

# Planning Commission recommends historic district zoning for Shoreby Hill

By Tyler Will

Planning Commission members last week unanimously agreed to recommend to the Town Council that a historic zoning district be established in lower Jamestown's Shoreby Hill area.

Dr. Richard Greenwood, the deputy director of the Rhode Island Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission, gave a short presentation about historic district zoning. His comments were followed by questions from those attending the Wednesday night meeting at Town Hall. Approximately 25 people attended the meeting, mostly residents of the Shoreby Hill area.

Greenwood began his talk with a clear message that the state was not trying to influence Jamestown's decision.

"We are from the state, and we have nothing to do with the town zoning in the town of Jamestown," he said. Greenwood said he was at the planning commission meeting to provide information during the decision-making process. He said the state has model ordinances available to provide a starting point.

Greenwood said towns usually set up a separate commission to handle the historic district matters.

Historic district zoning does not restrict home interiors, and "very few" communities set restrictions on house paint colors or modest exterior decorations, like window boxes or front yard gardens, he said.

Specific restrictions are left to the individual town's preferences. Input from home owners is typically considered important in other communities where historic district zoning exists, Greenwood said.

"Historic district zoning is a way communities have decided how they control their future," he said. "Historic character is something that all of Jamestown has a

stake in."

Communities sometimes hire professional architectural designers to help determine specifics. Greenwood said Wickford is one such example. Some communities have different design standards in different historic districts, he said.

Other communities with historic district zoning include parts of Providence and Newport.

Establishment of a historic district would involve creating zoning specifications, a written document for the state government and an inventory of the area's buildings, Greenwood said.

If the area is approved as a historic district, it will be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and there would be historic home owner tax credits.

"It is a restriction," Greenwood said. "It is a way that land use is a restriction, it is a way that set backs are a restriction, it gives a degree of confidence to the town."

After the meeting, Town Planner Lisa Bryer said the entire process would probably take about a year, if the town council decides to go forward with the historic district.

Questions from the audience ranged from how many members usually sit on committees to what other towns have historic district zoning to how many residents sit on the committee.

Greenwood said usually five

to seven people sit on a committee, and in Connecticut, state law requires that 25 percent of the members be area residents. He said communities usually have only one committee for the entire town, not one committee per district.

Greenwood said overall, property values usually increase in historic districts. He said sometimes buyers will be attracted to historic homes, but others may be repelled because of the extra restrictions. Historic home owners often take good care of their houses, which helps boost the property values, he said.

Taite Dronk, director of planning in Newport, said historic zoning districts have nationally shown to increase in value over time, and rarely decrease. Historic homes also increase in value at a higher rate than non-historic houses do, which he said was proved by studies of home values before and after they were designated as historic in a zoning district. In Newport, he said, historic homes are more desirable, and the restrictions mean homes will be fairly consistent in quality and design.

Among the benefits of historic zoning is protection of historic quality, he said.

"I think most people consider it to be of significant value to preserve the integrity of geography and properties," Dronk said.

Among the downsides of his-

toric zoning is a one-month period that residents must wait for house project approval, he said. In addition, Newport charges a processing fee for reviewing projects to ensure that they satisfy the extra zoning restrictions.

Extensive housing projects may have specific design requirements and material uses, and sometimes residents need to hire an architect or even a lawyer, which can get expensive. He said the same renovation in a district not designated as historic might take far less time.

"People cannot come in and make significant changes without extensive review," he said.

Residents at the Planning Commission meeting were also invited to share their sentiments on the issue. The overwhelming majority of residents supported historic district zoning. When Planning Commission Chairman Michael Swistak asked residents who supported it to raise their hands, almost everyone did. When he asked for opposing residents to raise their hands, three did. Swistak became chair when

former chairman Gary Girard announced a couple of weeks ago that he would serve the remainder of his term as vice chair.

Supporters said the zoning would help preserve the character of Shoreby Hill, pointing out that part of the appeal of Jamestown is its historic character.

"It is a very helpful tool, I think, for a neighborhood to preserve its quality and character," Mary Meagher said.

Others said historic district zoning places too many restrictions on home owners.

"I am really against another committee telling us what to do," Elle Burgess said.

The commissioners themselves said little about historic district zoning but asked questions of Greenwood.

Jamestown Zoning Board member Don Wineberg said the zoning board has reached a consensus in support of historic district zoning. "It would only be a good thing and could allow the town to preserve what makes it so special," he told the planning commission.



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