

Stratham Heritage Commission
Joint Session with Board of Selectmen
Meeting Minutes
October 30, 2017
8:00 pm
Hutton Room

Present: Nathan Merrill, Rebecca Mitchell, Wallace Stuart, David Canada, Tammy Hathaway

Absent: Florence Wiggin

Guests: Lucy Cushman, Historical Society Officer and Stratham Community Church historic committee; State Representative Patrick Abrami, and others

Board of Selectmen: Bruno Federico, Joseph Lovejoy, Michael Houghton

Town Administrator: Paul Deschaine

Called to order at 8:25 pm by Chairman Merrill

Mr. Merrill, Stratham Heritage Commission Chair and Demolition Review Committee Chair, addressed the Board informing them of the current status of the Old Town Hall. Mr. Merrill reviewed the letter he sent to the Selectmen on October 22nd [copy attached as addendum to these minutes].

As of this morning, current owner David Short has signed a sales agreement for both properties (Old Town Hall at 151 Portsmouth Ave. and Parker house at 149 Portsmouth Ave.) The pending new owner has filed a demolition permit application for both structures with the town Building & Planning Office. The Heritage Commission continues to advocate for saving the building either with a preservation easement or by purchasing the building from the new owner who has reportedly indicated that he would be willing to sell it back to the town for his purchase cost plus expenses.

Mr. Federico, Board of Selectmen chair, replied that the Board had discussed Mr. Merrill's letter at their last meeting and were supportive of a preservation easement, but did not support purchasing the building because of its current condition. Mr. Merrill suggested getting the building examined along with opening a conversation with the new property owner. He also noted that the town's citizens should be asked if there is support to save the building with a

purchase. Mr. Federico noted that it is not in the town's best interest to purchase and lease out old buildings. Mr. Canada replied that the price is "cheap" for a building that has a high degree of significance to the town's history. He asked that the Board keep an open mind on the building as it is a critical part of the town's heritage. He also pointed out that when the town vacated and ultimately sold the building there was no Heritage Commission to advocate for its preservation. Mr. Federico suggested the Heritage Commission communicate with the new owner and put together a proposal for the Selectmen to review.

Public comment made by Rep. Abrami: He argued that before the building is demolished the town taxpayers should have input into whether or not it should be saved. Mr. Merrill responded that the new owner would have to be patient to wait for the March 2018 Town Meeting and that hopefully he may be open to discussing various options, including a preservation easement as the preferred vehicle for preservation.

Selectman Mr. Houghton said it was unfortunate the town sold the building 20 years ago without any protections, and felt the economic viability of the building is lacking, but suggested that the town taxpayers can decide.

Public comment made by Ms. Cushman: The town needs to be aware of what is going on before demolition, as it would be shocking if two historically significant buildings were to disappear without any effort to inform and involve the public.

Mr. Merrill mentioned that the current tenant in the Old Town Hall would stay until the end of the year, giving us some time to work with the new owner. There was general discussion about potential reuse(s) of the building.

Selectmen Lovejoy noted that there have been "for sale" signs on the property for some time, and wanted to know why now it surfaces as a crisis worthy of the Board's consideration?

Mr. Merrill responded that the condition and fate of the Old Town Hall has been a high priority for the Heritage Commission for years as indicated by the timeline in his letter. Most notably, the Commission's goal has been a preservation easement, and as recently as one month ago the property owner expressed serious interest in pursuing an easement. Then suddenly he notified the Commission last week that a new buyer had surfaced, and that he wanted to tear the buildings down.

Ms. Mitchell noted that the Heritage Commission has been making an effort for years to educate the public and to advocate for the preservation of the Old Town Hall. In 2011 during the Town Center revitalization efforts and Plan NH charrettes, the Commission and members of the public raised concerns about the historic buildings in the Town Center. Ms. Mitchell also noted that

there is a chapter in the town's 300th anniversary book entitled "The sad demise of the old town hall." She also noted that rehabilitation of the Old Town Hall would qualify for the RSA 79E tax incentives.

Mr. Deschaine reminded everyone that the Old Town Hall has no well, and its septic system is unknown. He asked if there is a preference to favor one structure (Old Town Hall or Parker house) over the other?

Mr. Merrill stated that again there has been no communication yet with the new owner and that he felt the Old Town Hall holds more town heritage, however he did not want to lose either one. Ms. Mitchell noted that the Parker house was once the Baptist Parsonage and it appears to have been built by the electric streetcar company and the 1910 Federal census records that a trolley conductor resided there.

Ms. Mitchell asked the Board what is the standing of a demolition application if the applicant does not yet own the property? Mr. Deschaine replied that the current owner signed off on the demolition application and it may be one of the conditions for the sale.

Mr. Merrill said that during the 30 day demolition review period he will continue to work with due diligence on options to save the building. The Board indicated its willingness to consider proposals to preserve the Old Town Hall that the Commission might present.

A motion to adjourn the Heritage Commission joint meeting with the Board of Selectmen was made at 9:05 pm (Mr. Canada, Ms. Mitchell, unanimous).

Respectfully Submitted,

Tammy Hathaway
Secretary