

Approved Nov. 16, 2009
as corrected

Minutes of the Avon Hill Neighborhood Conservation District

October 19, 2009 - 5:30 pm - 831 Massachusetts Avenue, Basement Conference Room

Members Present: Theresa Hamacher, *Chair*; Catherine Henn, Bruce Irving, *Members*;
Heli Meltsner, Constantin von Wentzel, *Alternates*

Staff: Susan Maycock

Members of the Public: see attached list

With a quorum present, Ms. Hamacher called the meeting to order at 5:35 pm. She introduced the commissioners and reviewed the jurisdiction and procedures of the Commission. She designated alternate members Ms. Meltzner and Mr. von Wentzel to vote on all matters. Bruce Irving arrived at 5:40 pm.

Public Hearings: Alterations to Designated Properties

AH-323: 19 Bellevue Ave., by Jessica Miller and Robert Birnbaum. To replace windows.

Ms. Maycock showed slides of the house, summarized the application and the non-binding nature of the case, and stated the Commission's general preference for retaining original windows whenever possible, and installing high quality storm windows.

Jessica Miller, the owner of 19 Bellevue Ave., explained that she loves old windows and wavy glass but that these are too leaky. She said she had received a quote of \$20,000 from Restoration Windows to restore 12 windows, twice as much as the cost of replacement windows.

She explained which windows she was proposing to replace:

1. All the first floor windows except the three windows in the front bay. These three windows would be restored and have wooden storm windows.
2. All the second floor windows
3. No third floor windows, as these were replaced 20-25 years ago with vinyl-clad windows.

She is considering Anderson replacement windows that are made of a wood/vinyl composite material. She questioned why the Commission finds windows with aluminum storms preferable to thermal pane windows with no storms.

Jerry Callen, 63 Orchard Street, voiced support for energy efficiency.

Ms. Hamacher explained that storm windows are not considered in the Commission's deliberations and that the Commission's general conservation guidelines support preserving original material if possible.

Mr. Irving stated that tightening the existing windows and installing tight storm windows would provide the same energy savings as installing new thermal windows. He also stated that he considers the windows to be the eyes of the house, and once you lose the original windows, you lose forever an important design feature of the house. From his experience, when original windows are revamped, they will be good for another 100 years. He sees no substitute for the tight-grained old wood they are made of, and no good energy reason to replace them.

Mr. von Wentzel suggested the owner consider good storms.

When asked about the configuration of the proposed windows, the contractor showed a sample, stating that it is a full insert window and that the window opening would get somewhat smaller because of heavier frame and muntins associated with thermal panes but that the current window trim would not be touched.

Ms. Henn suggested that one possibility might be to restore some of the windows and move them to the front façade, and then replace only windows on the sides.

Mr. Irving stated that he has worked on a number of projects in which only the front façade has been restored. He added that in general only 15% of heat loss in a house is through the windows.

Mr. von Wentzel pointed out that the house already has vinyl windows on the third floor.

Ms. Hamacher stated that the Commission had two choices: 1) to deny the application and advise the owner to pursue other alternatives and get additional estimates for restoring the windows or 2) to approve the application on the basis of hardship.

Mr. Irving said he did not consider this a hardship case because not much money would be saved by replacing the windows.

Mr. Irving moved to deny the application to replace the windows on the basis that a change to thermal pane windows with heavier frames and muntins would inappropriately alter the original appearance of the house and to recommend that the homeowner consider alternatives. Ms. Henn seconded, and the motion passed 5-0.

AH-326: 27 Agassiz St., by Rebecca Streeter and Michel Tellier. To remove side door and porch; add new window and side entrance door and surround; repair or replace shingles and trim as required.

Ms. Maycock showed slides of the existing conditions of the house and summarized the application.

Rebecca Streeter, owner of 27 Agassiz St., presented the proposal for moving the current side door to the existing side bay near the front right corner of the house. She explained that if the door were moved, the proposed new window to replace the current door would be a thermal pane window with a black storm.

Ms. Henn questioned whether the current windows on the side bay are original.

Mr. Irving noted that the proposed side entrance would be at grade level and questioned whether owner needed zoning relief on that side. Ms. Streeter said no because there is 14 feet to the lot line.

In answer to a question about the reason for having sidelights at the proposed entrance, Ms. Streeter said that it was a purely aesthetic decision, that they were not needed for light.

Michael Bentley, 33 Agassiz St, presented photos of the foundation and side bay which face his house. He said that traditionally a side entrance is not a major focus of the design and the proposed placement so close to the front corner of the house makes the side entrance too prominent and in competition with the main entrance. He pointed out that brackets are currently used only at important locations, ie. the front corners at the eave line, and not at any secondary locations. He felt that eliminating the brackets on the proposed entrance would result in a better outcome for the project and for the neighborhood. He added that the sidelights looked like they belonged to a different building and hoped that the canopy over the door could be more in keeping with the rest of the house.

Jerry Callen, 63 Orchard St., said that he lived at 34 Lancaster St for many years, knew 27 Agassiz well, and could understand why the owners would want a mudroom.

Mr. Irving agreed with Mr. Bentley's comments and stated that the owners must have a powerful need or reason to do this work because the walk from the front door to the new door would be very small. He recommended that the proposed subsidiary door should be as quiet as possible. He added that the front façade is all about big components and that using the same components but on a smaller scale would be unfortunate, and that the angle of the proposed pediment was a odds with existing elements of the building. Mr. von Wentzel concurred.

Ms. Meltzer stated that these houses were built for servants and the second entrance would have been a servants' entrance. The owners now want a second family entrance but it would work better if it were less prominent, similar to second entrances in the 19th century.

Ms. Hamacher stated that putting the entrance at ground level makes it quieter.

Ms. Henn suggested not including sidelights at the proposed entrance.

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Ms. Meltzer suggested a transom instead of sidelights.

Ms. Hamacher suggested that the Commission not make a decision now and that it would be appropriate to continue the hearing until the next meeting and recommend that the applicants come back with a simpler design for the proposed entrance.

Mr. Irving suggested a shed roof and simpler brackets such as are on the current side entrance.

Ms. Maycock suggested a hip roof hood with no brackets, similar to the roof on the side bay.

Ms. Streeter agreed to the continuance, but said that she had met with CHC staff to review the plans before the hearing and did not hear from staff that the entrance was too detailed.

Ms. Henn moved to continue, with the owners consent, the hearing until the next AHNCD meeting. Mr. von Wentzel seconded, and the motion passed 5-0.

AH-387: 88 Washington Ave., Carriage House unit, by David and Andrea Pritchard. To alter carriage house doors; replace dormer windows; add exterior lights and skylights.

Ms. Maycock summarized the application but stated that only two dormer windows and 1 ½ doors can be seen from a public way.

Andrea Pritchard, owner of 88 Washington Ave., and Susan Cory, 114 Washington Ave., and architect for the project, explained that they are proposing to replace existing 6/6 windows with Anderson double hung 2/2 windows to match the windows on the front of the house.

Ms. Cory explained the need for the changes to the three façade doors to replace rotten material and to allow more light into the building so that Ms. Pritchard can use it as a studio. She explained that the current middle doors are rotten and proposed to replace them with new double doors in the same opening with bead board below and glass panels above; the steel lintel will remain. She proposed putting similar glass panels in the top part of the side doors.

Mr. von Wentzel pointed out that the building is at the end of a very long driveway and that only the left door and part of the middle door can be seen from the street.

Ms. Maycock reported that CHC had received letters of support from Carl and Marjory Wunsch at 78 Washington Ave. and Louisa Kasdon and Michael Hynes at 4 Walnut Ave.

Mr. Irving moved to approve the doors, windows, and skylights as submitted on the basis that the doors were not inappropriate to the building and that the windows and skylights are not visible. Ms. Meltsner seconded and the motion passed 5-0.

Determination of Procedure: Alteration to Designated Property

AH 330: 34 Lancaster Street (Unit 2) by Catherine Petersen and Jerry Callen. To rebuild retaining wall; rebuild and repave a portion of the driveway; reconfigure the entry path; and repair and refigure the existing fence.

Ms. Maycock showed photographs of the carriage house that was made into a dwelling by Peter Wasserman in 1978. She pointed out that this is a binding review, but would need a 10-day notice because the case had come to the Commission after the filing deadline and had not been formally advertised.

The owners Catherine Petersen and Jerry Callen explained the reasons for the application: that their daughter who is asthmatic would like to move into the house but that the house is contaminated with mold which they believe is caused by the configuration of the site and its poor drainage. They described one of the problem areas, the existing retaining wall of pressure treated wood that forms the substructure for the porch. They propose to rebuild the retaining wall using blocks because the pressure treated wood has rotted and been rebuilt three times in 23 years. They added that the retaining wall is not visible from the street.

To address the drainage problems, they described their proposal to raise the grade of the driveway so that it slopes away from the house and toward the street. They would also like to move the front fence (the section parallel to the street) back to create a planting area between the parking area and the fence, to close the current center gate, and to move the gate and the entry path to the side fence (the section perpendicular to the street). They would like to keep the fence 5 ft high and keep it planted with roses. They do not propose to increase the size of the driveway/parking area, only the garden area around it.

Michael Bentley, 33 Agassiz Street, said that he knows well the drainage problems of land in this area because of the deep clay and that he supported a large percentage of the work proposed. He pointed out, however, that there are currently two non-conforming situations on this property: 1) the 6 ft high fence which would not be allowed in the AHNCD today, and 2) the side by side parking lot in front of the house which is not allowed now in the AHNCD. He requested that they either keep the current fence in place or if they move it back that they reduce it to 4 ft in height to conform to the NCD guidelines. He pointed out that moving the fence back toward the house amplifies the parking by increasing the size of that area, even if some of it is planted not paved.

Denny Ellerman, 36 Lancaster Street, unit 1, said that he looks out on this property everyday and this that the proposed work will be an improvement. He submitted a letter in support of the proposal.

Ms. Henn asked when the current fence was installed. Ms. Petersen said that it was about 1992, before the NCD was established.

Ms. Hamacher stated that the retaining wall was not an issue because it is not visible from the street and that no one objects to regrading the driveway. She summarized the AHNCD fence guidelines and its purpose: to maintain more open streetscapes. She said that changing the location of the fence makes the fence and its height a Commission issue. She was also troubled by the proposal of eliminating the gate, because its existence gives the possibility of making the house more visible when the gate is open.

Ms. Meltsner and Ms. Hamacher both felt that moving the gate would trigger review of the fence. Ms. Hamacher thought that it would be okay if the fence were lowered to 4 ft, but she was uncomfortable allowing changes in the fence without dropping its height.

Mr. Callen asked about the possibility of leaving the current gate in the fence but making it inoperable and putting a new gate in the side of the fence perpendicular to the street. Ms. Peterson asked if adding pergolas would help the fence issue.

Ms. Henn said she was very concerned about the part of the fence that runs along the street and is about 8 ft in height.

Ms. Hamacher suggested that the fence discussion be continued.

Ms. Meltsner proposed approving the the drainage proposals and regrading the driveway with CHC staff review of the driveway material. A general discussion of paving materials followed.

Mr. Callen asked if the Commission would allow them as a temporary measure to take a panel out of the side fence to give access to the yard.

Ms. Hamacher stated the two choices as she understood them: 1) leave the fence as it is with a faux gate where the gate is now and a hinged panel in the side fence for a temporary opening; or 2) lower these two sections of the fence to 4 ft. She stated that if the owners want to do anything else to the fence, they should come back to the Commission with new, detailed drawings.

Ms. Hamacher moved to approve all elements of the proposal except changing (including moving) the existing fence around the parking enclosure. Any changes to the fence would require it to be lowered to no more than 4 ft in height measured from the sidewalk level. She further moved that the current fence posts can be kept until further review, that a pergola could be considered at a later date, that a temporary opening could be placed in the side fence, and that any new materials for the driveway need to be reviewed and approved by the CHC staff. Ms. Henn seconded, and the motion passed 5-0.

Mr. Irving recommended that the owners consult a soil engineer.

Minutes

Mr. von Wentzel moved approval of the minutes of September 21, 2009. Ms. Meltsner seconded and the motion passed 5-0.

The meeting was adjourned at 8 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan E. Maycock
Survey Director

Members of the public in attendance October 19, 2009

Robert Crawford Jr., 14 Mountain Rock Lane, Norfolk, MA 02056
Rebecca Streeter, 27 Agassiz St., Cambridge, MA 02140
Denny Ellerman, 36 Lancaster St., Unit 1, Cambridge, MA 02140
Jerry Callen, 63 Orchard St., Cambridge, MA 02140
Jim Maccario, 1 Liberty Lane, N. Reading, MA 01864
Jessica Miller, 19 Bellevue Ave., Cambridge, MA 02140
Andrea Pritchard, 88 Washington Ave., Cambridge, MA 02140
Susan Cory, 114 Washington Ave., Cambridge, MA 02140
Michael Bentley, 33 Agassiz St., Cambridge, MA 02140
Colette Bentley, 33 Agassiz St., Cambridge, MA 02140
Katy Petersen, 63 Orchard St., Cambridge, MA 02140