

**CITY OF NORWALK
HISTORICAL COMMISSION
SPECIAL MEETING
JANUARY 31, 2024**

ATTENDANCE: Dana Laird, Chair; Barry Belardinelli, Eric Chandler, James Frayer, Elizabeth Golden, Mark Jackson, Lisa Wilson Grant,

OTHERS: Michelle Andrzejewski, City Staff, Diane Jellerette, Norwalk Historical Society; Susan Gilgore, Patsy Brescia, Lockwood Mathews Mansion; Diane Cece, Henry Conroy, David Westmoreland

CALL TO ORDER

Commissioner Laird called the meeting to order.

ROLL CALL

A quorum was present.

REPORTS FROM BOARDS

a. Norwalk Historical Society; Diane Jellerette

Ms. Jellerette said that they had started planning for the upcoming year. Events include hosting a Black History Month lecture by Commissioner Chandler on slaves, free men and Haitians in the American Revolution on February 25th. March will have a Women's History Month event and planning is underway for an event in May, also.

b. Lockwood-Mathews Museum; Susan Gilgore

Ms. Gilgore greeted the Commissioners and said that they were also organizing events for the year. Stepping Stones has offered the use of their multi-media gallery for the spring lectures, one of which will explore the circumstances around the Mathews family who resided in a number of New York prominent hotels during the Gilded Age by Ms. Deirdre Dinnigan. On May 19th, the Lockwood-Mathews Museum will be partnering with the Fairfield Museum and History Center for a Gilded Age event at the Fairfield Museum's location. Their exhibit titled "Money Talks – The Gilded Age in Fairfield" will be available for viewing. Another presentation will be from Becky Diamond who is an expert on food during the Gilded Age and just published a cookbook called the "Gilded Age Cookbook". The flea market will be returning on Sunday, September 15th and the Lockwood-Mathews Museum Gala will be a costume ball held at the Shore and Country Club on October 19th.

Ms. Brescia said that the renovation project was moving along and they are about a third of the way through the heavy construction. The electrical wiring and fire safety plumbing on the second

story has been installed and flooring is being replaced. Trench work for the installation of the mechanical systems in the basement has begun now that the blue stone flooring has been taken up and stored on site. The construction work is proceeding on schedule. Once all the construction is completed, it will take a few months to reassemble the rooms with the furniture that is currently being store in Long Island. The Strawberry Hill office space has been rented through April of 2025.

The Capital Budget process is underway and the Mansion has requested \$3 million dollars in order to pay for the alternates that had been removed from the base project in order to fit into the City's Capital Budget Plan. This request is in the Economic Development Budget. She reviewed the details of the various areas of the mansion that were disrupted due to the construction with the Commissioners.

A separate project to restore the front doors of the Mansion is underway and this is funding by a State Preservation Grant of \$150,000 and requires matching funds. One of the Trustees has supplied the required matching funds. The project has gone out to bid. The timing has been scheduled to have the restored doors completed and in place for the re-opening of the museum next year.

Ms. Brescia went on to speak about the recent Norwalk Hour article about the State Capitol building the Lockwood Mathew Mansion both having been constructed within 10 years of each other and both designated as National Historic Landmarks in 1971.

Mr. Westmoreland said that regarding the \$3 million request, they have been trying to make sure that the City realizes that alternate projects covered by that sum is based on the fact they already have everything moved out and a contractor in place. If the money is not allocated this year, the price will increase substantially if they have do to these projects as a stand alone. Discussion followed.

Mr. Westmoreland then gave a brief overview of the various project requests that were significantly cut in order to keep the request for \$3 million intact in the budget. Ms. Brescia said that it would be crucial to show the various board members photos of the type of work that is being done. Ms. Brescia said that she would be in touch with Commissioner Frayer in the coming week.

REPORTS

a. Buildings *

Mr. Westmoreland said that there was a significant mold problem in the Gate Lodge at Mathews Park. Facilities Management has taken over the management of that building along with the other buildings in the Park. Mr. Westmoreland said that he was working closely with the staff on this issue. Clean up plans are in place and the problem appears to stem from leaks by the chimney. The roof will need to be replaced and will cost approximately \$35,000. At the direction of Mr. Dachowitz, this amount was placed in the Expense Budget.

The contract for the exterior work at the jail has been closed out. The next step is getting the reimbursement for the State grant of \$625,000. DPW is requiring the addition of a hand rail along the sidewalk where there is an ADA ramp in front of the jail. This will cost about \$10,000.

Mr. Westmoreland said that he was expecting to receive a complete plan, budget and specifications from the conservator to restore the first floor of the jail. They hope to preserve the graffiti left by detainees during the 1800's who signed their names and dates.

Mr. Westmoreland then spoke about the "well house" which was constructed in the 1970's over the spot where the utilities were placed underground. He explained that there were discussions about replacing this small structure with a larger shed that would allow for the storage of folding chairs and tables that would be appropriate for the site.

b. Cemeteries

Mr. Westmoreland said that Parks and Recreation had taken over the responsibility of mowing the cemeteries.

c. Financials

Mr. Westmoreland reviewed the small amounts still in the account and said that he had reviewed the Capital Budget requests earlier in the meeting. He noted that the Mansion had requested a \$100,000 increase in their grant because they have not been able to operate. The Historical Grant was also increased to help pay for the curator who is working on the City's collection.

OLD BUSINESS

There was no old business to consider at this time.

NEW BUSINESS

a. Public hearing on intent to demolish 1 Cemetery Street- In accordance with Chapter 55 of the City's Charter, a demolition application for 1 Cemetery Street, Norwalk CT has been received and an objection has been filed. Therefore, the commission shall make a determination as to whether the building proposed to be demolished is architecturally or historically significant. – (VOTE)

Mr. Henry Conroy, a representative of Mill Pond Holdings, LLC, greeted the Commissioners. There is an approved site plan for a 77 unit multi-family development on the site. Following that submission of the application, they filed an application for demolition because the building is over 50 years old in accordance with the procedure. Mr. Conroy went on to say that the objection was crafted in such a way to insure that the community and the Commission will have an

opportunity to review buildings that are historically and architecturally significant and to insure they will be preserved.

Mr. Conroy explained that he had worked on renovating a number of buildings in Norwalk and listed a number of those sites. While Mr. Conroy and his clients enjoy preserving and restoring architecturally significant buildings, he did not feel that 1 Cemetery Street was architecturally significant. He said the building was constructed in the mid-1970's. Commissioner Laird noted she had looked it up and the date she found was 1968.

Mr. Conroy said that this was the former Wells Fargo site and did not believe that there was anything of historical or architectural significance there. He said there was no information provided as to why the objection was filed and that he was hopeful that the Commission would decide that the developers could proceed with the demolition.

Ms. Diane Cece of Olmstead Place greeted the Commissioners. She said that of all the processes in Norwalk, this is one of the most confusing. She said that she was pleased since she filed this one and one for 11 Marvin. Ms. Andrzejewski informed her that this would prompt a review of the ordinance and the process that should be followed. She noted that there was nothing incumbent upon the objector to state any particular reason when the objection is filed. The objection itself is what triggers the process for the Commission, the objector and the applicant to have a fair amount of time to research the possibility of any significant architectural, historical or use.

There have been conflicting reports and interpretations of what portion of that should be done by the Historical Commission or by experts. Ms. Cece said that it was unclear what information was required of the objector or whether she could hire experts. She stated that in the absence of an expert, no one can simply look at a building and determine there was no architectural or historical significance. As a member of the public, Ms. Cece said that she would have no grounds to state whether there was anything historical or architecturally significant on any number of buildings in Norwalk.

She reiterated that the process was still confusing but said that the City staff would be looking at the ordinance in order to clarify it. Ms. Cece said that she was looking for who should be doing what when.

Ms. Cece added that there did not appear to be anything in the ordinance that would afford the objector on what the steps are. She happened to see the Legal Notice and checked the agenda in order to find out that there was a public hearing scheduled. There should be communications to the property owner and the objector as well. The public should not have to search agendas and the newspaper legal notices in size 2 font. She said that any communication between the applicant and staff should also be sent to the objector.

Ms. Cece said that she was under the impression that the demolition delay affords the objector the full 180 days which would be March 5th. She did not understand that according to the

ordinance, the applicant could actually file a request to have a public hearing, which would change the time frame. This objection was filed as a private resident and not as part of any association or group.

Ms. Cece was able to consult with a local resource who was able to assist her with a search through the Norwalk Hour archives and the original records from the Merchant Bank along with the parcel itself. She said that the 1968 records did not indicate who the architect was for the building. She said that the documents noted that one internal wall and portions of the external wall were marble. She added that she was not sure if this was historically significant requiring the building to remain intact or whether the portions should be preserved or incorporated into the new structure.

Ms. Cece said that she had not been told what the findings of the Historical Commission were and asked if they were prepared to share any information with her. She said that if nothing else comes of this, she was glad that it prompted a conversation about the fact that the ordinance needs to be clarified. She contacted Mr. Conroy privately to say that it was not her intent to impede anyone's development but simply exercising her right under the regulations and the ordinance. In the absence of any significant findings by the Norwalk Historical Commission, Ms. Cece was prepared to withdraw the objection officially, effective immediately. She thanked the Commission for their time.

There was no one else who wished to address the Commission at this time.

Commissioner Wilson Grant said that Ms. Cece raises a number of good points and said that the Commission should also consider the essence of the place such as the land, the water and the surroundings, which might be Native American or other general spaces. That might be something to include in the review along with the building itself.

Mr. Conroy noted that the application was only for the demolition of the building. Mr. Conroy noted that it was a bit of a confusing process. Mr. Conroy is a strong supporter of the Historical Commission and their ability to preserve buildings in Norwalk.

Commissioner Frayer pointed out that the ordinance does not require the Commission to come up with reasons they feel the buildings should or should not be demolished. He said that if someone objects to the demolition, they should give a reason why this should not be done. Discussion followed.

Commissioner Belardinelli said that the objection came from someone who was against the overall development and simply was hitting the brakes. He explained that he grew up on Gregory Boulevard and other than redoing the façade, there was nothing significant about that building. Looking at the process is one thing, but this seems to be just throwing up something to see if it will stick. Several of the Commissioners agreed with Commissioner Belardinelli.

Commissioner Chandler said that if someone was going to file an objection, the individual should have some underlying, fundamental reason to initiate the process that is underway at this time. Otherwise the process can be used to stall off a future project that the individual objects to. Currently the ordinance does not make it incumbent on the objector to state a reason but nonetheless there needs to be an underlying reason for stopping a project. The building is just a bank building and the fact that there is marble on the inside or re-purposing that marble does not seem to be sufficient reason for delaying the demolition.

Commissioner Frayer said the ordinance states that the parties can present alternatives to the demolition, however he did not hear any alternatives. The second part of the ordinance encourages identifying a purchaser who will retain the architectural or historical significance. Discussion followed.

Commissioner Chandler pointed out that the land records are open to the public and added that if there was a significant architect involved, it would be so noted. It should not be incumbent upon a citizen to hand the Commission a work order to do an in-depth investigation when they also have access to the same information. The objector should have their documentation ready to present.

Commissioner Frayer said the ordinance indicates the Commission can or may hold the public hearing and issue a recommendation on alternatives to demolition. There were no alternatives or other purchasers.

Commissioner Wilson Grant said that sometimes people want to move the building, but not in this case. While she appreciates the open space of the area, there is nothing that prohibits Mr. Conroy from going ahead with the development. Discussion followed about the role of Planning and Zoning in the process.

Ms. Andrzejewski said that she had spoken with Mr. Ireland and Corporation Counsel about the ordinance. They will be reviewing the ordinance to address problematic issues. This vote is focused on whether it was architecturally or historically significant.

**** COMMISSIONER CHANDLER MOVED TO FIND THAT IN ACCORDANCE WITH CHAPTER 55 OF THE CITY'S CHARTER THERE IS NO ARCHITECTURAL OR HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE STRUCTURE LOCATED AT 1 CEMETERY STREET.**

**** COMMISSIONER WILSON GRANT SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

b. Elections of Chairperson and Secretary

The floor was open for nominations for Chair.

**** COMMISSIONER CHANDLER NOMINATED COMMISSIONER LAIRD AS CHAIR FOR THE 2024 HISTORICAL COMMISSION.**

**** COMMISSIONER MR. BELARDINELLI SECONDED.**

**** COMMISSIONER FRAYER MOVED TO NOMINATE COMMISSIONER CHANDLER AS CHAIR FOR THE 2024 HISTORICAL COMMISSION.**

Commissioner Chandler thanked Commissioner Frayer, but declined. Commissioner Frayer suggested that Commissioner Chandler take the position of Vice Chair. Commissioner Chandler said that he could fill the position of Vice Chair.

Commissioner Frayer said that it was important to follow the protocols because of FOI requirements. He thanked Ms. Andrzejewski for her ability to keep on top of these things. There were certain protocols that the Commissioners had to follow such as the procedure for Public Speaking such as the 3 minute limit, only addressing items on the agenda and the speaker providing their name and address.

**** THE MOTION TO APPROVE COMMISSIONER LAIRD AS CHAIR FOR THE 2024 HISTORICAL COMMISSION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

**** COMMISSIONER WILSON GRANT NOMINATED COMMISSIONER CHANDLER AS VICE CHAIR FOR THE 2024 HISTORICAL COMMISSION.**

**** COMMISSIONER FRAYER SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION TO APPROVE COMMISSIONER CHANDLER AS VICE CHAIR FOR THE 2024 HISTORICAL COMMISSION PASSED WITH FIVE (5) IN FAVOR (BELARDINELLI, FRAYER, GOLDEN, JACKSON, AND LAIRD) AND TWO (2) ABSTENTIONS (CHANDLER AND WILSON GRANT).**

Ms. Andrzejewski suggested that the ordinance indicated that the Commission should have a Chair and any additional positions that would assist the Chair. If the Commissioners wish to just have a Chair and Vice Chair, that would be fine. This was agreeable to all.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

• December 20th, 2023

Commissioner Chandler said that he had a number of corrections even though he was not at the meeting.

The following corrections were submitted for the minutes of the December 20, 2023 meeting:

Under the **Report for the Norwalk Historical Society**: please change the following from:

City of Norwalk
Historical Commission
Special Meeting
January 31, 2024

“a Proclamation on November 27, 2023” to “a Proclamation for Native American month for the City of Norwalk that was presented on November 27, 2023.

Page 2, under **OLD BUSINESS**, please correct the spelling of “old alms house 1869 Town Farm”.

Page 2, under **NEW BUSINESS, under 2024 Calendar (Vote** please change the following from “was presented to the mission. “ to “was presented to the commission.”

Page 2, under **NEW BUSINESS**, please correct the spelling of “unanimously.”

Page 2, under **APPROVAL OF THE NOVEMBER 15TH MINUTES**, please correct the spelling of Commissioner Laird’s name.

Page 2, under **ADJOURNMENT**, please correct the spelling of Commissioner Belardinelli’s name.

**** COMMISSIONER CHANDLER MOVED TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE DECEMBER 20, 2023 MEETING AS CORRECTED.
** COMMISSIONER BERLARDINELLI SECONDED.
** THE MOTION PASSED WITH FOUR (4) IN FAVOR (FRAYER, GOLDEN, JACKSON AND WILSON GRANT) AND TWO (2) ABSTENTIONS (BELARDINELLI AND CHANDLER).**

ADJOURNMENT

**** COMMISSIONER CHANDLER MOVED TO ADJOURN
** COMMISSIONER FRAYER SECONDED.
** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 7:14 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

S. L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services