

Fair Housing Committee Minutes

January 20, 2022 Meeting, Mimi Hollister, Scribe

Present: Debby Larkin, Dirk Isbrandtsen, Frank Evans, Teri McDonough, Kurt James Katie Farrell, Joe Whipple, Mimi Hollister

Guests: Lou Meyi, Bob Neuss, and Aviva Herr-Weber who is the new Community Organizer for Essex County Community Organization (ECCO). This is a regional North Shore organization in which a number of Marblehead clergy and individuals are active.

Focus Group Leaders: Emma Bataglia from Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) and Town Planner, Becky Curran Cutting, Town Administrator, Jason Silva

Minutes were approved.

Focus Group

The whole first part was conducted by Emma and Becky as a Focus Group about the vision for the Coffin School Property as a possible affordable housing option for the town.

Their first discussion item was a response to the larger public forum that was conducted on December 7, 2021. In response, Debby read from the handout she had created based on our discussion of the same at our December Fair Housing meeting. (Notes will be attached.) Kurt noted that we all focused on the appearance of whatever goes there, that we want the process to be open to public comment, that we don't want to force this down the throat of neighbors, and that it will be different from the current Green Street project of town homes that is not attractive. Joe noted that we should expect some objections as inevitable.

Becky then described the earlier focus group with the abutters. About 60 % were in attendance and about half attended the public forum. She said the discussion was not as negative as a few parts of the open forum; that keeping the present building was almost unanimous; that mixed and affordable housing is fine as long as it's not like the Housing Authority facilities that are nearby. She said that Request For Information (RFI) has been and will be sent out to developers, both non-profit and others. The idea is to ask "What do you think you can do here? Help us see what's possible." Thus we will eventually have a visual to present to the public.

Kurt responded that this was a "great approach" to attract experienced developers such as Harborlight. He reiterated that 30-40 units is likely a minimum to be a feasible project and so town homes are probably not a likely design. Frank reiterated as a realtor that design standards and visuals are very important for neighborhood acceptance. Kurt suggested they could include services and community space for the neighborhood, perhaps a small park or community garden.

Katie said that whatever is built there, a few units must be handicap accessible. All agreed.

Next discussion item was about affordability considerations.

Dirk expressed the consensus that a variety was desirable: 30-50-and 80% of the minimum household incomes should qualify, and also the hope for cultural diversity. There was discussion about the local preference option since there would be a statewide lottery process. Emma said that a local preference option is possible upon request to the state and can be up to 70% for those who live and those who work in our community. As for a mix of rental and purchase, this depends on the developer but the project is likely too small to have both. Developers know a lot about the affordable housing market and can help with that. Teri offered that we will need to help Becky, who has no staff, to move on this. Becky noted that the library inhabiting the building temporarily helps us buy some time. She described this as a 40B type project, that there is cost savings in re-developing an existing building , and reminded us that this all has to get through Town Meeting.

Final discussion item was about education of the public about the need for affordable housing.

Teri suggested making a short video that could include stories from some living in affordable housing. Kurt suggested the focus should be on education about the need and how it helps our town. Dirk suggested that property values are the biggest issue for current homeowners so we have to convince people we have that consideration in mind and might use Oliver's Pond 40B project as an example that there is no negative effect on soaring home prices in that neighborhood. Debby pointed out the monetary gains for the town.

We need to find the advocates for Town Meeting by presenting to other town committees the need for this, no apologies. Create a "road show" to present also to Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, Sustainable Marblehead, etc. We should also approach the Council on Aging for support since affordability for seniors in town is a big issue.

Appreciation was expressed to Emma and MAPC for their help and to Becky and Jason for their support and leadership in this endeavor.

Forum was ended and we proceeded to unfinished business agenda items:

1)The Housing Production Plan Implementation Committee has not met since October. Reminder that Dirk and Kurt represent FHC on the committee. Fortunately for us, Teri is also a member, although representing the Housing Authority. And Lou Meyi, who attends most of our meetings and is very knowledgeable about affordable housing, is also a "member-at-large" of the HPP Committee.

Dirk expressed the need to get a committed Selectman as our liaison. He will talk with Moses Grader, who is our appointed connection but who has never attended our meetings. He may approach Jackie Belf-Becker if Moses is unresponsive. The possibility of Erin Noonan being

chosen was raised. It was noted that the new Selectmen are not given committee assignments because the long-time Board members feel more training and experience is necessary before representing the Selectmen on a committee.

2) Bob Neuss has not been given an interview date yet. (Mimi has since learned that there is another person who has submitted a letter for the open seat on Fair Housing.)
3) Dirk would like more ideas about how to increase the Trust Fund. He wants to dig deeper with what other towns have done so we need to re-visit the earlier assignments and update our information. He noted that Becky is on overload and perhaps Trust Funds could be used for an assistant. Also perhaps for incentives to developers. **We will each report on our research at the next meeting.**

Debby announced an invitation to a farewell gathering for Jason Silva the next morning at Abbot Hall. She will also be emailing us the new version of the Open Meeting Law.

Lou Meyi encouraged us to read the extensive article in this week's Reporter on housing and invited us to watch for the community Coalition event in March about red-lining in housing.

Meeting Adjourned.

Summary of Discussion in December meeting about the Coffin School (Debby's Notes)

1. This development must enhance the neighborhood. It will then go a long way toward reducing resistance for further developments.
2. The town should take note of the nearby Green St. multi-family/condo developments. If our understanding of the prior neighborhood focus group's responses is accurate, some members on the FHC feel there is legitimate concern that the adjacent area, southwest of West Shore Drive does not enhance the neighborhood. Some members feel the town would be well advised to ensure that the Coffin School site does not mimic this area.
3. While there was a fairly popular neighbor response regarding retaining the existing building (or part), some on the committee feel it should be replaced, and some feel that adaptive reuse of the existing building would be cost effective and keeping it or part of it would please those abutters that have sentimental feelings regarding some of the permanent structural contents of the building. Except for it being a school or a public building, and unlike the prior schoolhouse-to-condo conversions with 100+ year old buildings that have historical connotations, some on the FHC feel that the Coffin School building doesn't go with its surroundings and feel that it may always be thought of as incongruous with the surrounding as the years go by while others feel differently.
4. There is an understandable tension between building the maximum number of living units and maximizing green space. The neighbors clearly thought that optimizing green space was an important consideration. Some FHC members recommended that any

development manages this tension in a creative way with housing units taking up the most modest amount of space possible in order to enhance any remaining green space.

5. There are various opinions within the FHC regarding the architectural design. Some feel that the design should be townhouses versus a larger multi-family and that it should be "timeless" New England colonial style and some feel that the design should be multi-family, similar to the design of Oliver's Pond.
6. Many on the FHC believe that occupancy should be mixed – some market, some low income, some very low income. Some ownership, some rental, could all be part of the mix.
7. Landscaping is an important factor in enhancing the perceived value of the property. An investment in thoughtful landscaping will go a long way toward making the neighborhood residents appreciate the town's thoughtful management of this very important project.