

WELLESLEY HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING
DECEMBER 10, 2013; 6:45 PM
PLANNING BOARD OFFICE, TOWN HALL

Members Present: Edwina McCarthy, Eric Cohen, David Giangrasso, David Smith
Staff: Erin Heacock
Also Present: Helen Robertson, David Wright, Catherine Johnson, Joshua Dorin, Maureen Cary

Chair McCarthy opened the regular meeting at 6:45 pm.

Consideration of two new Single Building Historic Districts at 26 Elmwood Road and 126 Woodlawn Avenue

Documents:

- Memorandum to Historic District Commission from Erin Heacock, Planner, re: Process to Establish a Single Building Historic District
- Rough Draft of the Preliminary Report, Sylvia Plath House and Fiske House, Single Building Historic Districts
- Massachusetts Historical Commission Form B, 26 Elmwood Road
- Massachusetts Historical Commission Form B, 126 Woodlawn Avenue

Discussion:

Ms. Robertson, representing the Historical Commission, indicated that the group of people in attendance is the potential Single Building Historic District Study Committee. Ms. Robertson explained that the Historic District Commission has been asked to recommend a study committee be formed of members of the Historical Commission and a Planning Board representative. The alternative is that the Historic District Commission could undertake the study themselves.

Ms. Robertson reminded the Historic District Commission of the concept Single Building Historic District. The town completed the process in 2011 for two other properties in town. The two properties under consideration are 26 Elmwood Road and 126 Woodlawn Avenue.

Ms. Robertson explained that the two properties being considered are different than the previous properties. In this case, the Historical Commission is suggesting these properties be preserved due to the connection to people who have been significant in Wellesley's history, the state's history, our country's history, or in the case of one of the properties, internationally.

Ms. Robertson described both homes as Colonial. The Sylvia Plath house was constructed in the 1940s and the Fiske House was constructed in 1824. The Fiske House was originally a simple farm house but has been renovated.

Ms. Robertson introduced Maureen Cary, a member of the Historical Commission, to present some history on Sylvia Plath.

Ms. Cary described Sylvia Plath as one of the most famous graduates of Wellesley High School. She graduated in 1950. Sylvia Plath is an important figure in literature and poetry, particularly the type of poetry she wrote which is known as confessional. Ms. Plath was writing this type of poetry in the 1950s when it was unfamiliar for women to be writing this freely about their emotions, attitudes about society, and gender roles.

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Ms. Cary noted that Sylvia Plath is most noted for the why in which she passed, which was by suicide when she was 30 years old. The structure at 26 Elmwood Road is significant as the location of Ms. Plath's first documented suicide attempt. Ms. Cary mentioned this information as the one novel authored by Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, is considered an autobiography of her life during this time.

Ms. Cary noted that Sylvia Plath's family moves to Wellesley when she was 8 years old after the death of her father. Shortly after moving to Wellesley, Ms. Plath's first poem was published in the *Boston Herald* which is remarkable for an 8 year old. Ms. Plath attended Wellesley public schools and was a protégé of Wilbury Crocket, an English teacher for which the library is currently named. Ms. Cary described that in addition to winning the Pulitzer Prize; Ms. Plath's work has received numerous awards and has been published in many mediums. Shortly after moving to the UK with her husband, Ted Hughes, poet laureate for Great Britain at the time, her first book of poems was published. Unfortunately, their marriage suffered and Ms. Plath and Mr. Hughes separated, although remained legally married at her death. They have two children.

Ms. Cary described Sylvia Plath's mental illnesses informed her writing. It appears to be an outlet for her to release any pain she was feeling.

Mr. Cohen asked who is currently living in the home at 26 Elmwood Road. Ms. Robertson stated James and Linda Gallo are the current owners.

Mr. Cohen asked who initiated the process. Ms. Robertson stated that Mr. and Mrs. Gallo are her friends, and they have spoken about preserving the home for many years. The time is right now to preserve the home, and the Mr. and Mrs. Gallo are excited about the process.

Mr. Wright noted that people have inquired with the Historical Commission on the location of the home.

Mr. Cohen stated that he would like to see as many houses preserved that are worth preserving.

Ms. Robertson provided some additional background on the house. The property is part of land previously owned by a gentleman named Cavanagh, who lived at the Methodist Meeting House at the corner of Weston Road and Elmwood Road. Mr. Cavanagh developed smaller lots and more modest homes unlike the development pattern of the Cliff Estates and the Farms. Ms. Robertson noted that many of the modest homes in Wellesley are being torn down to make way for newer, sometimes larger homes, so in a way the structure at 26 Elmwood Road, being so modest is a part of Wellesley's history as well. If not preserved, would be likely torn down.

Mr. Dorin presented information about the structure at 126 Woodlawn Avenue. The property was the home of Joseph E. Fiske. He was born at the home and died at the home. He is arguably one of the most important residents in all of Wellesley's history, particularly because he led the fight for separation of Wellesley from Needham. Mr. Fiske was voted to be the person to present the successful petition to the state in October 1880. The state finally approved the separation. Mr. Fiske was also a Civil War veteran and a prisoner of war. After returning from the war, he became involved in the development of Wellesley from a farming town to a suburban town. Mr. Fiske was an early member of the School Committee and as a result of that a new school was named for him at Ouellet Park, which was later moved down Cedar Street to where the Fiske School is today off of Hastings Street.

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The extended Fiske family owned the property at 126 Woodlawn Avenue prior to Joseph E. Fiske owning the property. The property remained in the Fiske family until 1937. At that point, the home underwent some renovation when the home was rotated to face Woodlawn Avenue as it exists today.

Mr. Dorin reiterated Ms. Robertson's earlier comment about tear downs. Mr. Dorin noted that the property owner is very concerned about the fate of the home.

Ms. Robertson noted that both of the houses give a window into Wellesley and its development.

Mr. Cohen again noted that any structure worth persevering there is no reason why the structure should not be preserved.

Mr. Giangrasso confirmed that the Historic District Commission is only recommending the study committee. Ms. McCarthy stated that it was accurate.

Mr. Giangrasso stated that the burden on the Historic District Commission is not much greater with only two more houses.

Ms. McCarthy stated that she spoke with Jean Berry, the former Historic District Commission chair, to refresh her memory about the discussions on the previous single building historic districts. Ms. McCarthy noted that the Commission in 2010 did express some concern that if this becomes a regular occurrence there may be the need for a second Historic District Commission to handle the single building districts.

Ms. McCarthy noted that approving changes to these homes may not be the same as approving changes to the homes in the Cottage Street district.

Ms. Robertson stated that it is the same. She spoke with a representative of the Massachusetts Historical Commission who explained that the rules are written broadly enough that allow it. In any historic district, there may be a range of houses, some are old and some are new. The only difference between the Cottage Street district and these single building historic districts is how the house has been preserved. The preservation of property due to the person who lived there is valid.

Mr. Giangrasso stated that it may be a little difficult at first for the Historic District Commission to consider changes to these houses. For properties in the Cottage Street Historic District, the Commission reviews the changes in the context of the overall district. The same analysis must be applied to these new homes which may not be as interesting in a historical or architectural perspective.

Mr. Cohen agreed with Mr. Giangrasso. He stated that if the Commission were considering an addition to the Sylvia Plath house, for example, the Commission would have to consider whether the addition would significantly alter the rather plainness of the home and make sure that it fits with the current architecture of the house.

Ms. Robertson noted that eventually the Historical Commission is going to have to start considering homes that are relatively new and not from the 19th century because that style of architecture is also disappearing.

Mr. Cohen stated that his position is that the Historical Commission should prepare the report and move forward.

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The Commission discussed what to do since a quorum was not currently present at the meeting due to Mr. Smith's late arrival. A quorum is needed to make a motion on the recommendation.

Mr. Cohen reviewed the draft recommendation. He confirmed that the position is that the Historic District Commission is allowing the Historical Commission to move forward with a study committee and the Historic District Commission relinquishes control of the report.

Ms. McCarthy points out that the Historic District Commission is not being asked to vote on the appropriateness of preserving the two homes. That is for Town Meeting to ultimately decide through a zoning map change.

Ms. Robertson noted that any future review would be undertaken by the existing Historic District Commission.

Mr. Smith arrived at the meeting. Mr. Cohen gave a summary of what was discussed during the meeting.

Mr. Smith asked what happens after the single building historic districts are designated. Mr. Cohen explained that the property comes under the jurisdiction of the Historic District Commission. Ms. McCarthy reminded Mr. Smith that in the future there may be the need for a second Historic District Commission should the number of properties designated as single building historic districts reach a critical mass.

Mr. Smith asked what is around the two houses. Ms. Robertson explained that the properties are surrounded by neighborhoods. She gave a quick summary of the history of each location.

Mr. Smith asked who owns the homes currently. Ms. Robertson and Mr. Dorin responded. Mr. Smith asked if the property owners are in agreement. Ms. Heacock noted that the Planning Department has certifications from both property owners stating their understanding of the implications of the designation.

Mr. Cohen moved to recommend that the Historical Commission form the appropriate study committee of members of the Historical Commission and a representative of the Planning Board for the purpose of investigation and reporting on the historical and architectural significance of the building, structures or sites to be included in the proposed historic districts, presenting such reports to the Massachusetts Historical Commission, conducting hearings in connection therewith and performing all other study committee functions. Mr. Smith seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (4-0).

Previous Minutes

Mr. Giangrasso moved to accept the minutes from October 8, 2013, as prepared. Mr. Cohen seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (4-0).

The Commission adjourned at approximately 7:50 pm.

Erin L. Heacock
Planner

Minutes Approved: June 3, 2014