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Community Preservation Committee

MINUTES

14 September 2017

The meeting was held on Thursday, 14 September 2017 starting at 7:12 pm in Newton City Hall Room 204.

Community Preservation Committee (CPC below) members present: chair Jonathan Yeo and members Mark Armstrong, Dan Brody, Susan Lunin, and Jim Robertson. Vice chair Peter Sargent and members Beryl Gilfix and Richard Kronish were absent.

The Parks & Recreation Commission appointment to the CPC, required by the CPA state statute, is currently vacant, due to the mid-August 2017 resignation of that commission's former appointee, Don Fishman.

Community Preservation Program Manager Alice Ingerson served as recorder.

[Blue, underlined phrases](#) below are links to additional information online.

Ingerson began the meeting by summarizing briefly the CPC's current system of deadlines for funding requests and public comments, and its funding process. On the basis of discussing a pre-proposal at a regular public CPC meeting, the committee decides whether and when to invite a full proposal, on which it holds a public hearing before voting on whether to recommend funding. The CPC aims to provide the public with both notice of and access to funding requests that significantly exceed the requirements of Massachusetts public meetings law. However, Ingerson also noted that one item on tonight's agenda was possible revision of the CPC's current funding guidelines. The CPC would welcome suggestions for improving these guidelines as well as its current system of deadlines.

PROPOSALS & PROJECTS

Pre-proposal: [1615 Beacon Street / Staples-Craft-Wiswall Farm](#) (Waban) - Suzuki School of Newton, \$600,000 request for historic rehabilitation

Sachiko Isihara, Executive Director of the Suzuki School of Newton, summarized this project's potential CPA funding request. The school has a signed purchase & sale agreement with an imminent closing, but they do not own the property yet. They are excited about rehabilitating this building as a new permanent home for teaching the school's 300 school-age students and 40 preschool students. Isihara characterized the Suzuki School as a "community-minded organization" with "a stable financial history." Adapting this previously residential building for use as a school will be very expensive, but the school's board of directors strongly supports the project and believes the school can sustain the building once it is renovated.

James Loftus, the project architect, is both a Newton resident and a Suzuki School parent. He explained that the school has been looking for a new home for 5 years. At 1615 Beacon Street, the historic home would house the music school, with the preschool in the rear 1980s addition. The basement and first floor will require some reconfiguration for the preschool, and the change of use from residential to educational requires some fairly costly life-safety improvements, including emergency exits, sprinklers, and fully accessible bathrooms.

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Jim Robertson asked how the project's planned 3 phases would affect accessibility and community access to the property. Loftus said all visible exterior changes would be to the 1980s rear portion of the building. Phase 1 would add an accessible entrance to the first floor and expanded parking. Phase 2 would add a new entrance vestibule and elevator making all floors accessible except the historic home's attic, which would be used for offices. Because the floors of the historic home and the 1980s addition do not align, the elevator needs multiple stops. Phase 3 is a rear addition with a large music/preschool room. Loftus further explained that the availability of funding would determine the schedule for all three phases. Isihara said the school hopes to complete all three phases by about 2020-21. For the time being, the Suzuki School must request a waiver from the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB) to operate the building as a school without making all floors fully accessible.

Dan Brody, Susan Lunin, and Jonathan Yeo asked for clarification of what would happen if sufficient funding were not available for a particular phase, and of public access to the new space proposed for construction in phase 3. How big would that new space be, and how would Newton residents not otherwise involved with the Suzuki School access it? Why had the Suzuki School deferred the elevator to phase 2?

Isihara explained that all services offered by the school to its students and parents could be provided on the ground floors, with more space for the same services on the second floor. This is why they believed MAAB would grant an accessibility waiver for phase 1, without the elevator. The phase 2 and 3 changes to the building's exterior would require not only raising additional funds but also a longer zoning and permitting process, including reviews by the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the Newton Historical Commission. Since the school needed to start the project quickly for financial reasons, to date it had requested zoning review and permits solely for phase 1. Nevertheless, the school would very much like to have the additional preschool space that phase 3 would create.

Isihara said the Suzuki School wanted its own building so it could control its own schedule, but operating for many years in rented spaces had demonstrated that the school could easily share space. On most nights music lessons end by 7 or 7:30 pm. The school's students all study string instruments and usually stand for their lessons, so Suzuki teaching spaces can also be flexible. The new large room will have about 800 square feet that could be used for small performances and as an alternative to the Waban Library Center for community meetings. Loftus added that the room would also be used for Suzuki School recitals, which are open to the public at no charge.

Yeo and Robertson expressed concern about the Suzuki School's agreement to pay approximately \$3.7 million for this building, in light of its \$1.8 million assessed value and its most recent previous sale for about \$2.1 million in 2015. Lunin felt that the new purchase price was very high, especially for a building that the school can use in the long term only by adding an elevator. Ingerson explained that when CPA funds are used for real property acquisition, the purchase price must be supported by an appraisal and the property must either be owned by the municipality, or if CPA funds are used to write down a mortgage, must be used for a CPA-eligible purpose such as affordable housing. Yeo acknowledged that the Suzuki School's potential CPA request was not directly for acquisition, but he felt the CPC still needed to consider the purchase price because it seemed to exceed the property's potential value by more than the amount of proposed CPA funding.

Isihara said that the Suzuki School had faced very significant competition for all the properties that they had considered acquiring in Newton. Loftus saw the high price of this particular property as the price of keeping the Suzuki School in Newton.

Yeo wondered if the Suzuki School might submit future CPA requests in addition to the initial \$600,000. Ingerson noted that the CPC's funding guidelines said it would consider construction funding requests only if they were supported by professional cost estimates based on completed designs. She thought the pre-proposal and its attachments included several, slightly different project budgets partly because the project was still at such an early stage that its final costs could not yet be predicted with great confidence.

Isihara acknowledged that the project would be very costly. Like other cultural organizations, the Suzuki School does not have enough resources of its own to undertake such a project. The school believes that public support in the form of CPA funding would help it leverage more private funding. In response to Yeo, Isihara said the school and project have no financial relationship with the Windsor Club, which abuts 1615 Beacon.

Ingerson asked why historic tax credits were listed in the submitted budgets as such a small proportion of the project's total funding: about \$146,000-\$246,000 out of a total \$6.8 million in estimated costs. Isihara confirmed that the consultants the school had contacted to date had advised that only a small part of the project's costs would be eligible for these credits. Ingerson wondered whether the CPC would be comfortable treating as CPA-eligible historic preservation work that was not tax-credit-eligible historic preservation.

In response to Robertson, Ingerson confirmed that because the historic building at 1615 Beacon Street is a local historic landmark, it cannot be demolished, and any exterior alterations must be approved by the Newton Historical Commission, regardless of its ownership or use. Following up on CPC members' questions about public benefits, she wondered whether CPA funds might be used to purchase a preservation restriction on this building's historically significant interior features, as had been done with the CPA funding for the Allen House. At 1615 Beacon Street, how would the public get to see these features? Isihara suggested the public would be welcome to visit the building at any time, but Robertson thought a building in which children were being educated could not simply be open to the public; visitors must be carefully managed.

Ingerson explained that neither she nor Isihara had been certain whether to check "outdoor recreation" as a CPA category for this pre-proposal. Isihara said that although Suzuki preschool students and their teachers would be the primary users of the planned organic garden, the public would be able to view the garden from the public way, and the garden would be a visible reminder of the site's history as a farm. She said the Mayor's Office also supports the idea of concerts on the lawn at this site. In response to Ingerson, Isihara thought the school would be excited to consider granting a public access easement or landscape preservation restriction to the City for the grounds, as had been done with CPA funding for the grounds of the Durant-Kenrick Homestead. However, Isihara also agreed with Ingerson that having a public park around the Suzuki School's private building, open during the "dawn to dusk" hours typical for Newton's parks, might raise concerns for the school's insurers, parents, or board. Armstrong also noted that once all phases of the project were completed, the site's open space would be limited, since most of it would be occupied by buildings, parking and driveways.

Finally, though she knew this could not be answered at tonight's meeting, Ingerson asked whether the City might obtain a right of first refusal on the building at a reasonable future price, in return for CPA funding. This might address any concerns about investing CPA funds in a site that in the future might be sold at a significant profit for a new use that did not provide public benefits.

Isihara felt that the public access and event space proposed for the Suzuki School's project were comparable to those at Allen House, which had received Newton CPA funds. Robertson felt that the Allen House project had a more accessible plan. Ingerson noted that the Allen House project also differed from the Suzuki School project in other ways. The Allen House had an original asking price of over \$2 million, but the Newton Cultural Alliance (NCA) had ultimately purchased the building for about \$250,000. The Allen House was also in poor condition when acquired by NCA, so CPA funding was helping to prevent the loss of that historic building. In contrast, 1615 Beacon Street was in very good condition. However, Ingerson also acknowledged that waiting until a historic building was at risk of loss before acting to preserve it was not necessarily ideal. Finally, Ingerson and Yeo noted that a large number of Newton's nonprofit cultural organizations, including the Suzuki School, were members of NCA. Newton's CPA program could not realistically consider additional, individual grant requests from each of those private nonprofits, at least for the foreseeable future.

In summary, Isihara felt that the proposed project addressed the emphasis in Newton's *Comprehensive Plan* on valuing and preserving Newton's historic properties. She also felt that this particular historic property is effectively invisible to the public, though it is in a village center. The Suzuki School's plans would engage the public more with the property and would beautify the village center. For example, the historic house's lovely porch could be used for some of the "porch parties" currently being planned by the NCA.

Robertson said that since the CPC makes recommendations for the use of public funds, it must focus on whether the public benefit of each project justifies its proposed public cost. The majority of CPA funding requests are for buildings or sites in public ownership. The Suzuki School's student body of 340 seemed a less compelling argument for public funding than the larger public served by most projects funded in the past, including private projects such as the YMCA. He felt that the Suzuki School had a commendable vision for 1615 Beacon Street, but the project was just not appropriate for CPA funding.

Lunin said other projects that had received Newton CPA funds in the past or on the list of potential future projects in the *Community Preservation Plan* involved public buildings and affordable housing with full-time uses that were in themselves public benefits. She did not see this project as providing comparable benefits.

Armstrong agreed. He noted that some descriptions of public access to or benefits from the project were worded as possibilities rather than as guarantees. Given the uncertainty of the project's schedule, he saw both the extent and the timing of its public benefits as nebulous.

Yeo agreed that the top priorities for Newton's historic resources CPA funds should be buildings with solid public access, probably in public ownership. Otherwise, he supported targeting CPA funds for affordable housing and for open space.

Yeo and Robertson did not support inviting a full proposal for this project. They thought the CPC might be willing to discuss a revised pre-proposal in the future, if or when the Suzuki School can demonstrate more clearly the public need for and access to the benefits provided by later phases of the project.

VOTE: Robertson's motion not to invite a full proposal was seconded by Brody. The motion was adopted by a vote of 5-0.

Project request: [Historic Burying Grounds](#) (Historic Newton) - to apply a small portion of remaining already appropriated but unspent CPA funds to an expanded scope of work

Historic Newton Executive Director Lisa Dady presented this request. She explained that these sites are actively used by the public. The entire 8th grade of the Day Middle School recently did a project about the burying grounds, a film was recently made there, and many of Newton's founding ancestors are buried there. The Parks & Recreation Dept. works closely with Historic Newton to maintain these sites appropriately.

The original scope of work for the most recent CPA-funded burying grounds project at the East Parish Burying Ground (Centre and Cotton Streets, Newton Centre) had been completed. At that point, Historic Newton did a new walk-around of all three sites to assess their most immediate current needs. They would like to use \$3,000 of the remaining approximately \$82,000 in previously appropriated CPA funds to hire a conservator to repair six of the most deteriorated and vulnerable gravestones at the East Parish Burying Ground, and \$1,000 to train volunteers in gravestone cleaning. In response to Robertson, Dady explained that CPA funds appropriated for projects at these sites remained unspent because the work done to date had cost less than expected.

Sheila Donahue, a member of Historic Newton's Board of Directors and Burying Grounds Committee, spoke in support of the request.

Ingerson noted that the Newton Law Dept. had agreed with her view that the volunteer training program proposed by Historic Newton was CPA-ineligible, as a combination of education and maintenance.

Robertson believed that the CPA funds appropriated for these sites had been well used in the past, so he favored allowing the use of \$3,000 for CPA-eligible restoration. Lunin agreed that the additional scope of work had been clearly described. She did not know what this kind of work should cost, but thought the request seemed reasonable. She expressed deep respect for the sites and noted that she drove by the West Burial Ground every day.

In response to a question from Ingerson, Dady reconfirmed Historic Newton's intention to create a new strategic plan for the burying grounds, rather than continue incremental updates to the now 20-year-old Master Plan. Historic Newton would like to retain most of the unspent CPA funds previously appropriated for the burying grounds to help reduce future CPA requests that may result from the new strategic plan.

VOTE Robertson moved approving Historic Newton's request to use \$3,000 of already appropriated CPA funds for additional gravestone conservation at the East Parish Burying Ground. Armstrong seconded the motion, which was approved by a vote of 5-0.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Ingerson briefly reviewed the available funds report and funding forecast provided, which are regularly updated on the program website's [Reports & Presentations](#) page, and the list of pending and potential future funding requests that constitutes the last 2 pages of the 4-page [Community Preservation Plan](#). After the upcoming election in November 2017, she thought the committee might get a clearer sense of priorities for the many future requests on its list that were part of the City of Newton's [Capital Improvement Plan](#).

Ingerson also summarized the possible revisions to the [Community Preservation Plan's](#) funding guidelines included in the packet for this meeting. In creating this discussion draft, she had focused on clarifying the CPC's criteria for deciding which projects were appropriate for CPA funding and its expectations for the share of project costs that should be covered by non-CPA funding sources. By sense of the meeting, the CPC deferred further discussion of these possible revisions to its October meeting.

Ingerson reported that a draft of the appraisal commissioned by the City of Newton for Webster Woods (rear of 300 Hammond Pond Parkway) had been completed. At the CPC's request, she agreed to ask about a process for sharing the future, final version with the committee.

The packet for this meeting had included a full copy of the CPC's current proposal forms and instructions. Ingerson encouraged CPC members to send her their suggestions for revision of these documents, especially for any current requirements or attachments they felt could simply be eliminated.

Ingerson explained that each year the CPC calendar includes 2 possible meetings in November for public hearings on new, regular-round proposals. Since only two proposals had been invited for the fall 2017 round, this year's hearings could all be held at a single meeting. She therefore recommended canceling the tentative 2 November 2017 meeting date and meeting only once in November, on 16 November 2017. The CPC accepted this recommendation by sense of the meeting.

Based on a motion by Armstrong, seconded by Lunin, the committee approved the minutes for the 9 August 2017 meeting as submitted, by a vote of 5-0.

The Committee then adjourned by consensus at 8:13 pm.