

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COHOES HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND
ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW BOARD SPECIAL MEETING HELD
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2023 AT 8:00AM**

MEMBERS PRESENT: **Daniele Cherniak, Chair**
 Barbara Hildreth, Vice Chair
 John Frainier

ABSENT: **Evan Lamb**

ALSO PRESENT: **Sharon Butler, Administrative Assistant**
 Tess Drauschak, Assistant Planner
 Joe Seman-Graves, Planner

Chairperson Cherniak called the October 31, 2023 meeting of the Historic Preservation and Architectural Review Board to order at 7:59AM.

Roll Call;

Members present; Chairperson Cherniak, Vice Chair Hildreth, Member Frainier

Absent; Evan Lamb

CONSIDERATION OF THE AUGUST 15, 2023 MEETING MINUTES

Chairperson Cherniak; next item on the agenda is the minutes from the August 15, 2023 meeting has everyone had a chance to look at the minutes; motion to approve the minutes was made by Vice Chair Hildreth 2nd by Member Frainier All in favor AYE motion carried

	YES	NO	ABSTAIN
Daniele Cherniak	X		
Barbara Hildreth	X		
Evan Lamb	ABSENT		
John Frainier	X		

CONSIDERATION OF A SIGN PLACMENT AT 49 JOHNSTON AVENUE

Chairperson Cherniak; next item is a proposal on 49 Johnston Avenue, can you tell us what you are looking to do?

Mr. Ben Williams addressed the board; so the project is a digital LED sign and we feel that this project is super important to the building to the Connect Center, Good Ground because we have been reenergizing the former St. Agnes church, to be what it was it originally was to be, which is a beacon of hope on the hill and serving the community, a place for resources, a place for connection, a place for recreation. We are just really trying to restore it to the Beacon of Hope that it once was in the community. In that is evident in our restoration process, we have repurposed the oak from the pews using them in our building down stairs the retro fit for the Connect Center there is oak everywhere. We love the heritage of the building, people stop and see me all the time saying they got married there, they got confirmed there, I was baptized here and we love those stories and we want to make more of those stories. When my father and mother purchased the building in 2001 it was in severe disrepair it was in really bad shape, We had to do what we had to do, we were facing over a million dollar bill in just the roof and you guys graciously let us put not slate on there, that

involved selling some of the vertical stained glass pieces, we made sure they went to another church. But we have been steadily preserving other pieces in the building, currently we are restoring the St. Agnes window on the eastern side and again the history of the building is super important to us, what it means to the community is important to us and even with this project we salvaged some bricks, from the actual building some repair bricks and we intend to use them at the base of the sign to create some continuity between the free standing sign and the building. So I mean the sign itself will be used for displaying community resources, like a food pantry, our feeding programs. We sent out over 20,000 meals last year to kids on the weekends. Our food pantry was renovated and it is exploding, we are feeding between 7 & 8 people a day when we used to feed 4 or 5 people a month.

Vice Chair Hildreth; is your food pantry open every day?

Mr. Williams; 2 days right now we are working on expanding all the infrastructure it is hard to keep up with the 2 days right now

Vice Chair Hildreth; what days are you open?

Mr. Williams; Tuesdays and Thursdays

Vice Chair Hildreth; ok because the Library has been collecting food, Tuesday and Thursday you will get the next batch.

Mr. Williams; thank you for the support. That was a project that was left for dead, early COVID, it was a project that Salvation Army and Good Ground was shouldering but both of those organizations didn't have capacity. The Connect Center took over the pantry as well as our weekend feeding program that program used to be run by Miracle in Action, that folded early COVID, so we took that on too. We had no idea how to run a feeding program but we sure do now. But I say that because we really love this community, we love supporting it, we love revitalizing it and we want to keep doing that but we need help promoting our programs getting the word out there on for all these dynamic programs. We run free programs for kids grade 6 through 12, top notch programs that they would pay thousands of dollars for after school somewhere else. We want to continue doing that and continue giving back to the community, we also have become a hub for more resources we just onboarded Healthy Alliance which is a network of care providers for upstate New York. So anybody that comes through our doors can get help with medical, mental health, translation services, ride sharing, diapers, menstruation products, we have really become a community hub for empowerment and we just want to get our message out there. So thank you again for taking this meeting and considering the project.

Chair Cherniak; so will the sign just be listing the upcoming schedule and listing the programs so it wouldn't be like not flashy?

Mr. Murphy; it would be fixed images and the location of it given that most of the traffic is coming up the hill is not necessarily ideal for reading things. So whatever we put on there is going to have to be a fixed image so that somebody when they are on approach they can actually be able to glance at it on their way and see what is happening.

Chair Cherniak; any other questions from the board? We sometimes have concerns with signs like that but it seems like the way you are presenting it you are also trying to make it compatible by using the bricks.

Mr. Murphy; I am an architect by trade and the aesthetics of the building are very important to me with as much volunteer labor as we can muster, we have been attempting to improve the whole exterior as well as we can. Some of that is as much as repoint to keep the water out of the building things like that. But that corner has always bothered me a little bit, it's a little uninviting the fence comes in front of our current sign, it's a no man zone there. We would like to put the sign in as you can see from the renderings that we included, we plan on having some planting beds out there we want to add beauty to the neighborhood, we have to make some efforts to keep our doors open.

Chair Cherniak; then opened to public comments.

Ms. Joan Kennedy approached, first I want to thank the board for letting me come and talk, this is the first time I am getting a little bit of history that is helpful. I think your goal is commendable I do

have some problems with the sign and I'd like to read this. So the other night when we were here and you mentioned the pictures would be moving, is that no longer going to be happening?

Mr. Williams; they will be static, like a slide show

Ms. Kennedy; so they will be moving?

Mr. Williams; they will be rotating between the slides but there won't be animation or anything like that.

Vice Chair Hildreth; it's like the church down on the Island they have a sign like this, they will post the mass schedule then it changes to something else, but it is a slow moving so you have time to read it.

Ms. Kennedy; ok so it will be slow moving, and will it be in color?

Mr. Williams; yes it will be in full color

Ms. Kennedy; well then my next question is, we were at a variance meeting the other night, you want to move the sign up to the road?

Mr. Williams; no so the variance was for a zero foot setback, it is replacing the existing sign, which is already at a zero foot setback, it won't be coming any closer to the road, if anything it will be a little further away from the road because it is a little bit larger than the current existing sign.

Mr. Murphy; the proportions are different it is rectangular rather than square.

Ms. Kennedy; I would like to make my comments. This was based on what I heard the other night and that it would be moving squares that were going to rotate and I do know those are distractions and it's coming up a road and that is a concern but the traffic commission said that there is no concern of it being a distraction and they would be ok with it. But what I would like to say here is I'll say my comments but then add some addendums because you have given me more information. The proposal before us is asking to replace an existing stationary static 5 foot by 4 foot sign with a lighted digital moving sign and I thought it sat closer to the road but you said that is not going to happen. I am opposed to the sign for the following reasons; the church is located in a historical designation district, this designation is meant to protect the integrity of the historic value including the aesthetics and ambiance of the designated district. The church is also located within a vibrant predominantly residential walkable neighborhood with a mix of (inaudible). Walking trails connect the residential to the city, kids walk to school, the walking trail goes from Schenectady all the way beyond Albany. All of this I see as a support of the historic district and walkable residential neighborhood. So the proposed 7'7" digital lighted sign is out of context with the character of surrounding residential neighborhood. As well as that historic designation it also inconsistent with other signage in and around the area. It is commercializing the area, on that corner, it is out of harmony and inconsistent with the surrounding uses and I moved to the area because it was historically designated I would like to see the area and neighborhood protected by this designation and in my opinion the digital, lit, moving 7'7" sign is inconsistent with that. So you sound like you are a very creative group of people, and I think there is a different way you can do the sign that would be more consistent with the historic designation. I'm not an architect I'm not a sign design person but I did, my husband and I did renovate the Goose Stop Stickley house in Syracuse I have a long history of working with historic groups and doing that type of thing. I know that they can get creative and so I am just hoping that you will think about this and go back to the drawing board. I appreciate that the sign was donated but sometimes it is better not taking what is given to you because it is a little bit inappropriate. So that is my comments.

Chair Cherniak; ok any other thoughts or comments from the board. I mean I don't know if there are any other alternatives that they might consider.

Mr. Murphy; it's either we keep what we have or we have to upgrade, that is basically where we are at.

Vice Chair Hildreth; I understand the history of this city and the area, I do like this sign and if there are flowers and things put around it, that will make it look more elegant and fitting, you have a stop sign and that is not historical.

Chair Cherniak; and this is not a commercial entity and it's not going to be flashy, so it's going to

be promoting the programs and the activities that you have in place.

Member Frainier; my experience with signs both at St. Michaels and the thruway authority was the length of your message should be long enough for the people to see it but not short enough that it appears to flip, flip, flip every time. St. Michael's hasn't had an issue with it, I think it would fit in there the slow rolling message not the active animation.

Vice Chair Hildreth; as long as there is natural environment, grass planted and flowers around it and not blacktop or concrete or anything just the natural stuff around it.

Joe Seman-Graves; perhaps the middle ground, I don't think you are going anyplace soon, but should the board want to move forward with it, perhaps in the resolution make a point that there was a special consideration given to this entity and this isn't something that would be considered for every commercial entity in the historic district. Because the historic district is not only up there but it covers downtown too, so you could be looking at the same application and I know we've had

Chair Cherniak; that really is a concern and that kind of thing being wide spread and being sort of exploited in the commercial sense where this could open the door.

Joe Seman-Graves; and I think there is a community benefit here, where other entities trying to do this maybe to promote their own business and maybe even the music hall I know would love to have one but that is another can of worms to open up, I think making a designation here separately for a community entity rather than private commercial would be important should you want to proceed with it.

Chair Cherniak; ok so what do board members think about that?

Member Frainier; here you are advertising services that you are providing or would like to provide where commercial signs are selling products, two different things.

Vice Chair Hildreth; would your church schedule be put on here also?

Mr. Williams; yes

Mr. Murphy; also we collaborated with other nonprofit entities we like the idea of collaborating so, when we have collaborating efforts we've done not much yet, but a little bit of things with the dance studio there, I see that it simply doesn't just benefit us it benefits the other collaborators we have started to build throughout the city.

Chair Cherniak; ok so do we want to approve the sign with the stipulations concerning its community benefits

Vice Chair Hildreth; I think that's really what it is; church related and community benefits, if the dance studio wanted to do this I'd have a problem with it

Chair Cherniak; do I have a motion?

Member Frainier; I make a motion to approve it with the conditions 2nd by Vice Chair Hildreth all in favor AYE motion carried.

	YES	NO	ABSTAIN
Daniele Cherniak	X		
Barbara Hildreth	X		
Evan Lamb	ABSENT		
John Frainier	X		

Meeting was adjourned at 8:21AM