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Historic District Commission to Hold Retroactive Hearing



Changes to the former Medfield Post Office/recent Nosh & Grog building at **21 North St**. -- in the **Town Center Historic District** -- is yet another example of work that proceeded without official approval by a town historical review committee.

In this instance, the Larkin family removed the mansard roof from 21 North St. -- a step that must be approved in advance by the Historic District Commission according to **town bylaws**. As such, in addition to a public hearing, abutters were also required to be notified about architectural changes to the building, as required by **state law**, but that step was also skipped.

The timeline includes these actions:

- On the evening of May 15, Historic District Commission Chair Michael Taylor received an e-mail from applicant Nikki Moran-Larkin stating that she hoped to get "some coaching and insights" from the commission on possible changes to the restaurant premises. Accompanying the e-mail were architectural renderings of the building.

- At the May 16 commission meeting, with less than 24 hours to review Larkin documents, the Historic District Commission held a meeting to discuss the project.

- During the commission meeting, Taylor downplayed the proposed changes, expressed support for the roof removal, and also expressed concerns about the proposed whitewashing of the brick building but was told the end result would be "subtle." No details about the whitewashing process (or pre-treatment brick repairs that are often needed) were shared with the commission so members did not have the opportunity to discuss if the bylaw applied. No vote was taken to either bypass a hearing or request a formal application.

- At some point prior to Oct. 24, according to Taylor, the building inspector issued a "cease and dismiss" order to the Larkins after seeing the roof being removed, but Taylor said the work could continue.

- On Oct. 24, after the roof had already been removed, Garrett Larkin submitted **an undated application** to the Medfield Historic District Commission. (Submission date is based on Larkin statement in an e-mail message to Taylor.)

- Now with two new commission members on board, votes were cast at the Oct. 24 commission meeting to hold a retroactive hearing and to notify abutters about the 21 North St. project. No future hearing date was set at the meeting.

Whitewashing brick versus painting

Among the exemptions to Historic District Commission bylaw review criteria is type of paint and paint color -- both which an owner can pursue without commission approval.

However, both the architect and Garrett Larkin referred to the exterior work as "whitewashing" brick, not painting it.

According to a variety of painting and home improvement experts, whitewashing and painting brick are very different techniques that can change the external surface and overall texture.

At the same time, Medfield Historic District Commission bylaws call for exterior architectural changes requiring review to include anything related to "the kind and texture of exterior building materials, or other materials applied to exterior surface."

Across the Commonwealth, dozens of Historic District Commissions representing both large cities and small towns prohibit previously unpainted brick from being painted.

Taking the path of least resistance

At the May commission meeting, Taylor noted that a public hearing adds another 15 days to the project schedule, and deemed it unnecessary because "the plans are fairly straightforward."

He added that "going down the path of notifying abutters would turn into this administrative nightmare" and that he wanted to be "as supportive to developers or property owners as we possibly can."

Five months later, Medfield residents are not only guessing about the restaurant that will occupy the interior space of 21 North St., but are now wondering how changes to the building exterior in such a highly visible downtown location could be allowed. Once the public hearing is date set, residents will finally have a chance to express their opinions and get answers.