

CHC memo re Envision Concord 2030

September 30, 2017

The Concord Historical Commission (CHC) met on Thursday, September 14, 2017 with Jeffrey Gonyeau, Preservation Consultant, and Elise Woodward, Co-chair of Concord's Comprehensive Long Range Plan Committee, to discuss the CHC's perception of the Town's most pressing issues related to historic preservation and its relationship to Concord's future.

Following that meeting, the Chair of the CHC asked that further comments from Commission members be submitted to her for inclusion in this memo. The following is a synopsis of meeting discussion and follow-up comments arranged in an attempt to impose order on the most significant ideas that emerged.

The ideas and concerns broadly fall into three categories:

- Protection of built environment
- Importance of historic landscape
- Collaborative/coordinated interpretation and engagement

Protection of built environment

Two years ago, town meeting passed the first update to Concord's demolition delay bylaw since its inception. This was a major effort for the CHC and has succeeded in providing oversight and temporary protection for more than a thousand Concord buildings outside the Historic Districts. The CHC is proud to have authored this broadened protection of historic resources. Following a year of applying the new bylaw and developing procedural regulations, the CHC is concerned that the present demolition review bylaw still falls short of the protective and constructive functions that we would like to see it have. Commission ideas include the following:

- Require that owner/contractor provide professional other-party proof of structural failure if that is the stated cause for wishing to demolish; add regulations concerning owner/contractor participation in seeking alternatives during delay period; consider further amendments of bylaw perhaps including a longer delay period, and adjusting "historic" cut-off date to later year (1950?) or period of time (50 years or older).
- Work on identifying options to prevent demolition. Expand options for the individual homeowner or developer. Beyond this, investigate possibilities such as Town purchase of property to renovate for elderly, affordable, or single parent housing. The reuse of these houses can link to *Envision Concord* goals beyond historic preservation such as affordable housing, diversity, sustainability. It is a goal of the CHC to help make those links, in an effort to lower the number of demo applications and the number of demos following the imposed one year delay.

More broadly, the Commission is concerned about the important and problematic concepts of "unique character" and "historical integrity" as applied to our town. Comments:

- Does the town have specific growth and economic development goals? What are they? These areas are mentioned in the materials but I did not see specific numbers. Such goals should be tested carefully against the overriding goal of "maintaining the unique character of the town." Some of the changes/goals potentially add up to significant changes in the town's character. How these ideas are carried out

will determine how significant a change, so here the HDC, CHC and others need to have oversight. (cf: using open land for development, building around transportation hubs, developing a new village area, bike paths and sidewalks.)

- Growing threats to the character now include: mass and scale of development, building out-of-scale residences in neighborhoods--often leading eventually to the destruction of small scale neighborhoods; pressure to build on open land, (for example, seeing open land as a place to build affordable housing rather than integrating such housing into existing neighborhoods or using existing housing).
- Has the "unique character of the town" we want to maintain been defined in way that allows us to test changes against this? I think the Town used to say the goal was maintaining the character of the town *as a New England village or town*. Was that specificity taken out on purpose? We need to keep in mind that this character is a result of landscape, topography, open land, agriculture, architecture, small business--many factors interacting with and impacting each other.
- How can we protect the character and history of West Concord? I sometimes sense that it will be used as a tax base and place to develop in order to keep other parts of town free from this development.
- I am deeply concerned about balancing interests of preserving Concord's historic integrity while also maintaining strong financial health. I define historic integrity for Concord as open space, farmland, historic vistas, preservation of historic structures and scale. When any major alteration or construction is contemplated, its impact on historic integrity must be considered - but what that means is different for everyone. On the other hand, I am mindful that we need a robust tax base to pay for our schools, police and fire, library, public works and that lands on the value of our real estate, a tax base that grows with the construction of every McMansion.

Importance of historic landscape

The landscape of Concord is deeply valued as an environmental resource, an aesthetic pleasure, and a medium of continuity with the past. It helps to form and perpetuate the community. It furnishes numerous opportunities for recreation. It adds to the economic value of real estate. And it serves as a backdrop of our lives. In preservation and planning, we need also to find ways to make the landscape not just a backdrop but an integral part of our lives in the present. Can it be a living heritage, and are there ways that the preservation process can promote such relevance?

While Concord provides landscape protection to those areas covered by wetlands regulations, there is no comparable protection for the majority of the town's acreage where wetlands legislation does not apply. Conservation Commission, Concord Land Conservation Trust and the Historical Commission would do well to work in close cooperation to protect publicly owned parcels and raise the consciousness of citizens concerning the heritage value of all land within the town.

This is particularly true as pertains to archaeological resources, both pre-Columbian and from the historic area. These resources, like the land itself, are not replaceable. The CHC is working on developing a predictive archeological sensitivity map for the whole town. This project, being done in partnership with Brandeis University, is expected to be completed within the next 3-5 years. and be available for consultation by all public & private entities whose work will involve ground disturbance,

Collaborative/coordinated interpretation and engagement

The CHC feels strongly that the best ally in historic preservation is an informed and engaged public who understand the depth and fragility of even the most humble aspects of the historic past.

Primary partners in this effort are/should be:

- Concord Recreation Department – Concord Visitor Center
- Concord media including the Journal and Town website
- Concord schools including CCHS and private schools
- The Concord Historical Collaborative and its members

Examples of sites where the CHC is involved that might be enriched for outreach include the current Brandeis “dig” at Barrett Farm, and the Wheeler-Harrington House and Park, which the CHC and NRC jointly manage.

Target audiences include residents all along the age spectrum, including young adults in the post-college/pre-kids range and seniors. These audiences have been underserved and their energy or life experience – as well as their potential volunteer engagement - has been underappreciated.

The drawback of any such collaboration is the amount of time and/or expertise that needs to be invested in forming and maintaining such connections.

It is a goal of the CHC that these connections, and specific outreach programs connecting Concord’s past to Concord’s future will be initiated within the year, and “up and running” within 3-5 years.

The Concord Historical Commission appreciates your interest in our input to *Envision Concord*. We are charged with attending to the broad historical interests of the Town, including identification and preservation of the historic built environment and the heritage landscape of which it forms a part. Your work puts ours in context and reminds us of the larger purpose of what we do.

Thank you.

Electa Tritsch
Chair, Concord Historical Commission