

SWARTHMORE BOROUGH COUNCIL
Historic Preservation Task Force Minutes
January 4, 2023
Borough Hall Community Room

Claudia Cueto, Historic Preservation Task Force (TF) Chair, called the meeting to order at 7:03pm.

Committee Members Present (12/12)

Claudia Cueto
Shaun Eyring
Janna Garland (virtual)
Doug Harnsberger
Christopher Kenney
Ryan McKenna
Melanie Rodbart
Don Semler
Jamie Shindell
Hannah Sisk
David Virgil
Susan Wright

Committee Members Absent (0/12)

1. Administrative

a. Roll Call and Introductions were made.

b. Minutes

Wright made a motion to approve the meeting minutes. Semler seconded the motion. All were in favor.

2. Presentation

Kathleen Abplanalp and David Brauer presented on behalf of Narberth Borough. Abplanalp is the Director of Historic Preservation at the Lower Merion Conservancy, non-profit group that supports LM township/serves Narberth Borough, and involved with effort to create the HP ordinance. Brauer is a retired architect with 40+ years of experience, a Narberth Planning Commission member since 2004, he assisted with rewriting their zoning code, and was involved with enacting the Historic District Ordinance after there were a series of teardowns.

A recording of the presentation is available [here](#) and summarized as follows:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgWyTUZ90a8&feature=youtu.be>

1. Narberth is a borough in Montgomery County, surrounded by Lower Merion Township, having less than 5,000 people in a space of a half square mile. Most of the borough is residential with some commercial activity, and was mostly built out by 1925. Narberth is a [Certified Local Government](#). Similar to Swarthmore, it is a railroad suburb of Philadelphia.
2. The precipice to their [Historic District Ordinance](#) were the teardowns. Large, out of scale/character, houses were replacing the small existing houses at an alarming rate. The ordinance took 4 years to prepare, in consultation with PHMC. Prior to preparing the ordinance, the borough took 12 years to rewrite their zoning code (form-based zoning) and specifically left out anything related to historic preservation. It was through this process the borough realized that they had to address HP directly, resulting in the path to the Heritage Preservation Plan.
3. The Ordinance provided a broad layer of protection to the entire borough because there were enough contributing resources. Non-contributing resources were identified, specifically properties that were far too altered, along the edges of the district (Montgomery Avenue). They thought by identifying non-contributing buildings, the application would be more successful.

4. There is not a single building on its own that would be considered worthy of preservation, but as a collection it is significant. It's the fabric, the sum of the parts, that represented a pattern of development. There is a consistency of design as the 1920s architects of the residential buildings also designed the commercial buildings.
5. A Heritage Preservation Plan was prepared, the culmination of a couple of years of work, that resulted in a set of recommendations. Recommendations included better education, workshops, and recommendations to home owners on how to repair, restore, maintain masonry, windows, and existing fabric. Final recommendation was the creation of a historic district, mostly to protect against demolition.
6. Transparency, community outreach, and educating the community was critical throughout both the zoning code and HP ordinance process. It was an organic process where Lower Merion Conservancy was called in and then a stakeholder group involving people with commercial interests in town, realtors, lay-people, diverse group of people to brainstorm.
7. Since there are not many, if any, incentives for privately owned houses, the focus was to build a sense of community, sense of place, and source of pride. The economic value for historic preservation did not help them sell the ordinance to the public.
8. The era of significance was defined as before 1945, end of WWII. They were able to refine the period based on architecture and development.
9. The phrase heard consistently through the process: wanted to keep Narberth, "Narberth". What is Narberth, how do we define it? The state was helpful in making typology of ordinances depending on their goals. Once through the process, it became clear that they wanted a mostly demolition ordinance and a historic district for the community.
10. A HARB (Historic Architecture Review Board) was formed to help protect the historic character by considering the effects of proposed changes to the properties within the district and by ruling on their appropriateness. A proposed feature (such as removing a front porch) could be denied a demolition permit by the HARB. Narberth does not have design guidelines (but they are working towards creating them) and additions are not regulated.
11. Politically, the ordinance needed to be minimal and modest to obtain the votes needed by council to not appear too over-reaching.

Q/A Portion:

Q1: Harnsberger: Were the non-contributing buildings targeted as teardowns [after they were identified]?

A1: It was thought that by offering "sacrificial properties" to developers that they would be the first to be demolished, and it was preferred that a 1950s brick box was torn down rather than a 1920s bungalow. However, developers have not swooped in to demolish them.

Q2: Semler: Is there much new construction [in Narberth]?

A2: There are few examples before the form-based code was enacted, which are glaringly inappropriate. There are newer houses since the code, they are okay and fit in, they don't look inappropriate, but they wish the developer would spend more money on divided lite windows.

Q3: Virgil: Much was discussed about the impacts to the residential properties, but how did this manifest in commercial buildings?

A3: There have been three major construction projects in borough: one completed under the form-based code, but before HP ordinance; the other two were post HP code. Dave thinks the form-based code did its job and that it wasn't intended to be a style book. In terms of the larger building, a 56-unit building is more than what they would have done, but it worked because there was a combination of materials used, a broken-up roof line, etc.. The two new buildings under construction, one designed by Cecil Baker, are very modern, but both the massing and form works.

Q4: Eyring: Were there any cultural considerations or only aesthetic?

A4: No, not really. However, cultural preservation and affordability was built in naturally because Narberth has small houses on small lots. It's such a dense community and the small rowhomes contribute to the story because they were for working class residents, so that's intrinsic to the cultural narrative and fabric. The district wasn't just to protect the aesthetic, but large buildings split into apartments helped affordability.

Q5: Rodbart: What strategies were used for engaging community and getting support?

A5: It was not easy, but it was important to monitor the information, making sure there were credible sites so it wasn't rumor and did not entice fear. There was confusion [from the public] about zoning code vs historic preservation. Outreach about what it isn't going to be was more important than what it actually was. They are not the style police. Communicate through public meetings, unofficial historian who has worked for Park Service was a valued asset. Task Force provided FAQ each step of the way, so they had a formal response on record. Held charettes with the public. Introduced the community to historic preservation, provided visuals. Utilized Facebook, borough website, facebook (which was a challenge because that is where disinformation surfaces). Posted on bulletin boards outside train station, borough hall, post office. Involved neutral stakeholders. People really want to be heard. Open forum was very important.

Q6: Garland: Are there any areas of Narberth that are trying to encourage development?

A6: That happened and was addressed when formed based code was created (and not the goal of the HP district). There already was high density development near train. The ordinance does not prohibit demolition, it requires that BC make a decision. There are loop holes for council to review opportunities. Example: south side of Haverford Ave, main commercial strip is not on Montgomery Ave, so doesn't have volume and traffic of busy through roads. Contributing "plain box building" proposed for demolition had to go through review process. A developer is actively coming up with designs for redevelopment of an entire block, which will have a huge effect on borough. The hysteria of the increased traffic resulting from these large projects was high despite the minimal impact the added density had contributed to the parking patterns on the street (since the building had to have one parking spot per unit built in). Parking has not been a big problem.

Q7: Manaker: How is the ordinance handling the proposed development along Haverford Ave?

A7: All of the existing buildings are contributing, and a few of them really should be preserved. A building dates pre-1895. What's worked for Narberth in the past is working directly with the developer from the start. Some developers will ignore them, but a higher number will work with them and hear what's important to them, start dialog early to create a win-win situation. They have a long enough track record that they have done it successfully. When this happens, the PC works with them, and it's not antagonistic.

3. Discussion of Old Business

a. Task force objectives outlined in the Resolution

- i. Questions were sent to Rodbart relative to the scale, materials, design of Town Center. Specifically, when the task force discusses the identification of historic resources, what questions should we be asking to meet that standard? *Post meeting note: Rodbart assembled all the questions in one file and distributed to TF members.*
- ii. Reviewing the town center properties, map, and a field trip to view the buildings in TC is necessary for the TF.

Action: Garland to provide parcel map with property names/addresses. TF to coordinate TC field trip as the work develops. TF to review questions and begin to answer them at future meeting.

b. Discussion of educating the task force

- i. Delaware County Planning Commission –Cueto connected w/Beverlee Barnes and will follow-up.
- ii. Narberth – Garland posted advertisement on Town Center social media prior to event. *Post meeting note: Rodbart distributed documents provided by Narberth, powerpoint ppt, video of recording, and contact information for Kathleen Abplanalp from the Lower Merion*

Conservancy, and David Brawer from Narberth PC and HARB. TF is coordinating field trip to Narberth to view their historic resources.

- iii. Media Borough – No update. Rodbart to contact Solicitor Bob Scott, to request contact information.
- iv. Newtown Square – Sisk connected with NS Historic Society Board of Director, Cathy Cavalier, and is coordinating a presentation for February 1, 2023 having a similar format to the Narberth meeting.
- v. Pittsford, NY – Virtual presentation for possibly March 1, 2023 with a similar format to the Narberth meeting. Wait to schedule this depending on outcome of Newtown Square.

Action: Cueto to follow-up w/Delco PC. TF to coordinate field trip to Narberth. Rodbart to follow up with Scott for Media contact. Sisk to continue coordinating presentation w/Newtown Square. Garland to advertise upcoming presentation (Newtown Square) on TC social media. Virgil to coordinate use of projector for February 1 presentation (post meeting note: A/V is not needed for Newtown presentation). TF to determine if a presentation from Pittsford is needed for March.

3. Discussion of New Business

a. Steering Committee/Technical Advisory Group

Cueto said that Kristen Seymore, Borough Council member, has requested an appointment of one member from the HPTF to the Steering Committee or Technical Advisory Group to assist FHI Studio. FHI Studio “*has been tasked with assisting the Borough with updating the Town Center Zoning Ordinances. The consultant mentioned form-based zoning which focuses on the relationship between the pedestrian on the sidewalk and the buildings. This type of zoning also tends to be very clear, with diagrams being included. The consultant most recently worked in Media on the zoning ordinances. The committee will provide the consultant with baseline information on Town Center and comment on drafts.*” Cueto said TF will appoint someone to represent exclusively this group at the next meeting (February 1), which is prior to the February BC meeting.

Action: TF to nominate and vote on committee nomination at February 1 meeting.

b. Public Outreach

- i. TF discussed asking an open-ended question to the public “***What do you like about Town Center?***” in the Swarthmorean and in the Town Center newsletter to gain knowledge about what residents and visitors enjoy about TC. The responses will be filtered via zip code. McKenna will be responsible for preparing future questions.
- ii. Update on TF – Cueto and Rodbart will prepare a brief statement of the status of the TF so that it is printed in the Swarthmorean before the next meeting (submit by January 24 to be printed by Jan 27, ahead of Feb 1 meeting).
- iii. Email address – Garland to create Gmail account for HPTF to receive data relative to the survey.
- iv. Public Realm Project – Garland said that the Public Realm project has taken flight (funded by the Centennial Foundation) and that the TF should leverage the findings of their work and vice versa w/TF.

Action: Garland and McKenna to coordinate questions for paper and TC newsletter. Cueto and Rodbart to prepare update on TF statement for Swarthmorean.

Public Comment

1. Alison Manaker (211 college Ave) asked a question during Narberth presentation (see above).

Adjournment

At 9:10pm, Virgil made a motion to adjourn the meeting, Kenney seconded the motion. All were in favor.

Next Meeting

February 1, 2023, Community Room. 7PM. Call in information will be provided from Teams if required.

Note: Due to the school district closing for spring break, the April 5 meeting has been postponed to April 12. Elise O'Rourke has confirmed the meeting date and Bill Webb has coordinated advertisement.

These minutes were prepared by Melanie Rodbart, Secretary.