

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION



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MINUTES

RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

January 11, 2023

Location:

Joseph A. Doorley, Jr. Municipal Building
444 Westminster Street, Providence, R.I.
First Floor Conference Room

I. MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr. Michael Abbott, AIA
Mr. Jeffrey Emidy, State Historic Preservation Officer
Dr. Morgan Grefe
Ms. Roberta Groch, representing Meredith Brady, Associate Director, Division of
Statewide Planning
Ms. Kaity Ryan
Mr. Clark Schoettle
Ms. Michelle Sheehan, representing Terrence Gray, Director, Rhode Island Department
of Environmental Management
Ms. Ruth Taylor, Chair

MEMBERS ABSENT

Mr. Bill Ash, Interim President, Rhode Island Commerce Corporation
Mr. Warren Ducharme, representing James Cambio, State Building Code Commissioner
Ms. Anjali Joshi
Dr. Rod Mather
[Vacant]
[Vacant]
[Vacant]

STAFF PRESENT

Joanna Doherty, Principal Architectural Historian
Virginia Hesse, Principal Historical Architect
Roberta Randall, Principal Historical Architect
Sarah Zurier, Principal Special Projects Coordinator

II. AGENDA

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:30 A.M., Ms. Taylor, Chair, presiding.

Ms. Taylor asked for a motion to move agenda item 6, “Easement Review: Providence Performing Arts Center – exterior addition,” to the first item on the agenda. Dr. Grefe made the motion, which was seconded by Ms. Ryan. The motion passed unanimously.

2. For vote: Easement Review Providence Performing Arts Center – exterior addition 220 Weybosset Street, Providence

Mr. Abbott recused himself and left the room. RIHPHC principal historical architect Roberta Randall made a presentation about a proposed addition at the Providence Performing Arts Center (PPAC). The Commission conducted an initial review at the December meeting and asked PPAC to investigate further any possibility of moving the addition back from the edge of the first story.

PPAC’s revised design holds the addition wall along Richmond Street back five feet from the wall of the building below. The addition wall along Pine Street remains set back 2½ feet from the wall below. Otherwise, the design of the building is unchanged from the previous iteration. The project team looked into continuing a screen wall from the existing restroom rooftop addition to the proposed, but it is cost prohibitive.

Ms. Taylor asked how the staff views this proposal. Ms. Randall stated that setting the addition back five feet is the best solution. Dr. Grefe asked about discussion at the last meeting related to the crenellation of the existing parapet and how the ornament of the main block of the theater is carried onto the addition. Ms. Randall replied that the staff think that keeping the addition simple but carrying a reference to the detail of the masses below and behind is appropriate.

A motion to approve the revised design was made by Mr. Schoettle and seconded by Ms. Ryan. The motion passed unanimously.

3. For approval: Minutes of December 14, 2022, Commission meeting

On a motion by Dr. Grefe, seconded by Ms. Ryan, the commissioners voted unanimously to approve the minutes of the December 14, 2022, Commission meeting as they appear in the draft.

4. Executive Director's Report

Jeffrey Emidy reported that:

- a. He wants to start by congratulating Commission Chair Ruth Taylor on her retirement from the position of Executive Director of the Newport Historical Society after 15 years there and wishing her well in her leisure time. He also thanked her for staying on as Commission Chair for the near future. Ms. Taylor has been a great advocate for preservation and history and culture in her role at the Society, so it is sad to see her leave, but we are very grateful for all that she has done. Congratulations.
- b. As a final update to the executive director search process, he is officially in the position as of January 3rd. We are still awaiting approval of the press release from the governor's office. Ms. Taylor sent a letter to the governor's office requesting that he appoint Mr. Emidy as State Historic Preservation Officer. We have not yet received a response, but it has only been a few days. Ms. Taylor added that we owe the governor a new list of proposed commissioners. She and Mr. Emidy will be working on it. If commissioners have ideas, please send them to Mr. Emidy. Mr. Schoettle asked if a list of the areas of specialization that need to be filled could be forwarded. Mr. Emidy replied that he will do that.

5. For discussion: I-195 Redevelopment District property
Revised design for Hope Point (aka Fane) Tower
I-195 Redevelopment Parcel 42
Northeast corner of Dyer and Dorrance Streets, Providence

Mr. Emidy reported that a revised design for the Hope Point (aka Fane) Tower has been submitted to the I-195 Redevelopment District. The tower is proposed to be constructed on Redevelopment District Parcel 42, at the northeast corner of Dyer and Dorrance Streets. This project has been in development for years, and there have been a lot of public comments made on the early designs. Paul Loether, as State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), reviewed the previous design and issued a letter dated October 23, 2019, in which he concluded that the then-proposed tower would have no adverse effect on historic properties. The I-195 Commission submitted designs for this parcel to our office for review because the memorandum of agreement (MOA) for the removal of I-195, signed in 2000, states that "The RISHPO shall review and approve redevelopment proposals for consistency in accordance to the Secretary of the Interior's 'Standards and Guidelines for Rehabilitation and New Construction'." Mr. Emidy explained that, since the MOA specifies SHPO review, he is bringing this to the Commission as a discussion item only - to hear the commissioners' thoughts, which he will consider when making his determination.

Parcel 42 is not in any National or State Register-listed historic district. The closest National Register districts are the Downtown Providence Historic District to the north,

Providence Jewelry Manufacturing Historic District to the south, and College Hill Historic District to the east. Also nearby is the individually-listed South Street Station.

The design that Paul Loether reviewed was 46 stories, 550 feet tall, with residential floors atop a parking podium. Mr. Loether's determination is summed up in relation to the areas of National Register integrity as defined by the National Park Service, "the construction of Hope Point Tower as currently proposed will not diminish the integrity of the location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, or association of any of the National Register properties located in the APE [Area of Potential effect] in such a way as to significantly affect their character, significance, or National Register eligibility. While the construction of the tower will affect the setting of each of these properties, and while that effect will be direct, it will not be adverse." That is where we stood from October 2019 to December 2022.

The current design is similar to the one that Mr. Loether reviewed. The sides have been smoothed out from the undulating previous design and the ends of the tower rounded more. The base - or parking podium - has been decreased in height. The building height remains the same because more residential floors have been added in place of the parking levels.

After showing multiple views of the new design, Mr. Emidy reminded the commissioners that this is up for discussion, not for a vote, and stated that he would like to hear their thoughts on the design as they relate to the previous determination by Mr. Loether.

Ms. Taylor stated that she wants to remind everyone that this is not to determine what is good for the city; it is related to historic resources only. Dr. Grefe asked how Mr. Loether analyzed the previous design. Mr. Emidy stated that he believes that Mr. Loether reviewed material on determinations of effect and applied the Criteria of Effect in relation to the historic resources.

Mr. Schoettle stated that, looking at what Mr. Loether approved, this is slightly better because it makes less of a statement. Ms. Taylor stated that the question for the Commission is whether Mr. Emidy should overturn the determination that Mr. Loether made. Mr. Schoettle stated that the commissioners would have to be definitive in their analysis to do so. Dr. Grefe stated that, if anyone knows the National Register and how it should work, it is Mr. Loether. RIHPHC's Virginia Hesse asked if driving piles for the building could potentially have an effect on nearby, historic, masonry buildings.

Ms. Taylor asked for public comment. The following public comment was taken:

- Sharon Steele provided comments. Referenced RIHPHC letters from 2018 and 2019 about effects on West Side parcels and the Jewelry District. Opposes the project.

- Greg Miller provided comments. Asked if shadows and wind shear had been considered by Mr. Loether. Provided potential positive and negative effects of the proposal.

Public comment was closed. Ms. Taylor thanked the speakers for their comments.

6. For discussion: I-195 Redevelopment District property
Proposed concept design
I-195 Redevelopment Parcel 2
Between James, South Main, Dollar, and South Water Streets, Providence

Mr. Emidy reported that the next matter for discussion is proposed development on I-195 Redevelopment District Parcel 2, which is bounded by James, South Main, Dollar, and South Water Streets. The I-195 Redevelopment District has selected Urbanica as its preferred developer for the site. We are at what we are calling a “pre-concept” stage. The formal review of a design by the I-195 Redevelopment District Commission begins with a Concept Plan review. Urbanica has not submitted that yet. At our recommendation, Urbanica is working with us to get to a Concept Plan that we are comfortable with – if possible. This is a common RIHPHC review practice – before someone develops plans for a project and submits it for review to either us or someone else, they bring it to us for a preliminary review. So, we are “pre-concept” in I-195 lingo.

Parcel 2 is located within the bounds of the College Hill Historic District, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The historic Tillinghast House abuts Parcel 2 to the north, a historic house is located across South Main Street, and historic homes line Transit Street. There is modern infill between James and Transit, and south of Transit Street.

Staff have been consulting with Urbanica for a couple of months and they have submitted three packages of information in response to our questions. Urbanica’s designs are based on playing off the pedestrian bridge and adjacent park along the South Water Street elevation, showing movement through the continuation of Transit Street, and activating the South Main Street elevation.

The first design iteration has a mass stretching the length of the parcel, with a three-story pass-through along the course of Transit Street through the parcel. Floor levels are: 1st = 15’, 2nd-6th are 10’ each. The roof floor level is at 65 feet, with a short parapet. The concept is to take cues from the heights of other buildings along South Main Street. To do so, the design has three-story sections along the street, with floors four through six set back slightly. The upper floors step down as they extend to the north, approaching the Tillinghast House.

At the staff’s meeting with Urbanica, we talked about making the top floor or floors more transparent and setting them back. Urbanica developed a concept to respond to that

request. It responds to the transparency and to the setback questions. Though it is not a fully-developed rendering, the three-story masses along South Main Street became four stories in the process. The “bridge” over the Transit Street utility easement changed significantly in this process, with the opening higher and the structure more transparent. The floor levels also change a bit in this concept: 1st = 17 ½’, 2nd-6th are 10’ each. The roof floor level is at 67½ feet, plus a parapet.

After some further questions from our office, Urbanica submitted another revision to the concept. This maintains the larger Transit Street pass-through, with the transparent level above. The masses along South Main Street are dropped back to three stories, the 4th and 5th floors are pushed back, and the 6th floor transparency is maintained and that level is pushed back further still.

Mr. Emidy showed a photograph of a project that Urbanica did on Massachusetts Avenue in Boston. He pointed out that the Parcel 2 concepts that he showed are very early, but that, when viewing them and thinking about what they may look like in reality, one should imagine them with detail and real materials like those shown in this design. These are the things that will be worked out later in the process. He reiterated that we are in a “pre-concept” stage and the big picture ideas are the things that we should be thinking about. These include massing, height, siting, and setbacks. He stated that he is happy to hear the commissioners’ suggestions about other aspects, but we may not be addressing those at this stage.

Mr. Abbott stated that he prefers the first design. It is much more broken down than the subsequent designs, which appear to keep getting bigger. He prefers the smaller opening for the Transit Street easement, which better maintains the connection across the two parts of the building.

Ms. Schoettle stated that he also prefers the first design. The continuity of materials is better than in the subsequent designs. Changing materials on a new building is not the same as adding them to a historic building to differentiate the old from the new. He does not like the curved walls bordering the utility easement because, if it were a real street, the openings would be angular and right at the sidewalk lines. Curved brick walls are not seen elsewhere in the historic district. The opening doesn’t need to be celebrated.

Ms. Taylor stated that the first design looks like residential space, but the other designs look like hospitals.

Mr. Emidy asked the commissioners if combining the first and second iterations is worthwhile. Mr. Abbott said no; he prefers the masses be broken down into smaller pieces.

Dr. Grefe stated that she sees the connection to the pedestrian bridge in the curvilinear design of the building, but reconciling that relationship is a challenge. She also stated that

South Main Street is a working street and needs to be active.

Ms. Taylor stated that, regarding the simulations looking down Transit Street toward the building, in the first design you know that what you are seeing is a building, but in the second, with the higher, smaller piece over the utility easement, you can't really tell what you are looking at.

Ms. Groch stated that the first iteration feels more urban, or "street friendly."

Ms. Taylor asked for public comment. The following public comment was taken:

- Greg Miller provided comments. Concerns include the massing experience at street level and breaking up the façade. Asked if the building is designed to deal with sea level rise and storms.
- Dan Beaudoin provided comments. Concerns include scale, height, and block configurations. Suggested four buildings. Stated that the Mile of History Association has asked to be a consulting party and that that should be allowed before a decision is made.
- Liz Rollins Mauran provided comments. Encourages multiple structures with view corridors through the property, and is concerned that a large mass blocks the view of the slower slope of College Hill from the west.
- Tayo Heuser provided comments. Noted that the building steps down as the hill goes up and steps up as the hill goes down [to the south]. This will take away charm from the area, not add to it.
- Caroline Skuncik provided comments. The I-195 Commission chose Urbanica because of their regard for historic buildings. Concept has a robust ground floor and public amenities. Density is required to get design elements that are preferred. I-195 Commission zoning is the same result as the city's zoning and six stories is consistent with other buildings along South Main Street. RIHPHC has not followed its 2017 memo suggestions in other cases.
- Tim More provided comments. New construction along South Main Street is to scale except two aberrations. It is consistent with the Old Harbor Plan and College Hill Plan. This design does not adhere to those plans. The 2017 RIHPHC letter says no to over 50 feet; nothing has changed.
- Vincent Buonanno provided comments. While there may have been months of conversation about this, this is the first opportunity for public comment. RIHPHC breach of the 2017 letter before does not mean it should be done again. Go back to the social premise; the developer's financial interest is the tail wagging the dog.
- Leslie Myers provided comments. Street-level experience of the building is important; consider the pedestrian experience of walking down South Main Street. Include sightlines to the river, as at Doubloon Street; there should be two or three in a parcel this big. Benefit Street perspectives provided are misleading.

Public comment was closed. Ms. Taylor thanked the speakers for their comments.

7. Announcements

The next Commission meeting will be held on February 8, 2023.

8. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 11:20 am.

Minutes recorded by,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jeffrey D. Emdy". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Jeffrey D. Emdy
Executive Director