Beaufort's historic area are generally priced in the \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 range.

Beaufort's sole criteria for receiving plaques are for the home to be 100 years old or older. Any exterior remodeling must be consistent with the architectural integrity of the house. The homeowner is responsible for providing proof of age. Any credible records are acceptable for this purpose. The documentation must be submitted to the Beaufort Historical Commission, together with an application. Homeowners are responsible for all expenses associated with the plaques. Plaques must be to the exact specifications of the Commission. They are made locally at the cost of \$150.00 each.

Mr. Worley asked what the plaques are made of.

Mr. Stephens said wood.

The rules for naming the home are the earliest known homeowner will be on the plaque, together with the date of the construction. No other information is permitted. Dates preceded by "circa" will be acceptable when exact year of construction cannot be confirmed.

The biggest risk in making this plaque plan work in Smithfield would be a lack of interest on the homeowner's part. Another factor would be the lack of motivation to take the responsibility of performing the required research and purchasing the plaques. Ways to overcome these risks would be a cooperative agreement with the Johnston County Heritage Commission for assistance in performing the necessary research. A cost-sharing arrangement for purchase of the plaques could also work. The funds could be solicited from private donors for this purpose. The HPC should make a list of the houses that are obvious candidates that would qualify for plaques and contact the owners to assess their interest. Because Smithfield has a smaller inventory of old homes, the 100-year requirement could be reduced to 75 years if the HPC wanted to go that route. Under this rule, houses built after 1944 would qualify. But are these "historic homes"? In my opinion they are rapidly entering that status and deserve consideration for inclusion in any plaque program for Smithfield. Under the Beaufort naming rules, the name of the Hastings House

would have to change since William Hastings did not build it. If a house has a long history of occupancy by a family other than its builder, this name could possibly be added to the "title" of the house.

Mr. Worley stated that he looks at historic significant homes as homes built after World War II. You end up getting into a large inventory of potential homes.

Mr. Stephens agrees and wouldn't exclude those types of houses from the program.

Mr. Wensman asked how it would work since the HPC governs 24 buildings downtown but not any of the historic neighborhoods. Should we try to bring those into our jurisdiction?

Mr. Worley said there is probably fear about regulation.

Mr. Stephens said he would develop a list of homes to survey.

Mrs. Ferguson asked Mr. Andrews how old his house was.

Mr. Andrews said 115 years old.

Mrs. Ferguson asked Mr. Andrews how he felt about this.

Mr. Andrews said he felt the 100 year old home qualification was a good starting point. If you allow homes to qualify that are a minimum of 75 years old then you'll have so many plaques. Having that many plaques around town, he's feels people wouldn't look at them. But if you only have a few then those plaques would be more significant.

Mrs. Ferguson said it would be nice to send out a list of homes and get some involvement from the community.

Mr. Stephens said the market for historic homes is small but it's viable. The millennials are the buyers of the future. How are they going to be motivated or unmotivated to buy these historic homes?

Mr. Worley said it's a marketing effort to get the millennials to come from other areas and want to buy here and start their families. He's always thought South Smithfield was the best kept secret around. People are aging out and moving on. We need to find ways to build that up.

Mrs. Ferguson asked what type of cost issues would be involved in this project. The homeowners would purchase the plaques so really time is the only other involvement.

Mr. Worley said he believe there would be some establishment and administrative costs.

Dr. Johnson said if our purview is 24 buildings and we want to expand through Smithfield proper to include those homes we would need to market bigtime. Some people would look at it as government overreach. It's necessary and we could do it but we would have to really sell this idea.

Mr. Wensman said in the Comp Plan process some residents complained about the new homes being built adjacent to the historic district, specifically on Fourth Street. They don't have any context to them. He told them if you have Historic Preservation protections and in the district that couldn't happen.

Mr. Worley stated it would be a good idea to have some surveying or initial research in what people are interested in. What information is given is a survey will help determine the next steps to take. NC State has an Urban Center and he isn't sure if the HPC would qualify for help. They do studies and have a group that seeks out projects like this. It could take several years to get on their radar screen though.

Mrs. Ferguson suggested asking Todd Johnson from the Heritage Center to come and provide the HPC with information on what his organization could offer. He has the documents there and could do the research. If we knew that they would be willing to partner with us and take on a project like this it would be beneficial. She suggested sending letters out to potential homeowners that might want to participate.

Mr. Wensman said going door to door would be a better touch; more personal.

Mrs. Ferguson suggested a neighbor to neighbor process. If someone interested in a plaque could share the information with another neighbor that qualifies.

Mr. Andrews said that he would put a plaque on his house now if he had one. It would draw attention and be a good example to others that qualify and have interest in participating.

Dr. Johnson suggested eventually holding a meeting at Town Hall for those that live in historic properties and discuss all of this.

Mr. Andrews said if we go ahead and design the plaque I will buy one and we can use that plaque at the public meeting. He also pointed out that the plaque needs to be easily read from the street.

Mr. Andrews pointed out in Southport, NC the historic homes have plaques to the left of the door.

Mr. Stephens gave examples of an Application for Historic Plaques, Guidelines for Obtaining Plaques and pictures of Historic Homes with these Plaques.

Dr. Johnson requested Julie Edmonds scan these documents and include them along with the minutes from this meeting.

Mrs. Ferguson asked Mr. Wensman if he needed to do anything with the Town before the board moved forward with this project.

Mr. Wensman said he would like to review the roles and responsibilities of the HPC and see if the board has the authority to work outside of the district that you're governing. He knows money can be requested from the Town Council but he would need to find out where it would be allowed to be spending from.

Mr. Worley suggested forming a Historic Commission Society.

Dr. Johnson asked what the next step needs to be.

Mr. Wensman said looking at the roles of the HPC would be first.

Mrs. Ferguson asked if Mr. Wensman would come back with information on the HPC's role at the next meeting. In the meantime she will reach out to Todd Johnson. She suggested the board start looking at plaques in hopes that they can go in that direction.

Mr. Wensman said he will check on the board's boundaries and send an email out.

Dr. Johnson asked Mr. Andrews to begin looking at plaques.

Mrs. Ferguson thanked Mr. Stephens for the research he has done on the plaques and the ideas he has given to help the board move forward.

Old Business

None

Adjournment

Dr. Johnson adjourned the meeting.

The next HPC meeting is scheduled for January 16th, 2020 at 3pm.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julie Edmonds". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Julie Edmonds
Administrative Support Specialist
Planning Department