

APPROVED MINUTES of the Workshop of
the City Council of the City of Rye held in City Hall on
March 13, 2002 at 8:15 P.M.

PRESENT:

STEVEN OTIS, Mayor
FRANKLIN J. CHU
ROBERT S. CYPHER
CAROLYN CUNNINGHAM
ROBERT H. HUTCHINGS
ROSAMOND LARR
DOUGLAS MCKEAN
Councilmen

ABSENT:

None

Preceding the scheduled workshop an Executive Session was convened at 7:04 P.M. on motion by Councilman McKean, seconded by Councilwoman Cunningham and unanimously carried, to discuss a legal matter concerning Home Depot. Former Councilman Edward Collins was also present. Councilman Chu and Councilman Cypher arrived at 7:12 P.M. and Councilman McKean left at 7:25 P.M. to attend the Recreation Committee Meeting. Councilwoman Larr made a motion, seconded by Councilman Hutchings and unanimously carried, to adjourn the Executive Session at 7:57 P.M. and begin the workshop. Councilman McKean returned prior to the beginning of the workshop.

1. Pledge of Allegiance

Mayor Otis called the meeting to order and invited the Council to join in the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. Roll Call

Mayor Otis asked the City Clerk to call the roll; a quorum was present to conduct official city business.

3. Discussion of the next steps and potential uses for The Friends Meeting House

Mayor Otis announced that as of the previous day, the City now owns The Friends Meeting House and that whether the model is to be a partnership, a full-time tenant, etc. need to be explored.

He said the goals for the property had always been: 1) no development; 2) use as a City-owned meeting space (by organizations such as the Nature Center, Rye Historical Society, Empty-hand Zendo [the Zen group] or other community groups); and 3) have the land available for parkland. A video (made by Jim Kenny, Rye TV at the last moment) of the building, both interior and exterior was shown.

Diane Moran, Chairman of the Landmarks Advisory Committee, described the building as a 19th Century gem, built in 1835 and used as Christ's Church Chapel well into the 20th Century. She believes the steeple was added in the 1870s. In 1959 it was sold to the Friends, but has remained the center of old "Mill town" to this day (a section still in 19th century style and scale). She said there has been a lot of interest over the years to landmark the building, but the Friends never consented. She said if the City locally landmarks the building additional granting sources, including, perhaps, a Sacred Sites grant (although Rye is not a certified city because it has a consent clause to its Landmarks Ordinance). Councilman McKean pointed out that more grants would be available if the building was not used exclusively for religious purposes. Corporation Counsel Neale said, while he does not really know if the Zen group is a religious organization, it is clear that the use of the Meeting House is more religious and meditative than just yoga. Mayor Otis said the use of historic, city-owned buildings by groups with religious leanings needs research.

Councilman Hutchings stated that the property itself is really important and presents a tremendous opportunity for parkland, especially as users can now access Blind Brook via the link to the Marina and its park and gazebo. He said the Council should focus on what they want to do with the property rather than the building. The Mayor said it is being informally used as a park now and liked the idea of linking it to the Marina. He said the first decision is whether to keep part of the land natural or to mow it all, and that the Conservation Commission and the Nature Center should have some input. Councilwoman Cunningham favored leaving part in a natural state, perhaps with wildflowers and bird feeders. Manager Novak said she had already decided the Boat Basin should be responsible for mowing whatever part is requested.

Councilwoman Larr suggested the building and property be linked to the Boat Basin and become part of the Enterprise Fund. The Boat Basin could rent it out for picnics for boaters or other private parties. Diane Moran mentioned that the building has been, and could continue to be, used for weddings. Several community groups have suggested other educational uses. Peter Larr, Vice Chair of the Planning Commission, said he recommended holding on to the Zen group for the time being, at least until it is determined if the community groups which have expressed interest can afford to participate. He said if the Zen group goes, we could have no one, at least in the short term. The Mayor agreed, saying they have been good for the building, keeping it clean, and requiring only light use, renting month to month for \$500. Mr. Larr recommended that the City put some restriction on the use (i.e. no gymnastics classes).

Mr. Neale said the Environmental Facilities Corporation (which provided the funds used for the purchase) requires that it be used for estuary purposes and the deed obtained from The Friends requires the property must be used for park, recreation, education or contemplative purposes, so that proposals for commercial use would probably not be appropriate unless they are consistent with our requirements.

Ms. Novak asked if the Council was comfortable having the building used at all, given the fact that it is now the City's liability. She said if not, the arrangement with the Zen group should be terminated. Councilman Chu recommended that the RFP be sent out ASAP so that they will know if the City has an attractive partner, and in the meantime we should limit use to light use, such as meditation.

Councilman Cypher asked what the City's liability now was and what improvements would be required to make the 19th century building ready for any of the suggested 21st century uses. Mr. Neale said the building was automatically added to the City's fire and theft policy, but that there is no liability coverage right now because The Friends did not require the Zen group to have liability insurance. He said the City would take care of that situation immediately.

In terms of making the necessary repairs, Manager Novak said the rough estimate from the Building Department is about \$87,000 for the exterior, but it could be more. There is no estimate for the cost of interior repairs. She said if costs of the repairs exceed 50% of the present value of the structure, the City could be required to bring the building up to code, but if it were landmarked perhaps some of the mandates might be waived. These savings would be offset by the added cost of making historically correct changes, but grants might be available.

In conclusion the Council recommended the following action:

- Amend the RFP to reflect the ideas heard tonight and send it out as soon as possible to interested community groups as well as City Commissions and Committees.
- Proceed with a detailed architectural and engineering assessment based on both a landmarked and non-landmarked status.
- Proceed immediately with short term, liability-sensitive fixes which will make the building habitable.
- Retain our relationship with the Zen group for the time being.

4. Adjournment

As there was no further business to be discussed, Councilwoman Cunningham made a motion, seconded by Councilwoman Larr and unanimously carried, to adjourn the workshop at 9:35 P.M.

Respectfully submitted

Susan A. Morison
City Clerk