

Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the Cambridge Historical Commission (acting as a Historic District Study Committee) and the Reservoir Hill Neighborhood Conservation District Study Committee

March 9, 2016 – 10 Phillips Place, Washburn Commons, Room 103 - 6:00 P.M.

CHC Members present: Chandra Harrington, William King, Jo M. Solet, *Members*; Susannah Tobin, *Alternate*
CHC Members absent: William Barry, Shary Page Berg, Bruce Irving, Robert G. Crocker, *Members*; Joseph Ferrara, *Alternate*

RHNCD Study Comm. Members present: Peter Ellis, Arch Horst, and Bracebridge Young, with appointed CHC representatives Chandra Harrington and Susannah Tobin

RHNCD Study Comm. Members absent: Robert Higgins and CHC representative Joseph Ferrara

Staff present: Charles Sullivan, *Executive Director*; Sarah Burks, *Preservation Planner*

Public present: See attached list.

William King and Peter Ellis called the meeting to order at 6:05 P.M.

Charles Sullivan showed slides and described historic district and neighborhood conservation district enabling laws. M.G.L. Ch. 40C passed in 1960 enabling historic districts. The Old Cambridge Historic District was established in 1963 and was a strict version with very few exemptions to categories of review. 40C allows towns to exempt only specified categories of alterations from review as listed in the act. The review criteria to be considered by historic district commissions were very broadly defined in the act as opposed to specific design guidelines. Additional policies can be adopted locally. Cambridge had adopted policies exempting storm windows and doors, window air conditioners, and temporary signs for charitable events.

Mr. Sullivan explained that Neighborhood Conservation Districts (NCDs) had been designed in Cambridge in the early 1980s under Home Rule Authority to respond to development issues in the Half Crown and Mid Cambridge neighborhoods including demolition for parking and construction of townhouses. NCDs could be adopted by simple majority of the City Council. NCDs could be drafted to be more flexible in what categories of changes were subject to review or could be as restrictive as historic districts (except paint color could not be reviewed in NCDs). NCDs could be administered by a separate neighborhood commission or by the citywide Historical Commission. Both types of districts could be more restrictive than what zoning allows.

Mr. Horst asked if either type of district could allow demolition. Mr. Sullivan replied that they could, if approved with a certificate of appropriateness or hardship. The demolition delay ordinance does not apply in districts because demolition is reviewed under the district order and guidelines.

Mr. Sullivan noted that NCDs could have both binding and advisory (non-binding) levels of review. He said non-binding reviews can become confusing or frustrating, so that should be considered when drafting a district order. Mr. Sullivan and Ms. Burks described the Mid Cambridge, Half Crown-Marsh and Avon Hill NCDs. Mr. Sullivan noted that NCDs needed a certain population to maintain membership on a neighborhood commission. If the district is too small, it can be hard to find members with the variety of experience desired and the geographic spread to avoid conflicts of interest. Mr. Sullivan described the Harvard Square Conservation District, which was largely commercial and

institutional, unlike the other NCDs that were largely residential. The Harvard Square order had been designed to allow for streamlined review of storefront alterations and signs, which had worked well.

Mr. King pointed out that there was one city department, Historical, which provided the administrative support for all the districts.

George Mabry asked how non-historic buildings were treated within the two types of districts. Ms. Burks answered that all buildings were reviewed under the same procedures and design guidelines, regardless of when the building was constructed. [Note added: an NCD could be drafted to provide a distinction depending on age of building, but Cambridge does not have such an example at this time. -SB]

Christian Nolen said he had read over the Lower Common NCD study report online. What had been the outcome of that study? Mr. Sullivan explained that in the Lower Common neighborhood there had been few projects in the neighborhood perhaps because many lots were already more fully built out than would be allowed under current zoning. It became clear by the end of the study that there was not sufficient neighborhood support to take a district proposal to the City Council, so the study was terminated. The study committee asked that the report remain available online because it was considered to have a lot of helpful information about the neighborhood and useful design guidelines that could be used by property owners on a voluntary basis.

Mr. Sullivan showed slides of some case study examples in the Old Cambridge Historic District and the Avon Hill NCD. He said the Avon Hill commission took a less rigorous approach to alterations than the Historical Commission did in the Old Cambridge Historic District because in Avon Hill, they were looking at the impact to the character of the overall neighborhood rather than the preservation of original fabric in all instances. He noted that the review criteria were too detailed and were confusing to interpret—even for staff. He recommended a simpler organization that would be easier to comprehend and administer.

Mr. Young said it would be helpful to hear from the staff if there were projects that had been completed in Reservoir Hill that they thought would not have been approved if there had been a district.

Mr. Young moved to adjourn the meeting, which was approved unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 7:40 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah L. Burks
Preservation Planner

**Committee Members and Members of the Public
Present on March 9, 2016**

Arch Horst	55 Brewster St
Jo M. Solet	15 Berkeley St
George Mabry	77 Sparks St
Marilee Meyer	10 Dana St
Annette LaMond	7 Riedesel Ave
William King	25 Hurlbut St
Edward Kerslake	15 Woodbridge St
Brace Young	88 Appleton St
Peter Ellis	16 Highland St
Chandra Harrington	123 Hancock St
Christian Nolen	29 Highland St
Susannah Tobin	3 Arlington St

Note: Town is Cambridge, unless otherwise indicated.