

Historic District Commission

Meeting Minutes

2025-06-24

7:00 PM

Online, Town Hall, 472 Main St, Acton, MA 01720

Present: David Honn (DH), David Shoemaker (DS), Anita Rogers (AR), Barbara Rhines (BR) (Acton Cultural Resources Coordinator). Art Leavens (AL)

Absent: Zach Taillefer (ZT); Fran Arsenault (FA) (Select Board Liaison) attending but not participating.

Opening:

David Honn opened the meeting at 7:02 pm. DH read the “remote meeting notice” due to COVID-19.

1. Regular Business.

- A. Citizen's Concerns – Ruth Bendig asks about the agenda.
- B. Approval of Meeting Minutes – May 27 Minutes. DS moved their adoption, seconded by AL. AR, DH, DS AL in favor. Approved.
- C. Review Project Tracking Spreadsheet / Chair Updates:
 - Outstanding and Completed COAs/CNAs/Denials
 - 472 Main Street CNA DONE
 - 562 Mass. Ave. COA DONE
 - 592 Mass. Ave. CNA DONE
 - 48 School Street COA DONE / Corrected 6/18/25 DONE
 - 62 River Street CNA (AR is writing)
 - 451 Main Street #2522 heat pumps – July meeting or Public Hearing?
 - 451 Main Street #2523 solar panels (more information requested from applicant); will make a public hearing for this
 - 450 Main Street #2516 Public Hearing will be 7/8/2025
 - 113 Main Street sign application (Erikson Grain) meeting will be 7/8/2025

2. New/Special Business or other applicable agenda items

- A. 7:15 Solar Rules & Regulations Public Hearing. BR reads the Public Hearing Notice. AL: The HDC Rules require that a change in R&R presented at a precedent meeting; this was done on 27 May. At this meeting we will vote on the change. This change is necessitated by

changes in the Massachusetts law, MGL Ch. 21N, relating to climate change. The proposed amendment changes the title to Solar Energy Systems to align with the new MA law, and updates the language to reflect Ch. 21N's requirement to give 'substantial weight' to the threat of climate change. Following changes in the language are intended to bring the rules into alignment with the new Statute. AR: Finds the new language correct. DS: Believes it is good. AL: Agrees with the changes. DH: 'Are appropriate for the particular building and site in question' could be put in bold. AL: Believes the language stands for itself and does not need e.g., boldface. AL agrees with DH that this is the key phrase for the HDC. DH: Heard. Public Comment: Jim Snyder Grant: no substantive comments, but thanks to HDC for this modification. DH: When the HDC established its guidelines, AL researched the HDCs and found that Acton was making a leading effort in accommodating the threat of climate change and the need for solar panels in the community. AL notes that Chapter P for the Town needs an update. Scott Kutil, SK, has some issues. Objects to this modification. The HDC's core mission is to preserve the historic character and the setting. Effort was made to walk through all properties and corresponding zoning to assess Acton's historical properties. Patterns became clear from that work. SK does not believe that the HDC needs to help the State reduce its greenhouse burden. Another similar concern is affordable housing; as is energy efficiency and pressure to use more energy efficient windows. But none of those are in the scope of the HDC. The amendment is about 'Solar Energy Systems', without distinction for roofs vs yards. SK has a slate roof on an historic house. Are there criteria for putting solar panels on slate roofs? Has that received discussion? DH: There are two documents; the first is the Rules and Regulations; the second is Solar Guidelines and will pertain more directly to the public comments. SK: would the criteria be for profile, or color? DH: Let's move to a discussion of the Guidelines. SK: Second point is the discussion at the end of the document where broken equipment must be replaced in kind. SK believes that there is insufficient force in the requirement for 'in-kind' replacement. Would like to see that the Town of Acton require an inspection of solar equipment, ensures it is functioning, at a change of ownership. Then, back to 'Solar Energy Systems'. Asks the HDC members if we have seen yard based solar arrays, with a concrete pad and a pedestal and a solar panel tracking system; many/all have. SK at 43 Windsor Avenue; back neighbors are not in the Historic District. There is a large yard solar array of 18-plus feet height on a Central Avenue back yard, which caused bad feelings in the neighborhood. SK believes that this sort of installation is not appropriate in an historic district, or in any yard. DH: the HDC has control in the District but not outside. SK asks that the Commission make a distinction, and to reject out of hand this sort of installation. DH: This is addressed in the Guidelines. Travis Odum, TO, joins: is there a time limit to discuss the issues? DH: Will try to keep to schedule. AL: This change is mandated by the Legislature. TO: Does this legislature impact all Boards and Commissions? DH: Believes it was targeted at Historic Districts at least; perhaps there are other impacts. DH: Proposes that this be adopted. AR, AL, DS, DH approve. AL: describes the machinery for the followup.

Discussion of the Guidelines: DH: have developed these guidelines over the last 2 years with some updates which provided food for thought and change. AL: Town Bylaw P provides that we can amend guidelines; this is one such guideline. The language mandated by Chapter 21N is also reproduced here. AL reads the existing language for the benefit of the Public attendees. The 21N definition of 'Solar Energy System' is reproduced here. Guideline 1 would add an additional 'Primary Factor': is the threat of climate change, per MGL Ch. 21N.

Guideline 2., would prohibit modifications of historically significant, character-defining features of a building, including removal, covering or altering historic roofing materials such as slate or wood shingles. A particular sentence would exempt large-capacity municipal buildings from this prohibition. DH: Does not believe this exemption is appropriate; the HDC cannot make decisions on usage or type of the building. AL thinks this can be removed, making this an absolute prohibition of panels on slate or wood roofs. DS agrees. Guideline 3, which prohibits solar panels on roof surfaces that front on the governing street, would be amended to permit an exception to this prohibition based on the expense of other options; this language echoes that in the HDC demolition guidelines. DH: Is concerned about the consequences of this clause. Insulation is also an important energy consideration, but is not in the HDC scope. DS: agrees. There are alternative ways for motivated citizens to move to green energy sources and savings. This is different from the case of e.g., demolition. There is a majority of opinion that this proposed exception should be struck. DS asks about ‘accessory building’ definition as used in Guideline 4, which permits solar panels on such buildings. – DH says it is loosely used here. AR: the use of Accessory Building is becoming more broadly defined, with more two-family homes on single lots. Guideline 5 remains unchanged, and 6 is a new requirement to match solar panels’ color with that of the roof materials. Guideline 7 remains as was. DH: will not vote tonight, and would like to list Caller’s concerns. BR adds the text to the draft.

Public Comment: Travis Odum: thanks to all. In favor of solar, with an application to the HDCs. Are there solar installers we have contacted about attaching to slate or wood roofs? Believes it is technically possible. A south-facing slate not seen from the governing way could have panels installed. Guideline 2 does not recognize that there are roofs not visible from the governing way. On colors of roofs – panels can be obtained in a range of colors. DH: There are so few roofs fronting on the governing streets that there is great reluctance to allow panels on those roofs. Jim Snyder-Grant (JSG): could there be cases where the HDC could approve a roof facing the governing way? Could allow an exceptional case. And, for Accessory buildings: The current use of a particular building should not be taken into account (cf. the discussion of Municipal building). DH: could change to ‘outbuildings’ as a better term. JSG: And alternatives to roof solar panels: there is a direct and immediate reduction to the delivered energy, in contrast to e.g., Acton solar energy (which is intended to encourage investments). Wants to discourage the HDC from considering alternative energy sources to solar panels. SK: again brings the question of solar panels elsewhere than on the roof. DS: We note the HDC has jurisdiction for all permanent structures taller than 6 inches, so most of these approaches would fall under our jurisdiction. AL: There is a passage in the Guidelines that notes there is no entitlement to approval of an application. We should be careful not to have absolute prohibitions. Further discussion is deferred to a later meeting.

- B. 8:30 Application #2518 583 Massachusetts Avenue Signage. Irene Elsinovsky (IE) joins. Describes the sign. A replacement of a previous sign, reusing the hanging hardware. The size is the same size but of a different color. Material that resembles wood, with painted surface. AR: thinks it is fine. Add on the certificate that we want it to be painted. DS, AL agree. IE asks about the process; would like a hard copy left at the Building Department. DH moves to approve the sign as proposed. AL Seconds. AR, AL, DS, DH approve. IE notes that she was asked to remove a satellite dish; the parallel with the solar panels was noted. DH notes that

the orientation of the house is such that solar panels on the visible roof would not be very successful.

- C. 8:37 Application #2520 75 School Street Front Door. AJ Murphy, Applicant, joins. The application is shared. There is currently a steel door. AR: Notes this is a fiberglass door that is smooth (which is desirable, as opposed to an embossed fake wood grain). AR has sought such doors with appropriate 'flush glazed' door. The result is not very colonial looking and does not look like a wood door. Unfortunate but the combination of appropriate design and lites does not seem to be available. Seeing examples in person is important. A wood door would of course work, with some disadvantages in longevity and energy loss. With no glass, there are certainly fiberglass doors that would work. On the design chosen, there is an extra piece of trim that is proud of the door itself and is around the piece of glass – like a thin picture frame glued on the face of the door (thanks, BR). This is not the way a traditional door would be made and it would contrast with the rest of the house façade. There are fiberglass doors with larger glass surfaces that are glazed appropriately. The HDC does not believe the proposed door is workable; AR will send some pointers for alternatives. July 8 is a next meeting. Door hardware was in the application and AR thinks it is fine. Consideration of the Application, with a different door proposal, will continue at the July 8 meeting.
- D. 8:56 Application #2521 510 Main St. Interpretive Sign at Meeting House Hill. Applicant is not present. BR shares an image. DH describes the need to move the explanatory sign to the left side of the granite pier or marker. No public comment. DH asks that the granite post to be made accurately vertical (front and side) as well as the marker; and to move the explanatory sign to the left clear of the marker by 18” or 24”, with the face of the sign and marker to be aligned. DH makes a motion to alter the position per our discussion. AL seconds. AR, AL, DS, DH approve.
- E. 9:03 Application #2503A Amendment Request 5 Concord Road – Alter Height of Interpretive Sign. BR reads from a text that indicates the will to adjust the sign to meet ADA requirement for the height. It remains in its current place. DH will take care of this one. DH moves that the sign be lowered as described. AR, AL, DS, DH approve
- F. 8:45 Discussion: Project completion documentation by Owners; Photo documentation of buildings prior to demolition. BR recapitulates the discussion at previous meetings, and there is agreement that BR will put the idea into motion.
- G. Informal discussion of new membership and elements of the agenda for the 8 July meeting.

3. Consent Items

None

1. Adjournment

At 21:15 DH moves to adjourn the meeting, AR seconds. DH takes a roll call vote: DS, AR, DH, AL all approve.

Documents and Exhibits Used During this Meeting.

- All relevant Applications and Documents, in Docushare