

Minutes of Meeting of Harbor Management Commission Lower Wharf Subcommittee on March 8, 2024 12:45 pm

Present: George Harris, Don Hyman, Belinda Shepard, Geoffrey Steadman (consultant)

Old Business:

State of Current Sign Design: Small changes in punctuation have been recommended by the Town Attorney since the Lower Wharf risk management warning sign content was approved at the January meeting of the HMC. Geoff Steadman also suggested the word "regulation" in the first sentence might be dropped as he thought not every directive was a regulation per se. The Town Attorney will have final say on the sign's language. That will come in concert with any changes that may come in future discussion with the Historic District Commission at a public hearing at a date to be determined.

Public Response to Sign To Date: George Harris said the last version of the Lower Wharf risk management warning sign was shared for comment with the Historic District Commission, with nearby Harbor Road residents and with surviving signers of one of the deeds used to transfer the total property to the town, Reaction was mixed. Leadership of the Sasquanaug Association and the Southport Conservancy have been positive about the sign and said they understood the town's obligation to warn the public of risk at the property. Others expressed concern about size of the sign, typeface, spacing, overall design and for some, why a sign warning of risks to the public and guidelines for considerate and behavior compliant with the terms of the deed by visitors to a residential neighborhood was necessary. Location of the sign is also a concern.

Discussion by George Harris, Don Hyman and Geoff Steadman revolved around a sign location dilemma stemming from language in the two property deeds related to the space. The complete Lower Wharf site today, according to town records, consists of two adjoining properties deeded to the town on two different occasions. One deed says, "no buildings or structures..." can be erected on the premises, raising a concern that a sign could be interpreted as a structure neighbors could possibly object to. The other deed, however, clearly specifies that a sign must be posted referencing restrictions specified in the deed. (Attorney John Fallon is on record asking the HMC in behalf of his client that the sign be posted in accordance with the deed.) The issue requires more discussion with the Town Attorney among others.

New Business:

Next steps in the path before the sign content and design can be finalized, fabricated by a town recognized vendor and erected by DPW: George Harris will create the first draft of an application for a certificate of appropriateness from the Historic District Commission. The application and guidelines are available on the HDC section of the town website. The goal is to have a draft application for the HMC to review and approve at its March 19, 2024 meeting. The application process will result in a public hearing at a date to be determined reviewing the sign's purpose and deed related aspects, its design, content and legal requirement in the interest of better managing the town of Fairfield's legal exposure and a historic residential neighborhood environment. The hearing may also surface new signage options for addressing public safety and wellbeing in accordance with the deeds for the property. No proactive publicity was determined to be needed apart from the regular flow of information from town website posted public hearings.

Lower Wharf Pier Rebuilding Project: Geoff Steadman will take the lead in submitting a funding application to the Connecticut Port Authority Small Harbor Improvement Projects Program (SHIPP) to obtain a grant to fund the existing pier demolition and reconstruction effort. Some \$5 million in grants may be available in total to Connecticut communities that meet program criteria. The deadline for submission is July 1, 2024. Grant award announcements will be made in August, 2024.

Next Meetings: Don Hyman will work with Jennifer Carpenter to finalize a schedule of Lower Wharf subcommittee meeting dates for the balance of 2024.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:40 pm.

The meeting recording can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU9t8UXi7ho>

Prepared by: Don Hyman