

West Newton Armory JAPG
Notes from February 25, 2020 Meeting
Newton City Hall
7:00 – 9:00 p.m.

JAPG Members in Attendance: Barry Abramson, Kelley Brown, Mitch Fischman, Jonathan Katz, David Koven, Anita Lichtblau, Ted Hess-Mahan, Sue Parsons

Others in Attendance: Amanda Berman, Director of Housing and Community Development, Eamon Bencivengo, Housing Development Planner, Ward 3 City Councilor Julia Malakie; members of the public

Approval of February 4, 2020 Meeting Notes

Approved with Kelley Brown abstaining, with the following changes:

- On the first line of the third full paragraph on page 2, it should say question was raised as to whether DCAMM would consider for municipal use, rather than whether DCAMM would sell it for \$ 1
- Last full paragraph on page 2. Add a sentence at the end: “However, in response to a question from the committee, Barney said that funds could be made available if the City Council appropriated them for such purpose.”

Appointment of Rotating Secretary

Anita Lichtblau volunteered to serve as Secretary for the meeting.

Discussion with Katy Hax Holmes, City of Newton Chief Preservation Planner

Katy discussed the process when she staffed the JAPG for the Waban Reservoir in Chestnut Hill six years ago. She passed around a copy of the letter from the Massachusetts Historical Commission (“MHC”) that resulted from that process, which the Planning Department will send to this JAPG’s members. MHC has the obligation to determine whether any proposal by the Commonwealth to transfer property listed in the State Register of Historic Places to another owner would have any adverse effect on the property. There is a potential for listing the Armory on the Historic Register; MHC last surveyed the property in 1987 and said that it was a “significant building.”

The process is as follows. The City of Newton notifies DCAMM what use, if any, it wants to make of the Armory. Special legislation, which will specify whether the Armory is being used for affordable housing or for municipal use, must then be passed by the state legislature to approve the sale to the City. The City of Newton then submits the Project Notification Form (“PNF”) to MHC. MHC then comments on its review and makes a determination as to whether the proposed use will have an adverse effect on the property.

Amanda explained that in the redevelopment of the Lynn armory, there is a Memorandum of Agreement (“MOA”) between DCAMM, the Lynn Neighborhood Development (which is part of the City of Lynn), and MHC. Katy said that MHC has said the other armories were eligible for listing on the National Historic Register.

Katy said that anyone can nominate a property for listing on the historic register. Any partial or complete demolition triggers review by the Newton Historical Commission. If a property is listed on the historic register, it will be eligible, after a federal review, for historic tax credits, if it is “commercial,” which includes housing.

Amanda discussed the process in Lynn. Special legislation for use of the armory for affordable housing was passed. A PNF was filed with the MHC. The MHC wrote a letter to DCAMM saying that there would be an adverse effect on the historic nature of the site (which is in the center of downtown Lynn) of using the armory for that purpose, but that if DCAMM and Lynn Neighborhood Development entered into a MOA concerning the development, MHC would be ok with that. The MHC then recommends that certain actions be taken to mitigate the adverse effects and requires that plans constantly be shared with MHC for review.

Therefore, Newton has to know what use it intends to make of the armory, whether affordable housing or municipal use, before it submits the PNF to MHC. The MOA with MHC would be signed before the City of Newton leased it to a housing developer.

A committee member asked Katy how she would handicap the decision of the Newton Historical Commission on designating the armory for listing on the National Historical Register. Katy responded that the ordinances regulating that process are now under review and doesn’t know how it will look after that review process. Katy also said that if MHC says that the armory is eligible for National Historic Register, then it goes to the Newton Historical Commission. The MHC comments on the proposed transfer of state property whoever the buyer is - the City or a private party.

Katy said that the MHC report on the Lynn armory is likely to be similar for the Newton armory, although the fact that the Lynn armory was in a historic district, and the Newton armory is not, may make a difference.

A committee member commented that MHC likes to come in early on a project, rather than “blessing” it at the final stage.

Review and discuss Armory Case Study Worksheets

Eamon shared a list of Massachusetts armories that the state had sold and case studies he had prepare for Plymouth and Somerville. JAPG members and Planning Department staff suggested adding columns on the list that would describe the years the armory was built and the renovation was completed, the nature of the reconfiguration and development, dealings with DCAMM and MHC, the disposition process, the arm of the municipality that purchased the property, and the purchase price.

A committee member said that the City of Newton could create its own entity, like Lynn did. Amanda commented that the City tried that with the Crescent Street proposed development, but there was intense opposition.

A committee member said that DCAMM's most recent estimate of capital expense for the armory, if it stayed in state hands, was \$1.2 million. The Lynn project is projected to cost between \$24 and \$27 million, for 45 microunits of housing for veterans. He also said that Robert Korff, the developer of the proposed 40B affordable housing project next door to the Armory and asked to speak to the JAPG. Several other JAPG members agreed to that request.

Assignment of Case Studies

Amanda said that the Planning Department is asking each JAPG member to prepare a case study for one of the armories on the list.

Other Business

Eamon said that the RFP for the affordable housing feasibility study will be issued on Thursday, with a walk through of the site on March 10, and a bid opening on March 26. Part I of the project (the housing feasibility analysis) should be completed by June. The JAPG should have their first conversation with the consultant in early May.

A committee member asked for more focus in upcoming JAPG meetings on potential non-housing uses of the armory. What about a performing arts center? Is that a municipal use?

Amanda confirmed that the JAPG report needs an assessment of non-housing uses.

A committee member said that he would download the JAPG reports for Crescent Street, the Newton Centre Library, and Austin Street on Dropbox.

A committee member asked when we should go back to DCAMM for an extension on the decision as to whether the City wants to purchase the armory and for what use. Amanda said they are working with the Legal Department on that. Eamon said that they anticipate it will take three months from the completion of the consultant's housing feasibility study in June to determine whether to ask the consultant to put together an RFP for a developer, so that will be August.