

LAYTONSVILLE HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
Meeting Minutes
Monday, October 16, 2017

Present:

Lisa Simonetti, Chair
Andy Drouliskos
Charles Hendricks
Jill Ruspi
Susan Phillips, alternate

Absent:

Michele Shortley

Attendees:

Jim Ruspi, Mayor
Matt Benning, consultant
Jennifer Sizemore, secretary

Opening: Chair Simonetti called the meeting to order at 7:31 p.m. She read the purpose statement of the commission and noted that a quorum was present.

Minutes: No changes were proposed to the meeting minutes for August and September. Member Ruspi moved to accept the minutes as presented. Alternate Phillips seconded the motion, and it was approved without dissent.

Old Business:

21532 Laytonsville Road (Figueroa residence): Chair Simonetti noted that nothing further had been sent to the commission since the last meeting. The front porch had been repaired, and the owner had received permission to put new windows on the house and a fence around part of the property. The owner needs to discuss the property line with the neighbors to the north.

21741 Rolling Ridge Lane (Lot 10, Rolling Ridge subdivision): The Laytonsville Town Council has approved a site plan submitted for this property by Brian Dribben.

21728 Rolling Ridge Lane (historic Rolling Ridge house, Lot 14, Rolling Ridge subdivision): Member Ruspi mentioned that people are currently working on the property, and someone should contact the owner, Brian Davila, to get a status report and timetable. It would be helpful to know what Mr. Davila plans to do and why the work is being conducted now. Member Drouliskos volunteered to reach out. Chair Simonetti commented that half of the house has been painted white. Member Hendricks looked at the zoning map and commented that lot 14 appears to be in the agricultural zone and not part of the historic district. He suggested the town council may need to take action, and Mayor Ruspi said he would follow up. Alternate Phillips asked whether the town council has the authority to redraw the zones, and Mayor Ruspi said it does

though there is a specific process. The town would need to have a hearing. The owner could attend the meeting, but rezoning could occur without the owner's consent and the town council's decision would be final. Member Hendricks suggested looking into when the property was annexed. Chair Simonetti volunteered to follow up with Sheree Wenger.

New Business:

Recognitions: Mayor Ruspi wanted to reaffirm that Matt Benning would be serving as a consultant, and Mr. Benning hoped to attend as many meetings as possible. His expertise is in structural and architectural issues, and Mayor Ruspi suggested Chair Simonetti let Mr. Benning know when such issues were expected to come before the commission. Charlene Dillingham can provide Mr. Benning's email address. Mayor Ruspi also thanked Jennifer Sizemore for volunteering to serve as secretary for the commission.

Town Hall Lights: Mayor Ruspi mentioned that he was working with Boyland Electric, Inc. to get the approved lights installed and hoped to have it finalized in the coming week. There will be five lights in the parking lot and one near the fire pit.

Oaks Landfill Solar System Community Meeting: Mayor Ruspi informed the commission that the Oaks Landfill would be having a community meeting at Laytonsville Elementary School on Monday, October 23, 2017 at 6:30 p.m. to discuss the photovoltaic project planned for 2018 at the old landfill site. Mayor Ruspi will check with Ms. Dillingham to decide whether to post the meeting on the town website. Member Hendricks asked whether the site is owned by the county, and Mayor Ruspi confirmed that it is. Chair Simonetti said she would send information about the meeting to the commission.

Financial Assistance for Homeowners: Mayor Ruspi mentioned his desire to have the commission look into helping owners of historic properties who may be having difficulty maintaining their property (external dwelling only). He said he is currently working with a homeowner to make improvements. He doesn't want townspeople to view the commission as punitive. He suggested Member Hendricks may be helpful in helping people navigate the grant process, but Member Hendricks said he doesn't have specific experience with grant applications. Mr. Benning said the Maryland Historical Trust offers tax credits, but the process is very formal, and there are specific criteria that must be met. In addition, tax credits don't help owners with costs up front. He said he believed the grant program for private citizens had not been renewed and current grant programs were better suited to non-profit organizations rather than individuals. Member Drouliskos thought the extent of work that needs to be done is beyond available resources. He also mentioned that, in specific cases, the owner not living on the property is an added challenge. Member Hendricks commented that the historic texture of the community is important regardless of the owner. Mayor Ruspi said the grants for individuals had been reinstated, and he would have Ms. Dillingham forward the email announcement to the commission. Member Ruspi mentioned that grant funding is for the next fiscal year, so applications would need to be turned in soon to receive money in 2019. Mr. Benning stated that the individual grants are very competitive, and grants for non-profit groups are much easier. He suggested the commission may be able to file for non-profit status and apply for the grants.

Mayor Ruspi asked Mr. Benning to give a presentation about the grant program at the next commission meeting.

Alternate Phillips mentioned an application submitted a few years before to use HardiePlank siding and suggested the commission give more consideration to similar lower-cost alternatives if the appearance is similar to the original. She commented that much of the discussion is related to nearby homes that are not visible on Route 108 or Brink Rd. Being more flexible can bring the whole town up. Member Drouliskos said HardiePlank is more historic-looking than vinyl siding and is a huge cost savings compared with original material. Mr. Benning concurred, saying HardiePlank represents a type of weather board, which the house in question currently has. This is a perfect example of where there has to be a bit of nuance, and the commission can get good results if it helps the process, though it is a slippery slope. Member Drouliskos suggested that being too strict may prevent the owner from taking any action, leading to the point where the house decomposes, mentioning a structure that shows signs of listing. Member Ruspi asked how siding fits in with structural damage, and Member Drouliskos suggested that using less expensive siding would free up money to address structural damage. Mr. Benning said there is a 1 to 3 to 1 to 2 difference between HardiePlank and wood weather board or German siding (i.e. 1/2 to 1/3 of the cost). The weather board is made of a fibered concrete. Alternate Phillips said the weather board has an amazingly realistic appearance, is available in different widths to better mimic the original materials, can be painted, and is insect resistant. It doesn't look like vinyl or plastic and is a good product for historic properties.

Member Ruspi asked about wooden windows in the front of a dwelling. Mr. Benning said windows should be very important from the perspective of the commission. The size and shape are related to natural lighting and should be preserved. Storm windows can be used for weather resistance without losing the original character. Member Ruspi said Armstrong makes the appropriate wooden windows that can be used on the front of a dwelling, but other non-visible windows can be handled differently.

Mayor Ruspi mentioned the Lion's Club's renovation of the shed behind the town hall, which is about 20 ft. x 30 ft. They removed all damaged wood and rebuilt in such a manner as to preserve historic value. The only original parts are the rafters and the roof. The shed is valued at \$30,000 and is being rented back to the Lion's Club for \$1 per year for 30 years. It is being used to store medical equipment. The wood is a specific type of high-quality, one-inch oak. Mr. Benning thought the club members had friends who provided the wood at a discounted price. Mayor Ruspi mentioned that Member Drouliskos had painted the shed, and it looked brand new. His point in mentioning this project is that he can understand how some people cannot afford this quality of materials.

Member Ruspi mentioned that another problem is the maintenance of grounds. The presence of dead trees or overgrown grass detracts from the curb appeal. Member Hendricks said he thinks only changes to landscaping, such as removing trees or installing major changes, are within the purview of this commission. Maintenance is a separate issue.

Mayor Ruspi mentioned several specific properties and suggested the commission may be able to provide assistance; otherwise legal action may be needed. He mentioned a property adjacent to

Laytonsville Elementary School that may pose a danger to students, but he has been unsuccessful in getting the owner to respond to his phone calls. Alternate Phillips asked whether the county has been contacted, and Mayor Ruspi said he was hoping to work things out with the owner before taking that step. Member Hendricks said one option is to declare demolition by neglect. The town can't have a situation where a property or building endangers neighbors, especially children. He said this step has never been taken since he's been on the commission. The town would probably need to go to court and get a judge to say the property's maintenance is not acceptable. After further discussion, Mayor Ruspi said he would try to contact the owner one more time, then would contact the principal at Laytonsville Elementary School and encourage her to file a complaint with the county.

Member Hendricks said the town council has access to funding, not the commission. A more appropriate role for the commission may be to collect and disseminate information about available programs, including tax credits. Member Drouliskos thought the town providing funding could lead to many more requests than could be accommodated. Member Ruspi was also concerned about what could happen if a homeowner was given funding but didn't use it for repairs. Mr. Benning commented that the commission has a "stick" that can be used to a certain degree, which is good, but only having that one tool affects the perception of the commission within the town. The commission should look to be more nuanced, thinking about what kind of help can be offered. There may be options other than funding. Member Hendricks suggested the commission may be able to organize a group of people to help owners paint. Member Drouliskos said current issues are beyond just paint, including things such as stones where a sidewalk should be, bad sidewalks, and structures that are falling over. He suggested there should be time limits to complete work and wondered if there was some way to determine whether a homeowner had the funds to complete needed work. Alternate Phillips commented that the expectation of historic restoration should not be equivalent of areas such as Georgetown, and Member Ruspi said it may be more similar to Frederick.

Alternate Phillips suggested a town meeting to collect feedback about what the town and commission may be able to provide. Member Drouliskos thought it might be possible to get contractors who are willing to work at discounted rate and promote their services on the town website. He said he would be willing, especially during slower times of year. He also suggested looking at resources on the Rockville city government website and adding them to the Laytonsville town website. Alternate Phillips thought providing people with a toolkit could be helpful in changing perceptions that the commission is only punitive. Member Drouliskos thought he could find other contractors willing to work at a reduced price. He suggested giving them the opportunity to advertise in the program for the parade and spring festival; perhaps they could offer a coupon. He thought it could be helpful to get a group of five to 10 experts together to talk to homeowners of historic properties to discuss needs and challenges. Contractors will often offer discounts if they can work on multiple, close-by properties at the same time. Mr. Benning said it should be open to everyone, so as to not single any one person out.

Mayor Ruspi mentioned that the town can pay for education related to grants and other relevant issues. Member Hendricks attended a training session recently. Mr. Benning suggested that something related to using tax credits could be helpful. Member Ruspi said she will look into taking a class related to writing grant applications. Member Hendricks said the seminar he

attended mentioned that some towns have provisions where rules are different for those who apply for low-income status. He will look at his notes and share more information with the commission.

The commission spent several minutes further discussing how best to handle individual problem properties, specifically whether properties should be discussed without the owner present, whether there should or could be separate open and closed meetings, outreach to homeowners of problem properties, and the commission's duty to the town.

Commission meetings: Chair Simonetti suggested changing the meeting start time from 7:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. Though Member Hendricks preferred the later time, the commission agreed to the earlier start time.

Adjourn: Chair Simonetti adjourned the meeting at 9:02 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Jennifer Sizemore