



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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MINUTES
RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION
January 13, 2021

VIA VIDEO CONFERENCE

I. MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr. Michael Abbott, AIA
Ms. Meredith Brady, Assoc. Dir., Div. of Statewide Planning
Dr. Morgan Grefe
Mr. John Paul Loether, State Historic Preservation Officer
Dr. E. Pierre Morenon
Ms. Kaity Ryan
Mr. Clark Schoettle
Ms. Ruth Taylor, Chair

MEMBERS ABSENT

Mr. Warren Ducharme, representing the State Building Code Commissioner
Dr. Tripp Evans
Mr. Paul Jordan, representing Janet Coit, Director, DEM
Mr. Jesse Saglio, President, Rhode Island Commerce Corporation
[Vacant]
[Vacant]

STAFF PRESENT

Donna Alqassar, Heritage Aide
Enerida Ademi, Data Control Clerk
Jeffrey Emidy, Deputy Director
Roberta Randall, Principal Historical Architect
Elizabeth Rochefort, Principal Architectural Historian
Sarah Zurier, Principal Special Projects Coordinator

GUESTS

Mr. Kevin Nelson, Div. of Statewide Planning

II. AGENDA

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:32 A.M., Ms. Taylor, Chair, presiding.

2. Meeting procedures overview

Ms. Taylor explained the procedures that would be followed by Commissioners and attendees of the meeting.

3. Roll call

Ms. Taylor called the roll of commissioners. See page one of these minutes for the attendance list.

4. Minutes of December 9, 2020 Commission meeting

On a motion by Ms. Ryan, seconded by Mr. Schoettle, the commissioners voted unanimously to approve the minutes of the December 9, 2020 Commission meeting without changes.

5. Executive Director's Report

Mr. Loether reported that:

- a) He had a meeting with RIHPHC staff and the Old State House (OSH) restoration project architect to plan an upcoming reapplication for a Save America's Treasures grant from the National Park Service (NPS) for interior rehabilitation work on the OSH. Though we did not get a grant last year, we will reapply this year. Our application will focus on disabled access and will address issues that the NPS reviewers cited last year. They did say that they liked the application. The OSH is not OSHA compliant, either, and we will also press that issue in the application. Mr. Loether stated his belief that if the building is not usable due to these issues, it is threatened, which is a concern for the NPS. We will ask for a \$500,000 grant for a \$1.7- to \$2.0-million dollar project. He spoke with Carol Cornelison at DCAMM about the new application. She understands the issues and also that, now that investment has been made on the exterior of the building, it makes good sense to try to complete the interior down the line. Mr. Loether sees the OSH project as three stages: the exterior, ADA access, and restoration of interior finishes including getting rid of surface wiring. He also intends to speak with the offices of our Congressional delegation.

Dr. Grefe stated that, when the R.I. Historical Society applied for federal grants last year, they were told by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) that they did not want letters from the Congressional delegation. Mr. Loether

- responded that, traditionally, the NPS doesn't take that view. Ms. Taylor stated that Mr. Loether may want to check on that because NEH is involved in the evaluation of these grants. Mr. Loether stated that these are really NPS reviews. He was never involved with NEH on these grants when he worked at the NPS. He added that we likely won't have a response to our application until September.
- b) He had a telephone call with DCAMM Division Director Carole Cornelison regarding the State's potential guarantee of matching funds required for the OSH Save America's Treasures grant reapplication. He is going to get a letter from DCAMM stating that they will provide matching funds.
 - c) He and staff have begun to review applications received in response to announcement of the hiring process to fill the Project Review Coordinator staff position vacancy. It is an open-ended application process. Mr. Loether stated that RIHPHC is not particularly competitive on the salary side and this impacts the quality of candidates that we get. He wants to complete the hiring process by March for an April or May arrival, though if none of the applicants are qualified, we may continue the search.
 - d) He had scheduled a tour of the Old State House exterior restoration work and interior rehabilitation needs of the building for the Governor's Chief of Staff David Ortiz, however, Mr. Ortiz was called away, so they have had to reschedule.
 - e) He had a telephone call with DCAMM's Carole Cornelison regarding the removal of the phrase "and Providence Plantations" from state owned historic buildings. Sometimes this is inscribed into the building fabric, other times it is painted or applied. He was told that he would be part of a committee looking into this issue, but has not heard yet. He told Ms. Cornelison that we do not want to come in at the end of the process, we want to be involved early on. We will review these actions building by building, not make a sweeping statement on the issue.
 - f) With assistance from Elizabeth Rochefort, he completed the third draft of the proposed RIHPHC Strategic Plan 2021-2027 and provided it to the Strategic Planning Committee for discussion and approval at the Committee's January 13, 2021 meeting. The Division of Planning has also responded to the draft of the State Guide Plan element that we submitted. He wants to get that revised in the next four to six weeks.
 - g) Based on monitoring of policies established by the Governor's Office, he has extended the current COVID-based staff telecommuting/work schedules regimen through the end of February 2021. He will continue encouraging staff to work from home when possible, operating this way until the vaccination process is through. The work is getting done and he extended his compliments to the staff; he is very appreciative of their efforts.
 - h) He prepared and sent recommendations to the Governor's Office for new Commissioner appointments and reappointments. The appointments should be staggered. In 2016-2017, when the last appointments were made, the governor's office did not stagger the dates, so a lot of members' terms expire at the same time. He will attempt to reestablish the staggered terms through this round of appointments. He will recommend Loren Spears to fill the position of museologist and Keith Stokes as representative of a preservation organization. Pierre Morenon has indicated that he intends to step down and he hopes to appoint Rod Mather,

Chair of the Department of History for the graduate school at URI. A couple of the current commissioners' terms will expire in June, and that will be a separate component.

Ms. Taylor asked if Mr. Loether would let the serving Commissioners know their status and what he intends to do. Mr. Loether stated that he will do that. His goal is to have all of this submitted by the end of January to establish full statutory compliance.

6. For approval: Historic Preservation Revolving Loan Fund draft revised regulations

The commissioners were provided with a copy of proposed revised regulations for the Historic Preservation Revolving Loan Fund prior to the meeting. It was made available to the public via a link on the posted agenda.

Katherine Pomplun gave a quick overview of the program. It was authorized by statute in 1981 and established in 1985 with \$2 million approved by the voters in a heritage bond issue. The \$2 million at the treasury cannot be used for any other purpose, so all repaid principal is put back into the fund and made available for new loans. The Commission has issued over 100 loans to date, totaling over \$8 million, the vast majority of which have been paid back in full and on time. Eligible properties must be listed in the National or State Register of Historic Places, and borrowers must grant the Commission an easement on the property as a condition of the loan. Individuals are eligible, but only if they cannot qualify for a commercial loan. Nonprofits and municipalities are also eligible. The program has operated as an adjustable rate program with the policy that the interest rate offered is two percent below prime with a floor of five percent. At the moment, we have about \$700,000 available to make new loans. Ms. Pomplun stated that she has noticed a recent uptick in inquiries about the program, which has spurred her to want to update the regulations.

Ms. Pomplun summarized the major changes in the proposed revised regulations. She removed language that established loan application rounds and replaced it with language that allows for applications to be submitted on a rolling basis, which, in reality, is what has been happening for a while. She removed all references to the ranking and scoring of applications as this is an internal process and doesn't need to be in regulation. She added language in the loan term that clarified the program as having an adjustable rate with the rate at two percent less than prime with a floor of three percent, instead of five percent, to make the program more accessible. That is the most significant change.

Ms. Taylor asked if there is a non-discrimination clause in the regulations. Ms. Pomplun replied that she is not sure. Ms. Taylor recommended putting one in. Kevin Nelson stated that his agency has gone through a lot of regulations changes recently, and in terms of the non-discrimination clause, that is in state law, so it's not necessary. Ms. Pomplun stated that it might be helpful in the application, in that case. Ms. Taylor stated that, to clarify, she suggested it because it is a way of communicating to potential applicants that they

will not be ex-ed out.

Mr. Schoettle asked if the interest goes into the state's general fund, or if it comes back to the Commission. Ms. Pomplun stated that it stays with the Commission and is meant to be used to cover administrative costs related to the program.

Ms. Ryan asked if Ms. Pomplun knows why there might be increased interest in the program lately. Ms. Pomplun stated that it is her understanding that interest rates are low now, so the program is competitive, and people might just have projects that they finally want to get to. She stated that the program has, because of the restriction about other financing not being available, has always been a program of last resort. By bringing the interest rate down, we might be able to allow someone to do a project that they might otherwise not be able to do.

Ms. Ryan asked if there is a floor level that the Commission wants to keep in the account at all times. Ms. Pomplun stated that there is not a set amount but that we typically request to keep \$400,000 available in our budget, so that seems like the safe amount.

Dr. Grefe stated that one reason for increased interest may be that there has been a profound increase in property projects during the pandemic as people have been focused on home improvement. Also, people have been alerted to state and federal funding sources more recently as a result of COVID funding sources, so existing programs are suddenly on their radar.

Ms. Ryan asked if there is any interest in trying to increase the amount of money available to lend by asking for more in the budget. Mr. Loether replied that because of the lack of activity and the available funding in the program, it would be difficult to justify a request for more funding at this time. Trying to generate more interest in the program is important because, if budget personnel and legislators see money laying fallow in the account in this kind of budget situation, they are going to want to use it. Ms. Pomplun stated that, to Ms. Ryan's point, we might want to do a little more outreach to get the word out about the program if we update the regulations.

Mr. Schoettle asked if there is a way to dovetail the loan program with the state preservation grant program as a way to get more funding from the Commission to make projects go forward and to use the loan program more. Ms. Pomplun replied that that is an interesting idea. We will have to look into allowability, but it could be very helpful.

Ms. Taylor stated that increased attractiveness of the program may lead to a new way to look at the regulations and the way the program is administered. You may want to give preference to projects that are funded through grants, if that is legal, for example.

Ms. Taylor asked if we are asking for a motion to approve the revised regulations as written. Ms. Pomplun replied that we are.

On a motion by Mr. Schoettle, seconded by Ms. Ryan, the commissioners voted

unanimously to approve the proposed Historic Preservation Revolving Loan Fund draft revised regulations without changes.

6. Old Business

- a) Mr. Loether introduced an update on the State Preservation Grants program, stating that the program has a \$1 million request in a bond issue for the March election. Ms. Taylor asked if it is a standalone bond. Mr. Loether replied that it is not. Ms. Pomplun stated that it is partnered with the R.I. State Council on the Arts (RISCA) in Question 6. It is a \$7 million ask with \$2 million for RISCA competitive grants, \$1 million for us for competitive grants, and the balance goes to two earmarked projects at Trinity Repertory Theatre and the Philharmonic.

Dr. Grefe, stated that there was a lot of confusion the last time we had a situation like this as to who could apply for the RISCA funds and who could apply for the RIHPHC funds, so she would hope for more clear agreement language around that issue. Ms. Pomplun stated that she is looking at the current regulations and we will see that come up at a later date. Mr. Loether stated that we will be doing a lot of crosstalk with RISCA about how these programs move forward. Ms. Taylor stated that this office endeavors to be transparent about the way that money is distributed, and she believes that it serves as an example for others, as well.

- b) Mr. Loether stated that the Project Review Coordinator position vacancy has been covered previously and he has nothing to add here.
- c) Mr. Loether stated that the Comprehensive State Historic Preservation Plan was sent to the NPS by Elizabeth Rochefort, and we await their final approval. He does not know how long it will take for their response. Ms. Taylor stated that she finds it admirable how much the staff are not only staying on top of the bureaucracy of all the regulations and plans, but actually making them meaningful and good.

7. New Business

There was no new business.

12. Announcements

The next Commission meeting will be held February 10, 2021 by video conference.

13. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 10:19 am.

Minutes recorded by,



Jeffrey D. Emidy
Deputy Director
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer