

MINUTES OF THE  
MOUNT VERNON HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION  
Sept. 16, 2020

The Historic Preservation Commission met via Zoom on Wednesday Sept. 16. Members present were Leah Rogers, Caroline Kelly, Mary Evans, Janet Budack, and Suzette Astley. Also present were emeritus member Hugh Lifson, possible incoming members (pending approval by City Council) Donnie Moore and Duane Eash, Scott Ladwig from Cornell College, Lucas Glissendorf, Laura Davis, Craig Peterson, and Brian Lapham from BWBR Architects, and Kim Zwald from Raker Rhodes Construction were also in attendance.

The meeting was called to order at 5:32 PM. Upon motion made and seconded, the Minutes of the Aug. 29, 2020 meeting were approved as distributed.

Scott Ladwig noted that the individuals present from BWBR were present to describe work that is planned for the mall-side entrance to College Hall and plans to move the handicap accessible entrance from the side of the building entering to the basement level to the newly configured mall side of the building. Craig Peterson noted that it is early in the process for this project and that they are just providing a preview. There is no target date at this point for construction.

Laura Davis said that BWBR researched the Cornell College Historic District and campus buildings that are individually listed on the Historic Register. She showed an early photo of College Hall, and noted that it was built 8 years prior to the Lincoln presidency and 11 years after Iowa became a state. She noted that at the time that College Hall was listed on the Register the windows were not original, the chimneys had already been removed, and basement access was already in place. Despite these modifications of the building, its significance to the campus and town and historical features were sufficient to earn listing on the Historical Register. Laura read from several portions of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation and noted that the work is planned to adhere to those guidelines. She especially highlighted Standard 9 that specifies that additions to historic structures should be compatible in design to the existing building but distinct from it.

Brian Lapham briefly showed early blueprints for the interior of the building and for planned modifications at this point. But more pertinent to the Commission's work, he showed and talked about exterior photos from 1891, 1930 and 1979. He then described the anticipated scope of the work on the exterior of the building. One major goal of the work is to improve accessibility for all individuals. Individuals with mobility challenges now must enter the building at the basement level under the stairs on the northeast side of the building. This separate and dark entry conveys a lack of appropriate respect, according to Mr. Lapham. The new plans for the main, mall-side entry to College Hall includes newly built steps and an accessibility ramp to the main entrance with entry to the first floor of College Hall. Other floors will be accessible by anyone using an elevator or stairs. A second goal of the proposed work is to give the building a larger sense of presence on the campus.

The current draft plan includes a half-moon shaped patio with connections to the main mall and adjacent buildings. The ramp will be to the left of the entrance, with a wall to the right of the entrance to balance the ramp in appearance and screen mechanicals for the building.

Leah invited comment on the proposed changes to College Hall. Sue Astley commented that safety of the stairs to College Hall had long been a concern of hers and she was glad to see that issue addressed in this plan. Other members commented that the new steps, ramp, and screening wall did not seem to detract from the historic appearance of College Hall. Guest Hugh Lifson noted for historical perspective that the southwest side of College Hall, opposite the entrance in question, was considered the main entrance when it was built because that side faced toward the commercial area of Mount Vernon. Leah noted that the Commission looks forward to a more in-depth discussion of these plans for the entrance to College Hall when Cornell submits a building permit and application for a Certificate of Appropriateness.

Scott Ladwig updated the Commission on other matters at Cornell. The College is still working on plans for work at the Sports Complex. The recent derecho compromised 48 buildings on campus and affected 311 trees, many of which were removed or will be removed. There was \$300,000 in damage to the Sports Complex roof alone. Scott noted that repairs made necessary by the derecho will constitute a long-term project for the College. At this point Scott, the guests from BWBR and Raker Rhodes left the meeting.

In old business, Mary Evans announced that the relaunch of the MVHPC has been accomplished. Members congratulated Mary for her hard work on this project and her success in working with Scott Cannon to make it so. Mary also announced that the Archives have gotten cleaned and there is no evidence of mold at this point. The Archives are still due to move to a space upstairs at City Hall once it is ready.

Leah updated Commissioners on federal financial resources available in Mount Vernon in the aftermath of the derecho. Cornell College is eligible for special federal assistance. However, homeowners are eligible only for regular FEMA assistance. Leah has notified the owners of historic properties who have contacted her and let them know that they need to apply for FEMA assistance.

Leah indicated that the Mayor and City Council members have received our recommendation that Donnie Moore and Duane Eash be appointed to the open seats on the Commission. However, due to a clerical error these nominations did not appear on agenda of the earliest available City Council meeting. (The nominations were considered at the Sept. 21 Council meeting, but the minutes have not been posted as of the time these minutes are being written, so the final decision cannot be reported here.)

Under new business, Leah noted a letter about rezoning for near the Hwy 30 bypass (specifically for the areas designated for retail businesses) that Commissioner Susan Hargus forwarded to MVHPC members. Surprise was noted by Commissioners that the Planning and Zoning Commission would have approved a plan that might jeopardize businesses in the downtown commercial district. Zoning regulations of Mount Vernon have

a long history of protecting our downtown commercial district. Commissioners also noted our special interest in downtown commercial interests because most of the buildings are in a Historic District. Older buildings can deteriorate rapidly when they are unoccupied and when owners may no longer have the resources or incentive to care for them properly. Leah noted that she would ask Guy Booth whether there are any legal issues with regard to this matter, and would ask Ed Sauter about the proposed design guidelines for the Highway Retail portion of the rezoning. bypass. Caroline Kelly moved and Mary seconded a request that Leah draft a letter to the Mayor and City Council expressing the MVHPC's concerns for downtown retail businesses, especially those in historic buildings, given the current rezoning plan. (Such a letter was written and distributed to Commissioners, one of whom requested some modifications.) Caroline and Janet both volunteered to read the letter at the next City Council meeting. (Since this time City Council has tabled discussion of the zoning issue and scheduled an in-person meeting on it on Sept. 28 at the Lester Buresh Center and a Zoom meeting on Oct. 7.)

Announcements: Mary noted that the current issue of Our Iowa magazine has an article centered on Mount Vernon entitled "My Sister's in Your Wallet" about an amazing reconnection of a former German POW and a former U.S. soldier.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 6:30PM. The next meeting is scheduled for Saturday Oct. 3 at 9:15AM, probably to be conducted using the Zoom platform.

Respectfully Submitted,

Suzette Astley, Secretary Pro-Tem