

Town of Charlestown
Commercial and Village Design Standards Advisory Committee Meeting
Wednesday, February 21, 2024 at 5:00 P.M.
Charlestown Town Hall, Council Chambers
4540 South County Trail, Charlestown, RI 02813
Minutes

1. ROLL CALL

Ms. Topping, Chair called the meeting to order at 5:00 P.M.

Members present: Frances Topping, Carol Mossa, Carl Johnson, Erica Perry, Brian Nieves, and Stephen Stokes (arrived 5:35 P.M.)

Members absent: Peter Mahony, Pam Lyons, Paula Orsini, and Susan Cooper

Others: Jane Weidman, Kim Salerno, Libra Planners, Steve Irvine, Libra Planners, and Peter Friedrichs, Libra Planners (attended virtually)

2. MINUTES APPROVAL

Discussion and/or potential vote(s) concerning:

A. Minutes from January 25, 2024

The Committee reviewed the meeting minutes from January 25, 2024

**A motion was made by Ms. Mossa to approve the minutes as written.
Seconded by Mr. Nieves. Motion carried with Mr. Johnson abstaining.**

3. UPDATE AND DISCUSSION WITH LIBRA PLANNERS

Ms. Salerno referenced the memo they had prepared. She felt it would be helpful to the committee to show how they (Libra) would like to have the committee members provide them with feedback on the document that they are preparing. She explained that Libra would like to conduct the review in two phases. The first phase would consider the text in the standards and the second phase would consider dimensional regulations and associated graphics. A draft of the text has been provided to members and a draft of dimensional standards will be available to the committee next month. She continued by asking committee members to volunteer to review and make recommendations for the text areas listed in the memo. The text area has been divided into seven areas as shown in the memo. She explained that the text was a conceptual underpinning for the standards. Ms. Salerno said that the idea and format of the dimensional standards portion of the document is that should the committee as a group decide to advance the completed document as a zoning change, it will essentially be ready for adoption. The dimensional standards are done as far as setting up the framework, but there is a need for a lot of consideration about setbacks because in some cases they are suggesting rather dramatic changes.

Ms. Salerno said that this is something that is being done across municipalities, trying to get the zoning code to reflect the existing conditions, if they are desirable and want to be repeated. The idea is to make zoning livable and useable. She added that in some municipalities, like Newport, 80% of the properties are non-conforming. That means that almost 80% of the population must go through the approval process for just about any changes which understandably can be onerous.

Ms. Salerno continued the discussion by addressing the list of items that need to be reviewed by committee members. She said that the person(s) who volunteers to review a particular section should have an expertise or an interest in that area. Discussion ensued as to what areas committee members would be reviewing.

Ms. Topping stated that both she and Ms. Mossa would volunteer to look at and review the Introduction.

Ms. Weidman asked if the generation of the text came from the responses to the survey. Ms. Salerno responded that a lot of it comes out of the background report. She said that the survey reinforced what they already thought. Ms. Salerno stated that the language in the text is a combination of best practices and some of it is original thinking specific to this task.

Ms. Salerno stated that the Design Principles section and the Best Practices section will require professional review. She suggested that someone in the trade would be well suited to review and add to these two areas.

There was a brief discussion about the Open Meeting Act (OMA) and how the committee would share information. Ms. Weidman stated that the individual committee members would submit their review to the Planning Office and she and Ms. Lombardo would compile all the information and disseminate it to Libra and the committee members prior to the next meeting.

Mr. Johnson asked what the goal is in providing definitions. He said that it is good to have definitions, but how those definitions equate to practice is a different thing. He said that you don't want it to be so onerous that people feel burdened by the definitions. He said that it is important to write language that does encourage people to do the right thing. Ms. Salerno responded that the purpose of the definitions is to create a working understanding that is broadly understood in the community. Mr. Johnson said that the clients that come to town will be knowledgeable and applying for something and it will either be awful, or it will be good in which case, there will have to be give and take on both sides. He added that the committee does not want to make the requirements so expensive that the applicants choose to walk away before they have begun.

Ms. Salerno stated that one of the big items that the committee will be discussing is the difference between "shall" and "should". "Shall" is compulsory and "should" is encouraged. It

will be the responsibility of the committee to make the decision as to what is mandatory and what is suggested.

Mr. Johnson stated that Charlestown is such a diverse community. You have limited available opportunities to create something in any of the districts. Every lot is completely different so dimensional standards must be applicable to that site. There must be some degree of common-sense principle in the document. The point that he was making is that every situation is different; there are no common denominators. Definitions are great, so that everyone understands that it is the goal to use the principles as much and as practical as possible given the specific situation.

Mr. Nieves said that we set certain standards, but under those standards you would still have to be sure that they adhere to CRMC and DEM regulations. He said that our guidelines would have to shadow some of the state mandated regulations.

Ms. Topping said that she would like to see the ability to have variety within a certain structure. She wondered how much flexibility could be added in without losing the goal of the guidelines.

Ms. Salerno stated that the sections in the text that ask the committee to really look at where the judgement lies and how much control there should be are the building section and the siting section.

Mr. Irvine added that some of the standards will be different for different parts of town. For example, the Scenic Highway is not going to be the same as Shannock Village.

The committee discussed the Materials section. It was agreed that synthetic materials have come a long way and are attractive and should not be ruled out. Mr. Johnson asked if the wording could be phrased in such a way to say that the preference is that certain types of vinyl need to be looked at in a different way. He stated that there are some excellent vinyl products out now. He added that any synthetic is going to be a forever look. He said people will start to bristle if you require wood siding. Ms. Topping suggested that it be written to say something such as, “natural materials are preferred or materials that are of high quality and closely resemble natural materials”.

The committee felt that with some of the potentially larger projects, it would be necessary to regulate some of the concepts, whereas some of the smaller projects and rehabs should be allowed more flexibility. It is important that the smaller projects and businesses be allowed to keep their “quirkiness”. Ms. Topping said that it is important that we maintain the balance between regulation and flexibility. It was agreed that the Committee wanted to allow variation within the districts; modern vs. historical if they could blend cohesively.

Mr. Stokes wanted to be cautious with the “shall” vs. “should” when referring to materials. He does want to see a list of materials that are the best practices, but he added that we are

governmental, and we move incredibly slow, and it is very difficult to change things once they are in place. Building sciences and material sciences improve at a very rapid rate.

Mr. Nieves asked if it would be beneficial to request samples of the materials that the applicant is proposing to use to be certain that they will meet the guidelines. Ms. Topping stated that it is important that the applicant has flexibility to use different materials that are durable, will not degrade, and at the same time, will not be cost prohibitive. She suggested an overall statement about building materials should be included.

Ms. Mossa stated that she would work on the Context section.

Ms. Topping asked that Ms. Perry and the Historical Society discuss what defines a village or the village look. Ms. Salerno asked that they look and reference each village separately. It was decided that both Ms. Mossa and Ms. Perry would work on the Overview section.

Ms. Salerno said that the Building section needs to be broken down into two parts; Building Design and Elements and the second part would be Building Materials and Details. Ms. Topping stated that she would be willing to work with someone on the Building Materials part, but as far as the more detailed part, such as eave details, sash details, etc., someone with more expertise should look at that area. She asked Mr. Johnson to review that section and added that Mr. Mahony could share that task.

Ms. Topping felt that under definitions there should be one for vernacular architecture. Ms. Salerno stated that would be added.

Ms. Salerno asked that when Committee members review the material to be mindful that Libra is looking for specific textual recommendations.

Ms. Salerno continued with discussing the Siting section. She stated that it is not as lengthy as the building section, but it should be broken up into two parts: Design and Elements, and Materials and Details. Ms. Topping suggested adding some examples. Ms. Salerno responded that one of the things they had done a little differently was that they created a standards document, they didn't create a guidelines document. There aren't a lot of pictures. There are a few pages reserved for "dos and don'ts" where they could add pictures. She stated that this is not the same type of document as the earlier Shannock guidelines because this document is being prepared to be adopted. She stated that she felt it was important that the committee find a balance between how much to recommend, encourage, and educate.

Ms. Topping brought up the issue of color for discussion. She asked if the committee wanted to mandate acceptable colors for buildings. She added that if you look at different towns in the area, there are varying colors for buildings that are quite attractive and pleasing. It adds a bit of quirky variety. Mr. Stokes cautioned that when you start to go too far toward the "standard" realm vs. the "guideline" realm, the committee may develop a top-notch document, but he felt

certain that the Town Council would not be amenable to limiting color choices. He said that if it were under the guideline realm, then the Town Council can always then reference the ordinance that adopts the specific guideline.

Ms. Salerno stated that Libra understood there is a process in place that the committee must go through with the Planning Commission and Town Council for approval and that their job as leaders, in addition to creating the product, is really paving the way for public support. Regulating something like color, for example, will require a high degree of community consensus and if you do not have that consensus, she would not recommend trying to regulate it.

Ms. Salerno suggested as an approach, the committee should consider the different areas because what may be recommended for Shannock may be completely different for another area.

The Committee returned to Siting and Site Elements. Ms. Weidman said that she would look at the site elements.

Ms. Topping stated that she would add information in the Landscape section regarding native plants, the same as is written in the Comprehensive Plan and reference the URI Co-op Extension and Natural History Survey. It should be noted in the landscaping portion not to use invasives.

Ms. Weidman confirmed with Ms. Salerno that Libra would want responses back prior to the next meeting. Ms. Salerno said that she wanted the leaders to raise the discussion questions with the Committee members. The Planning Department would collect and compile the information and submit it to Libra and then the information would be reviewed at the next meeting. It was noted that all correspondence should be directed to the Planning Office and not between individual members.

Ms. Weidman said that she would ask Mr. McCandless to check all the commercial districts and determine how many non-conforming lots are in each.

Ms. Topping said that she would attend the next Economic Improvement meeting, the following day and request their input and comments. She said that she would also request that she be put on the following EIC meeting agenda to discuss the committee's progress with them.

4. COMMITTEE DISCUSSION AND ASSIGNMENTS

Nothing additional to discuss.

5. CHAIR COMMENTS

Ms. Topping asked if the committee agreed that the aim of the committee was to improve the look and sustainability of the commercial areas in Charlestown and maintain the traditional

character of style without being “cookie cutter”. She added that design standards should be encouraging, without being oppressive. The committee agreed.

6. MEETING SCHEDULE

The Committee set the next meeting date to be April 3, 2024 at 5:00 P.M. Ms. Lombardo will send out an email once she confirms with the Town Clerk’s Office that the Council Chambers will be available for that date. It was determined that all comments of the committee members be received in the Planning Office no later than March 8th.

7. ADJOURNMENT

A motion to adjourn at 6:40 P.M. was made by Ms. Mossa. Seconded by Mr. Nieves and carried by unanimous vote.

Respectfully Submitted,

Janet Lombardo
Planning Assistant