

MINUTES OF THE MID CAMBRIDGE NEIGHBORHOOD CONSERVATION DISTRICT COMMISSION

Monday, March 3, 2025, 6:00 PM, online Zoom meeting

Commission Members present: Tony Hsiao, *Chair*, Lestra Litchfield, Vice Chair, Katinka Hakuta, Charles Redmon, Monika Pauli, Nan Laird

Absent: Catherine Tice

Staff present: Allison Crosbie, Preservation Administrator
Eric Hill, Survey Director

Members of the Public: See attached list

This meeting was held via online zoom webinar <https://tinyurl.com/MC0325> with remote participation and was closed to in-person attendance. The public was able to participate online via the Zoom webinar platform. The meeting ID was 847 8791 5003.

Commission Chair Tony Hsiao made introductions and called the meeting to order at 6:07.

MC-7216: 29 Ellsworth Avenue, by Lucy Hadden. Remove chimney, install solar panels.

Ms. Allison Crosbie, preservation administrator, gave a brief history of the building.

Lucy Hadden and William Brockman, the applicants, shared their screen and presented the proposed layout of the solar panels on the south side of the roof. They also mentioned that Ryan Severin from Empower Energy was present and can answer questions. Mr. Brockman pointed out the location of the chimney on the building and explained that because it casts a shadow, keeping the chimney would make 4 panels ineffective, thus reducing the amount of energy generated. Mr. Brockman showed several images including a street view. He also stated that he and his wife love the house and want to maintain its historic integrity, including the slate roof.

Commission Questions

Commissioner Charles Redmon asked to confirm that the chimney is being removed only because of the solar panels. Mr. Brockman replied that is correct.

Public Questions or Comments

Sue Butler of 14 Clinton Street mentioned that she has solar panels on a house at 17 Clinton Street and that she added panels to the north side of the roof because it added to the solar energy gained. She asked the applicants if they had reviewed their calculations and considered putting panels on the north side. Mr. Ryan Severin from Empower Energy answered that it's a steep roof, and when it gets to 40 or 45-degree angle, it becomes difficult to get the solar access, and lower sloped roofs tend to work better. Mr. Severin also referred to the image on the screen and clarified what the colors on the diagram represent.

Commission Comments

Vice Chair Lestra Litchfield commented that the Commission doesn't like to see the loss of chimneys, that they tell a story. She also stated that she appreciates that they are installing solar panels and just wishes they could maintain their chimney. Mr. Brockman replied that they ran the numbers and that without the chimney the panels can get 1,630 kilowatt hours. Ms. Hadden commented that it's too bad the chimney is not on the north side.

Mr. Hsiao shared his screen to look at the street view and noted that the chimney is minimally visible.

Mr. Hsiao motioned to approve the proposal as submitted and noted that keeping the chimney is preferable, but this is a non binding review. Mr. Redmon seconded and the motion passed 6-0.

MC-6545 (AMENDMENT): 18 Clinton Street, by Asha Daniere. Revise design of rear addition.

Ms. Crosbie provided a brief background on the project that was previously granted a Certificate of Appropriateness in a non-binding review in 2022. The project was also granted a Variance by the BZA to convert the property from 6 units to 2 units. With the new zoning amendments from March 10, 2025, the applicant is proposing a revised design with additional square footage resulting in a binding review.

Ms. Crosbie went over the Commission's review criteria and recent changes in zoning as well as the current City Council goals.

Asha Daniere, the applicant, introduced the architects Sam Kachmar, Axel Ramirez, and Sam Waite as well as the general contractor, Matt Roman. Ms. Daniere mentioned that she grew up in the house and the plan is to rehabilitate it since it had grown into significant disrepair and needed a tremendous amount of work, and the only way to be able to afford to do this was to create two units, one to live in and one to sell. She explained that they are in mid-construction and the new zoning has created an opportunity to add some square footage in the back. Ms. Daniere stated that the overall objective is to preserve the historical aspects of the front building and do something different in the back where there was a stable originally but will still stay inconspicuous. She further explained that she wants to differentiate the new construction but also honor the surrounding buildings and the building in front, through the placement on the lot and the choice of materials, and historical colors for the exterior. She then pointed out the green space on the site and that they were adding a roof deck. Ms. Daniere showed a site plan with the building footprint and setbacks. She also explained that they recently found an issue with the front entrance of the house. Matthew Roman, the contractor, explained that the existing door is set 18 inches in, and that it has rotted out all around it, and the current code requires recessed doors with a step to have a 36-inch landing. Mr. Roman further explained that setting the door back 36 inches would be awkward, so he is requesting to locate the front door flush with the front facade.

Ms. Daniere showed a site plan and explained how the building now conforms with the current zoning and showed the setbacks.

Architect Sam Waite then presented the changes to the building footprint in the rear, noting that the front house has been left in its historic state with original detailing to be restored. He went on to describe the rear unit has having simpler architectural details that complement the

main house with corner boards and board-and-batten siding. Mr. Waite then showed perspectives of the back unit and front streetscape view. He noted that vegetation will obscure some of the views and make the rear addition less impactful.

Ms. Daniere then showed the original exterior walls of the back structure and explained that they were given permission to demolish everything except these two walls because of a pre-existing nonconforming allowance under zoning which allowed them to keep the building where it is. With the new zoning changes, they no longer need to keep the walls. She also explained that a windstorm last fall caused one of the walls to collapse. With the walls where they are currently, the work has stalled, so she would like to remove the remaining walls.

Mr. Waite then presented shadow studies and explained that they are showing the winter solstice tracking throughout the day, this is the time when the shadows will be the longest and most impact the streetscape. He pointed out these impacts are similar to other buildings on the street. He then showed views from the street and stated that with the existing vegetation the visual impact of the rear unit is diminished.

Ms. Laird asked for clarification regarding the building projection on the left side of the front house. Ms. Daniere explained that the projection was already there, and they haven't worked on that yet. Ms. Laird asked if the old, approved plan was short and squat, and the new plan is thinner and taller. Ms. Daniere confirmed that was correct.

Mr. Waite then showed the south elevation of the rear unit and reiterated that the building is now within the new setbacks. Ms. Daniere stated that the rear elevation is not visible from the street. Ms. Crosbie asked if it was visible from Bigelow Street. Ms. Daniere answered she doesn't think so.

Mr. Waite showed additional drawings of the side and rear of the structure. Ms. Litchfield asked if the deck on the second floor was part of the original proposal. Mr. Waite confirmed that it was. Mr. Waite then showed images of other buildings in the neighborhood for context. Ms. Daniere showed a photograph taken from the backyard and said the buildings you see reinforce their belief that what they are proposing is not incongruous.

Commission Questions

Ms. Laird asked for more clarification of what is proposed and what has been approved and asked about the carriage house and how it's connected to the main house. Ms. Daniere clarified what's proposed and approved and said that there was a breezeway connecting the structures. She also clarified they are not adding another story to the projection on the left side. Mr. Hsiao showed a street view to help explain where the new addition will be located and pointed out that although it's further back on the lot, it is visible from the public way. Mr. Hsiao then showed the Google street view on Bigelow Street to determine if the new rear unit is visible from there.

Commissioner Monika Pauli asked if they had considered another type of roof. Ms. Daniere answered that they looked at a gable roof, but it would have made the building taller, and they looked at shed roofs, but one part of the roof would still have been higher. She also stated that

a flat roof structure is as congruent as a gable roof in that area. Ms. Litchfield pointed out that there is context not being looked at but understands that they are finessing it a bit.

Public Questions

Ms. Butler noted that two flat roofs were added to her house on 14 Clinton Street 4 years after it was built. She asked if Ms. Daniere is going to add another floor. Ms. Daniere answered that she could have added an additional floor but didn't feel it would be appropriate.

Public Comments

Rohit Karnik of 20 Clinton Street, unit 5, commented that the proposal is going to have a negative impact on him. He also explained the background of the project before this new proposal and believes the new building is very prominent. He also said the proposed yard space and new windows come at his expense and will result in loss of light, privacy, and well-being. He also stated that shadow studies do not show the impact on his living space.

Brendan Hickey of 54 Concord Avenue stated he appreciated that the new unit is not a copy of the existing structure and is clearly delineated as a new structure and that the applicant is taking care to make something that fits in with the neighborhood.

Alex Irving of 23 Bigelow Street stated there was confusion around where the house is located in relation to Bigelow Street and that it will be visible between 23 and 25 Bigelow Street and pointed out that the applicant did not show pictures of houses directly behind the project. She stated that the new unit will fill the view from her windows and will impact their green space and overall quality of life.

Justin Saif of 29 Hurley Street expressed support for the project and believes it meets the criteria for approval, that it's an architecturally fitting design, and the changes are primarily in the rear so not visible. He then informed the Commission that he was involved with the 2023 amendments to the Neighborhood Conservation Districts and emphasized the exclusion of size and shape from building review.

James Zall of 203 Pemberton Street noted the efforts by the applicant to build something new that is different but compatible with the existing house. He also stated that the changes in zoning are to provide more housing and more fair zoning laws. He expressed hope that the Commission doesn't go along with people who want to roll back the zoning changes.

Drazen Prelec, and his wife, of 19 Bigelow Street pointed out that the new construction will be visible between 17 and 19 Bigelow Street and noted the significant architecture of many of the buildings on his street, and the visibility of the new unit will make a difference. He also commented that he was not aware of the new zoning changes and doesn't see how these two large units are going to increase affordable housing in Cambridge, that it's not in the spirit of the zoning change. He also concurred with Ms. Irving and explained that he and his wife have lived here since 2000 and will now consider moving out.

Ms. Butler stated that there are already large infills in the area such as Harvard Street and agreed with Mr. Hickey that it's good not to imitate the front house. She also commented that she is grateful that these units are family housing which means people will probably stay longer.

Ms. Irving stated that turning the property from 6 units to 2 very expensive properties that the owner can sell is in opposition to the overall goals of the City Council.

Ms. Crosbie summarized for the record letters that were received by staff and distributed to the Commissioners, including several opposed including David Spillane of 21 Bigelow Street, Patrick Hollenbeck of 29 Bigelow Street, Margaret McLallen of 31 Bigelow Street, and Meng Fang of 20 Clinton Street #7. Additional letters of opposition were submitted by individuals who have spoken here including Alex Irving, Drazen Prelec, and Rohit Karnik.

Several letters of support were also submitted and distributed to the Commissioners, including David Sullivan of 16 Notre Dame Avenue, Daniel Hidalgo of 77 Norfolk Street, and Janene Davis of 20 Clinton Street #2. Other letters of support were submitted by individuals who have spoken at this meeting including Sue Butler and Justin Saif.

Commission Comments

Ms. Litchfield commented that this review was very challenging because of the new zoning changes - not being able to comment on volume, height, massing, which is basically what architecture is, is confounding. Ms. Litchfield said she appreciates the need for affordable and moderate housing but does not believe these two units provide either. She also pointed out that the infill on Harvard Street is why the Neighborhood Conservation District was established. She then discussed the front entryway which is a historical aspect of this house that should be respected and maintained and be restored to its original detailing. She also stated that the proposed board-and-batten siding for the rear wasn't appropriate and seems incongruous but would like to hear what the other commissioners think.

Ms. Laird asked to see the slide that showed the Commission's review requirements. Ms. Laird stated she understands the Commission should not consider the appropriateness of size and shape of the structure but agreed with Ms. Litchfield. She also commented that she understands the applicant's desire to rehab the building and make it more pleasant and noted that the applicant is taking what was probably student housing or at least affordable housing and making it into just two units. She also said that downsizing to two units will increase the property value of the house and surrounding neighbors.

Ms. Laird further commented that she thinks the proposal is counter to the City Council goals. She stated that she agreed with the neighbor who was concerned about the light into his unit, and she appreciated the light studies because they showed what was happening to the sun on the street. Ms. Laird also said having sunlight is important, especially in this climate in the winter, and she's sympathetic to people who are concerned about losing their sunlight but feels the Commission can't do anything about that. She also commented that she didn't think these solar studies directly addressed this neighbor's concern.

Ms. Laird said she agreed that overall, in this neighborhood, on the older properties, you don't see a bigger structure in the backyard of a smaller structure. She pointed out that the problem is that many of the things that the Commission is allowed to comment on are actually very difficult to measure objectively which leaves a conundrum as how to vote on this. She also said she thinks the neighborhood will be enhanced by this project, but it's going to contribute to this

to being a luxury neighborhood, not an affordable neighborhood. She went on to say she won't vote against it, but she sees many reasons why this project would be attractive to some neighbors and not others because of the lack of sunlight and general open space to other units and the visual views through the windows.

Commissioner Monika Pauli agreed with Ms. Litchfield and Ms. Laird and asked if there had been any outreach to the neighbors to try to take their views under consideration such as access to sunlight.

Ms. Daniere stated that a requirement under the new zoning laws is to hold a neighborhood meeting, and there are specific notice requirements, et cetera. Ms. Daniere said she reached out to the City, and in the end was told that she was not required to hold a meeting with neighbors. She explained she made multiple attempts to reach out to abutters but did not get a response.

Ms. Laird questioned the goals expressed by the City Council and how they relate to what the community wants and believes this is an example of luxury housing. She also said she understood why the applicant is proposing this.

Ms. Litchfield stated that they still have the Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District guidelines and it looks like they cannot apply them any longer. Ms. Litchfield stated that the proposal is not historically appropriate and emphasized that the Commission might not be able to vote against this, but it still doesn't change the fact that this is not appropriate.

Ms. Daniere stated that she met with City Councilors and was told that the goals were about creating housing at all levels and that luxury housing does lead to more levels of housing.

Mr. Redmon agreed with Ms. Litchfield and Ms. Pauli and stated the Commission is left with dealing with details and not its compatibility with an existing neighborhood structure.

Ms. Litchfield commented that they should focus on the entry, the roof deck, and the sheathing.

Mr. Hsiao commented that it's an extraordinarily difficult project to weigh in on, that one could make the rationalization on any point of view as following the new changes that are required of commissions. He further explained that this Commission is very challenged by the fact of the law, that this is where the pavement meets the road, because right now we're getting right into the very crux of the matter, which is the desire to create housing of all kinds in Cambridge. He clarified that nobody disagrees that there should be a wide variety of housing across the city, but what is in dispute is the Commission's ability to act in the capacity in what they believe are the interests of the city, the neighborhoods, and the applicants.

Mr. Hsiao went on to say that in many respects what the Commission has been charged with for many decades is no longer under their authority and reiterated that the whole purpose of what a commission does is weigh in on appropriateness. In this case, from a particularly architectural standpoint, it is impacting on mass, size, etc., which is exactly the nature of what the Commission does. Mr. Hsiao stated that he is an architect, not an attorney, and the

Commissioners have been planners, renters, people who are owners, and attorneys, and there's been a cross discussion across the city in this agency and in other commissions as well in Cambridge. He noted that they're coming to a head now because the intentions, while noble, are now pointing out where the drawbacks are and where the Commission's limitations are.

Mr. Hsiao also stated that it is very hard when you create blanket statements across the board and you have to conform within those new strictures when the Commission was previously able to comment on them. Communities are made up of neighbors, and it is not just at citywide level, it's at the street level, and at the individual level. It's at the person-to-person level. Mr. Hsiao said he understands that development in Cambridge is not easy, that there are a lot of things that you must go through to get projects approved. He further stated that he thinks everyone has the right spirit to try to do what's in the best interest of everybody and they are by no means perfect; the Commission renders judgments, which in some cases can be subjective, but they try to do their best; then what the Commission can really comment on are issues related to the public way, the issues related to the appropriateness of the design, not from the standpoint of scale and massing, but architectural features, architectural look, things that relate with respect to the existing house.

Regarding community goals expressed by the City Council, Mr. Hsiao commented that they're very open-ended and can be interpreted in any number of ways, and that is the challenge that the Commission is faced with here. He stated that there are competing interests here which are not aligned and can be argued either way.

Regarding the proposed design, Mr. Hsiao agreed that it's in compliance with all the current rules and regulations and recognizes that, as the applicant stated, the addition could go to 4 stories, and that she is trying to be respectful but is also trying to address concerns of her own.

Mr. Hsiao pointed out the comments from several neighbors who are not happy with the impact of this addition on their light, views, and privacy, and no matter how it's designed, they're clearly going to be impacted. Mr. Hsiao suggested reconsidering the proportion of the windows, that they could be further refined and made slightly smaller and to consider neighbors' privacy concerns. He also suggested reconsidering the use of board and batten siding and looking carefully into how to be sensitive to the neighbors with respect to views towards their properties. He also recommended additional landscaping including plantings, paving, open space, fences, etc. which can help to provide more privacy for both the project and the neighbors. Mr. Hsiao said he also appreciated that they are restoring the front house and should continue to advance that.

Commissioner Katinka Hakuta referred to Section 2. 78. 220, Section B that says the Commission can review to prevent proposals that are incongruous to the historic aspects. In the sample, Finding and Determination, it says that we are able to rule a proposed project is found to be incongruous to the historic aspects, and went on to ask if that is still true, why would that not apply in this particular case If the commissioners are finding that the structure in the rear is congruous with the historic aspects of the neighborhood and the house in the front, You can, but you have to be specific as to why.

Ms. Crosbie confirmed that the Commission can consider if the project is incongruous to the historic aspects, but the Commission must be able to say specifically what those aspects are and that it is hard to separate design from size and shape.

Ms. Daniere questioned whether the historic aspects apply to the district or the neighborhood. Ms. Crosbie pointed to the language in NCD amendments.

Ms. Hakuta commented that houses like this traditionally have a secondary structure which tended to not dominate the main structure, historically. Ms. Hakuta stated she believes that there's a clear argument for that interpretation, that from a historical perspective it is in fact not appropriate

Mr. Hsiao commented that in some way, the Commission is probably going to have to let the chips fall where they may, that they should do their best to interpret not only the new guidelines, but also what the Commission consciously is charged with doing. Mr. Hsiao said the Commission members should vote what they believe in. At the end of the day, it's still going to come back to this. He further stated that interpretation is to take this literally at face value, of appropriateness within a historic area in a neighborhood.

Mr. Redmon commented that at the end of the day, work out the details and consider the context, how it's built and materials, and talk to your neighbors. Which means when you look at the details, consider what it's next to. You could focus on the entry door and bring it back to the way it was originally done, which was recessed.

Ms. Litchfield asked if the Commission could rule to reject the proposal on the proximity and appropriateness within the neighborhood of not having a subsidiary back structure without mentioning positioning, size, or height, or volume.

Ms. Crosbie suggested asking Ms. Daniere to consider continuing this to come up with some other options, just tweak the design.

Mr. Hsiao suggested looking at this volumetrically because the volume in some ways exceeds, or at least with respect to the existing main house, is creating a higher volume. It's very evident, particularly in the axonometric views showing the proposed roof plan. He asked the applicant if she would explore the three-dimensional story volume in respect to this. He pointed out how the front house with its gable end and dormers has a certain defining characteristic, and wondered if there was even a way to mitigate the third floor on this addition at the back and take another look if that's appropriate, and still allow you to do some of the programming you want to do with your addition, but find a way to scale the addition in some ways that is more respectful to the main house so that it is more in keeping with the historic fabric.

Ms. Daniere replied that she is being asked to rethink the shape and size of this building. She also informed the Commission that she hasn't been able to build anything on this building for months, costing \$15,000 a month in carrying charges at this point and noted it's not the Commission's fault. She also stated that the Commission is going way outside of their jurisdiction. Ms. Daniere stated that It's not what the Commission has been directed to do by City Council, that it's a violation of the law as written.

Ms. Crosbie responded that any financial hardship the applicant is experiencing has nothing to do with the Commission and stated that the existing construction is currently in violation with Inspectional Services.

Ms. Laird explained to the applicant that Mr. Hsiao's comments relate to the historic integrity of the property and asks if that integrity could be improved.

Ms. Daniere responded that there are certain portions of the building that are visible from the public way, which is what this Commission has purview over, and not the shape and size. She stated this is outside of the purview of this commission.

Ms. Laird stated that the Commission doesn't think that the existing plan really does meet their expectations and criteria for preserving the historical architectural nature.

Ms. Daniere asked for the specific issues for her to address.

Mr. Hsiao stated that if the Commission is charged with the strictest interpretation of the guidelines, then the issues discussed, including entryway, siding, windows, and landscaping, should be addressed.

Mr. Redmon suggested that at this point that the final review can be worked out at staff level.

Ms. Litchfield stated that it's important for all the participants and the panelists, and attendees to understand that their neighborhood district commission is not really going to be functioning any longer.

Mr. Redmon motioned to approve the proposal with the following conditions: restore the entryway to what it was, replace board and batten siding with wood clapboards, revise window size and location and consider neighbor views, and submit a landscape plan.

Ms. Hakuta seconded, and the motion passed 5 (Hsiao, Redmon, Hakuta, Pauli, Laird) to 1 opposed (Litchfield).

The meeting was adjourned at 8:32 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Allison A. Crosbie, Preservation Administrator

Members of the Public Present March 3, 2025**Panelists:**

Lucy Hadden	29 Ellsworth Avenue
William Brockman	29 Ellsworth Avenue
Ryan Severin	Empower Energy
Asha Daniere	18 Clinton Street
Sam Kachmar	SKA Inc.
Sam Waite	SKA Inc.
Axel Ramirez-Palacios	SKA Inc.
Mathhew Roman	

Attendees:

Sue Butler	14 Clinton Street
Alex Irving	23 Bigelow Street
Rohit Karnik	20 Clinton Street #5
Brendan Hickey	54 Concord Avenue
Justin Saif	Hurley Street
David Spillane	21 Bigelow Street
Linda Murphy	21 Bigelow Street
Drazen Prelec	19 Bigelow Street
James Zall	203 Pemberton Street
TF	SKA, Inc.
Neil Miller	