

TOWN OF AMHERST
Historic District Commission Meeting

March 11, 2024

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In attendance: Doug Chabinsky – Acting Chair, Tom Grella – Board of Selectmen Ex-Officio, Tom Quinn – Planning Board Ex-Officio, Bill Glenn, Martha Chabinsky (remote), and Nicole Crawford
Staff present: Nic Strong, Community Development Director

Doug Chabinsky, Acting Chair, called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Work Session Topics:

1. Meet with consultant regarding design guidelines

Josh Lapp, Designing Local, Ltd., explained that his firm was started with the concept of approaching urban planning and historic preservation differently. The firm has worked all over the country but is located in Ohio. The firm's first project was in Georgia and was focused on arts and culture. The firm's work that is focused on historic preservation has been to date mainly in Ohio and Kentucky, but the arts and culture work is nationwide. Most of the firm's work is out of state and the group is used to traveling. The firm likes to employ a lot of stakeholder engagement, such as through focus groups or online engagement

Josh Lapp explained that the firm is focused on visual communications, including graphics and photos. He reviewed the scope of services. The firm would have a kickoff meeting that focuses on how to approach this project's timeline. The firm will then carry out a lot of background data collection and research. This will lead into stakeholder meetings, such as one-on-one meetings with everyone on the Commission. The firm would carry on analyses of buildings in the community. The firm completed a design guidelines project in Frankfort, Kentucky which was a bit controversial,

Doug Chabinsky asked what made the project controversial. Josh Lapp explained that Frankfort has an historic district, but he would consider it more of a conservation district. Frankfort approved the use of vinyl siding, which is not something most people in preservation approve of. There were a few other items suggested that are not universally supported, such as the use of vinyl windows on non-primary façades, that were not included. Curb cuts also had to be written into the guidelines.

Josh Lapp explained that the first two components of the project, the initial kickoff, and the research, would take a couple of months. The project will be based on what is desired by the client and the community. Task three is to draft a visual document, including the draft guidelines and some diagrams. The intention is to produce something that is easy to understand for individuals while using plain language, and visualizations to show example buildings within the District. The document would have a couple of drafts, with opportunities for input from stakeholders. As this work is being completed through a CLG Grant, the document may have to be reviewed by the State Historic Preservation Office. The firm's final delivery is meant to be both virtual and in print.

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44 Bill Glenn asked what information the firm will expect to readily have access to in order to
45 support the work from a remote location. He also asked what information might be difficult for
46 the firm to obtain from a remote position. Josh Lapp stated that the most difficult thing to obtain
47 is a clear picture of exactly what the Commission wants. In producing the final document, the
48 firm will want a bunch of pictures that illustrate what is being discussed within the District. The
49 firm will work to coordinate this with Commissioners and Staff to obtain images that are good
50 examples of things within the District. This is part of the reason that stakeholder conversations
51 are emphasized. Most of the data such as GIS maps, will go towards feeding into the document,
52 and this should not be a problem to obtain remotely. The biggest downside of working remotely
53 is that the firm cannot be on the ground in Town, walking the streets and getting a picture of it.
54 Josh Lapp stated, however, that he anticipates at least two visits to the Town.

55
56 Nicole Crawford noted that this grant has to be used by September and asked about the six-
57 month work schedule. Josh Lapp stated that this will require a lot more intensive work over a
58 shorter period of time, which the firm is okay with. He stated that he does not anticipate any
59 issues accomplishing that timeline.

60
61 Tom Quinn asked if the firm has worked in small towns before. Josh Lapp stated that the firm
62 has worked in a variety of communities. The firm completed a downtown revitalization plan for
63 Caldwell, OH, with a population of 1,000. The firm has done a lot of work in mid-size and small
64 cities, such as a public art master plan for Montpelier, VT. He stated that engagement tends to be
65 much better the smaller the community. Small towns tend to be more engaged with better
66 networks of people communicating with one another. The firm just completed a project in
67 Corning, NY, with a population of approximately 10,000.

68
69 In response to a question from Tom Quinn, Josh Lapp explained that Corning has a successful
70 Main Street, and the intention of the project was to express the creative spirit of the community
71 in the built environment through a public art plan.

72
73 Tom Quinn stated that it sounds like a lot of what the firm does overlaps with a town or city's
74 master plan. He asked if this is a duplication of efforts in any way. Josh Lapp explained that
75 Corning, for example, is working on its comprehensive plan right now. The firm has urban
76 planners and not architects. It approaches projects wanting to include all of the work already
77 completed to use it as a basis for the work. The intention is to utilize documents such as master
78 plans and design guidelines and align them within the work that the firm does.

79
80 Tom Quinn asked if Amherst's newly approved Master Plan Factor factored into the firm's
81 proposal at all. Josh Lapp stated that he has not yet reviewed Amherst's Master Plan, so it did not
82 factor into the proposal, but it would absolutely factor into the end result. It would not
83 necessarily change the firm's approach, but the information gathered would help inform it.
84 Regarding design guidelines, the existing building stock and how it's treated will factor in, but
85 also where growth is anticipated in Town and how it can be planned for. Many design guidelines
86 were created almost 50 years ago and were not created with the sense that development might

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87 come into a town. Having a strong understanding of where the community is intended to grow or
88 the changes that are supposed to happen would be very important.

89
90 Tom Grella asked about travel to the area, as there may be snowstorms coming up. Josh Lapp
91 stated that the firm is willing to drive through storms. He stated that he would expect his firm to
92 hit the ground running as there is a deadline to meet. He noted that the firm will have another
93 team member starting in May to work on historic preservation.

94
95 Doug Chabinsky stated that Amherst is a small New England village with an historic district that
96 has many significant and unique historic homes in it. There are also some newer houses that are
97 intermingled and there are still some available building lots. The Commission recently finished
98 updating its regulations. Many applicants that come before the Commission do not understand
99 the regulations well enough. The Commission decided to come up with design guidelines to help
100 applicants understand what information is needed. The idea is to allow new additions to blend in
101 and not detract from the original structure. Many applicants do not understand massing and how
102 to allow an addition to maintain the historic structure. The design guidelines should contain
103 information that the Commission needs in order to be able to make a decision. The document
104 should help guide applicants through the regulations and give some examples. Doug Chabinsky
105 stated that the guidelines should contain examples of the key elements of the district. He noted
106 that Amherst does not allow vinyl as a material in the district. He noted that the Commission
107 wanted to make it easy for people to configure their property in an appropriate manner to provide
108 them use and enjoyment while not detracting from the quaint New England nature of the
109 village. Doug Chabinsky stated that each time a building is added onto it creates its own unique
110 definition of history.

111
112 Josh Lapp stated that this is what excited him about the project, noting that he served on an
113 Historic District Commission and lived in an historic district. He agreed that it is important for
114 design guidelines to be clear and act as a resource for people, while improving the application
115 process. He noted that through creating the design guidelines they may create a new application
116 form with links to connect to things in the guidelines so applicants coming in will already know
117 what they need to bring in. He stated that the guidelines cannot solve every issue but can make
118 the process easier.

119
120 Doug Chabinsky stated that the historic district cannot conserve properties as they used to
121 be. He stated that people had to be allowed to live a comfortable life. Tying the guidelines into
122 the application form and simplifying the procedures and having a knowledgeable review of what
123 the Commission had already done with the regulations will assist in not having applicants
124 dreading coming to the HDC.

125
126 Tom Quinn asked what the objectives were for the Caldwell, OH project. Josh Lapp explained
127 that the town had guidelines in place already. The majority of the project was to help visualize
128 the guidelines and make them clearer. The town wanted to support growth in the community, in a
129 way that preserved the feel of the community.

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Doug Chabinsky asked if Josh Lapp had any questions for the Commission. Josh Lapp stated he did not. He stated that the style of the guidelines would be visual and reinforce the sense of the community. They would tell a story and feel like they belong to the Town. He stated it was important to discuss with the Commission what the guidelines would look like and how they would be different from other work.

Tom Quinn explained that he believes the Commission is only looking for design guidelines and asked if the scope of the project should be narrowed down a bit. Doug Chabinsky added that this should specifically address the Historic District, as houses and properties outside of this are covered elsewhere by town building and planning documents. Josh Lapp agreed that the firm did not envision anything beyond creating design guidelines for the Historic District, though the document itself may contain some history of the community.

In response to a question from Doug Chabinsky, Nic Strong explained that the Commission can deliberate and decide whether or not to move forward with the proposal at this time.

The Commission thanked Josh Lapp for his time. Josh Lapp stated he would let the Commission deliberate on their own and if there were any questions to let him know. Josh Lapp left the meeting.

Nicole Crawford stated that she liked the scope of work as presented and believes that the firm understands what the Commission is looking for.

Bill Glenn stated that he believes the Caldwell, OH, document best represents what the Commission would like to see. The firm's qualifications seem beyond adequate for this project. While this will be done mostly remotely, the project seems possible using the firm's process. Doug Chabinsky stated that he believes the firm will spend time and get a real feel for the community during the town visits.

Tom Quinn stated that he is not comfortable with this proposal, as the firm seems to deal with larger communities that have other aspects that Amherst does not have. He would feel more comfortable if this was a more limited scope for a project. Most of the places mentioned were large cities with small pockets of historic areas. The firm has no knowledge of Amherst or its Master Plan. Doug Chabinsky noted that the document may not have been sent to the firm. Tom Quinn stated that this seemed like a good sale pitch, but he is unsure what the Commission wants that it does not already have.

Doug Chabinsky explained that he would like the design guidelines to contain examples and descriptions of what is needed for projects in the Historic District. This should expand upon the existing regulations to make the process easier for applicants. He noted that the guidelines could list the ancillary items that go along with the items required by the regulations and provide pictures and photos and dimensions. Doug Chabinsky also stated it would be important to have a

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section on massing. He noted that if an applicant did not have an architect, they may not be able to follow the ins and outs of the regulations. Tom Quinn stated that he does not believe focus groups are necessary and Doug Chabinsky agreed that these could be removed from the scope in order to pull upon the preservation and design expertise of the firm more specifically.

Tom Quinn stated that he believes it will be important for the firm to take photos and walk around the Village when they come. This should not be done by Commissioners. He stated that he is a little skeptical regarding spending money on this project that may be of limited use. Doug Chabinsky stated that there was a handful of different building styles in the village and the consultant could get that information from the National Register and the 2019 survey.

Nicole Crawford stated that the firm previously completed design guidelines for Sandusky, OH, and this created a great visual document. Bill Glenn stated that was a very well done document. Tom Quinn stated that he would like the cost for that scope of work instead of what was quoted to Amherst. Nicole Crawford stated that because the company has already done this kind of work they will have a baseline to start from and add things specific to Amherst. She also noted that the historic district in Sandusky was not very big and that she liked the visuals provided in the design guidelines.

Doug Chabinsky stated that it is easy to get people to comply with guidelines if they are easy to follow. This document has been discussed for a long time.

Tom Grella stated that this document will help the applicants by streamlining the process. He thought it would be a good idea to move forward with this project. This will be a win/win for the Town and applicants.

Bill Glenn moved to accept the proposal from Designing Local, Ltd. Seconded by Tom Grella.

Roll Call Vote: Doug Chabinsky – aye, Nicole Crawford – aye; Bill Glenn – aye; Martha Chabinsky -aye; Tom Grella – aye, Tom Quinn – nay. 5-1-0.

Nic Strong stated that she would work through a contract with the firm and start to layout additional dates for meetings.

OTHER BUSINESS:

None at this time.

At 8:13 p.m., Tom Grella moved to adjourn. Seconded by Tom Quinn.

Roll Call Vote: Doug Chabinsky – aye, Nicole Crawford – aye; Bill Glenn – aye; Martha Chabinsky -aye; Tom Grella – aye, Tom Quinn – aye. 6-0-0.

Respectfully submitted,

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216 Kristan Patenaude
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218 Minutes approved: