

Council Agenda Report

Date: July 2, 2019
Submitted by: Odie Wheeler,
Director of Public Works
Prepared by: Herve Hamon, Planner I, A.I.C.P.
Subject: Historic Significance of the Mill Street School Building

Recommendation: That Council:

Acknowledge the determination made by the Historic Preservation Commission that the School Building located at 201 Mill Street has been recognized of historic significance.

DISCUSSION: During the meeting of May 28, 2019 the Cambridge City Council requested that the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) make a determination regarding the historic significance of the Mill Street school building located at 201 Mill Street, as part of the City Council's consideration of proposed Ordinance Nos. 1143 and 1144. If passed, the proposed Ordinances would establish an overlay district applicable to the Property and conditions for its development and improvement, including the School's renovation.

On June 18, 2019 at 3pm, in a special meeting, the HPC met at Council Chambers and heard the public. HPC Commissioners George Vojtech (Chairperson), Susan Morgan (Vice Chair), Ron Berman, Sharon Smith, and Janice Olshesky were present, as were Pat Escher, City Planner, Herve Hamon, Planner I and Historic Preservation, Patrick W. Thomas, Esq., Assistant City Attorney, and City Commissioner Stephen Rideout, City Council Liaison to the HPC.

Members of the HPC each presented background, observations and their individual opinion about the school building's historic significance, then public testimony was heard.

After deliberation and based upon the foregoing, the HPC unanimously voted in favor of a determination that the School and the Property at 201 Mill Street are historically significant.

BEFORE THE CITY OF CAMBRIDGE HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

IN THE MATTER OF *

201 MILL STREET *

* * * * *

FINDINGS AND DETERMINATION OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

OVERVIEW

On Tuesday, June 18, 2019, at 3:00 p.m., the City of Cambridge Historic Preservation Commission (the “HPC”) held a special meeting in the Council Chambers at 305 Gay Street, Cambridge, Maryland. The meeting was called at the direction of the City Council, which tasked the HPC with evaluating the historical significance of the school building (the “School”) located at 201 Mill Street (the “Property”) as part of the City Council’s consideration of proposed Ordinance Nos. 1143 and 1144. If passed, the proposed Ordinances would establish an overlay district applicable to the Property and conditions for its development and improvement, including the School’s renovation. HPC Commissioners George Vojtech (Chairperson), Susan Morgan (Vice Chair), Ron Berman, Sharon Smith, and Janice Olshesky were present, as were Pat Escher, City Planner, Herve Hamon, Planner I and Historic Preservation, Patrick W. Thomas, Esq., Assistant City Attorney, and City Commissioner Stephen Rideout, City Council Liaison to the HPC.

STAFF INTRODUCTION

Ms. Escher opened the meeting by explaining that its sole purpose was for the HPC to determine the School’s historical significance, not to discuss proposed Ordinance Nos. 1143 and 1144 or other zoning matters. Ms. Escher further stated that, should the HPC determine that the School is no longer historically significant, then the City Council would not act upon proposed Ordinance Nos. 1143 and 1144, in which case the Property would be subject to the zoning standards and regulations applicable to the Neighborhood Conservation 3 (“NC-3”) Zoning District.

HPC PRESENTATION

Chairperson Vojtech read into the record a document entitled “Historic Significance of the Mill Street School Building” which is attached hereto and incorporated by reference herein as if fully set forth as Exhibit 1. Chairperson Vojtech then read into the record a letter dated June 17, 2019 from Paul B. Touart, the architectural historian who authored the Property’s Maryland Historical Trust inventory form in 2010. In his June 17th letter, Mr. Touart reaffirmed his earlier opinion that the School is architecturally and historically significant to the Cambridge Historic District (the “Historic District”). Mr. Touart’s letter is attached hereto and incorporated herein by reference as Exhibit 2.

Commissioner Berman then presented a detailed history of the schools constructed on the Property. In 1865, James L. Bryan bought six acres in what is now the Historic District, including the Property, upon which he built a military academy. In the 1870s, the military academy became Dorchester County's public high school for boys. The structure burned down in 1902, and in 1903, J. Benjamin Brown, a prominent local architect, built the School. Commissioner Berman stated that Mr. Touart described the School as being an important survivor of early 20th Century education-related design and construction.

Commissioner Berman stated that the School was part and parcel of everyday life in the neighborhood and is significant to the neighborhood's history. The School was attended by future Governors of Maryland, as well as other individuals who played a role in the growth of Cambridge and Dorchester County. Commissioner Berman expressed his belief that the School deserves meaningful historic protection.

PUBLIC TESTIMONY

Carroll Dail, 202 Glenburn Avenue, testified that he attended the School in the 1940s. Mr. Dail's ancestor, William Byrne, who brought the railroad to Cambridge, attended the prior school building in the 1800s. Mr. Dail believes that the school is worth saving.

Frank Cooke, 303 Mill Street, testified that he purchased his property in 2000 and considered purchasing the Property in 2002 when the other portions of the building were still intact. Mr. Cooke believes that the School is still historically significant.

Tim Crosby, 206 Choptank Avenue, testified that the School is very special to him. The building is one of five that Mr. Brown constructed in Dorchester County, the others being in Hurlock, Secretary, Vienna, and East New Market. Only the buildings in Cambridge and East New Market remain standing. Mr. Crosby believes that the School is a tremendously significant building and a very important contributing structure to the Historic District.

Cheryl Hannan, 103 Mill Street, testified that she has researched the School's history, and her research follows that presented by the HPC. Mrs. Hannan believes that the School and the Property are historically significant.

Jim Culver, 109 Choptank Avenue, testified that the School is a historic building in a historic district, and he wishes for it to so remain.

Greg Boss, 8 West End, testified that the School is a historically significant property and contributes to the historic character of the neighborhood.

DETERMINATION

The HPC began deliberations following the close of public testimony. Commissioner Olshesky stated that the School has all the character-defining features of a historic property and contributes to a period of significance. Mr. Brown, who was once Mayor of Cambridge, designed the School, and it was attended by several prominent individuals. The School contributes to the Historic District.

Commissioner Morgan stated that there is enough evidence in the record to demonstrate the School's historic significance. Commissioner Morgan wondered where the line between non-historic and historic in the Historic District might be drawn if the HPC were to determine that the School is not historically significant.

Commissioner Smith stated that there was no sufficient reason to disagree with the historians who have affirmed the School's historical significance. Mr. Touart affirmed the School's historic significance in 2010 and reaffirmed its significance the day prior to the HPC's special meeting on the matter. Commissioner Smith did not believe any justification had been presented during the hearing for the HPC to believe otherwise.

Chairperson Vojtech concurred with the other Commissioners' statements, and Commissioner Olshesky stated that the Property is also historically significant.

Based upon the foregoing, the HPC unanimously voted in favor of a determination that the School and the Property are historically significant. The meeting was adjourned at approximately 4:00 p.m.

ATTEST:

George Vojtech, Chairperson

Date