



City of Somerville
HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
City Hall 3rd Floor, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville MA 02143

17 OCTOBER 2023 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation on Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Eric Parkes	Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Robin Kelly	Vice Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Ryan Falvey	Member	<i>Absent</i>	
Dick Bauer	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Denis (DJ) Chagnon	Alt. Member	<i>Present</i>	
Colin Curzi	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Denise Price	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Dan Coughlin	Member	<i>Present</i>	

City staff present: Emily Hutchings (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning)

The meeting was called to order at 6:47pm and adjourned at 8:08pm.

**PUBLIC HEARING: Determinations of Historic Significance
(Step 1 in the Demolition Review Process)
HP23-000024 – 97 Highland Avenue**

The applicant team explained that the YMCA is seeking to demolish the buildings at 97 and 101 Highland Avenue to build a new, modern YMCA to better serve the community. This project received \$2.5M dollars from the Somerville Affordable Housing Trust, and additional money from the State. The applicant team requested to present the project for both items on the agenda concurrently. The Board agreed.

The applicant team explained that this project is over 30 years in the making. The intention is to better meet the needs of the community. 97 Highland Avenue is currently being used as a daycare for the YMCA and also contains a residential unit. 136 School Street is also in the process of being acquired for the project. This project proposes mixed uses, with an affordable housing aspect. 97 Highland Avenue has been altered over the years, including enclosure of the front and rear porches, shed dormer additions to the front and rear, and an addition on the enclosed porch side of the building. The massing of this building has mostly stayed the same, but the detail of the building has changed from the original detail. There is nothing remarkable about the architecture of the structure. It is not associated with important historical events or persons. The need to demolish it, along with 101 Highland Avenue, to build a better YMCA facility that can serve the public and create more affordable housing dictates that the structure at 97 Highland Avenue is not significant. The size of the new YMCA will be approximately 100,000 s.f.

Chair Parkes opened public testimony.

Ron Cavallo (70 Victoria Street) – stated that a complex of this kind is a significant value to the City. This is an aggressive, but worthy project, and he supports the demolition of both buildings.

Diana Marsh (25 Madison Street) – asked about the plan for the new building and why it requires removal of both buildings.

Chair Parkes closed public testimony.

The Commission noted that this step is to determine if the building is historically significant, not to consider what type of building may be placed on the property next. The Commission discussed the building's significance, due to keeping its massing and fenestration.

Following a motion by Vice Chair Kelly, seconded by Member Bauer, the Commission voted unanimously (7-0) to find the building Historically Significant.

The Commission addressed findings:

- maintains its original massing
- is a decent reflection of its time period based on what is left of the structure
- is closely associated with a member of the merchant class in Somerville and represents that time period type of housing well

Following a motion by Member Chagnon, seconded by Member Bauer, the Commission voted unanimously (7-0) to adopt the findings, as discussed.

RESULT:

HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT

**PUBLIC HEARING: Determinations of Preferably Preserved
(Step 2 in the Demolition Review Process)
HP23-000025 – 101 Highland Avenue**

The applicant team explained that the applicant has waived the determination of significance regarding 101 Highland Avenue in the interest of time, and because the YMCA respects the Commission's thoughts about the structure. This building needs to be demolished to construct the new YMCA facility previously discussed. An engineering report of the structure from approximately 60 years ago stated that the Somerville YMCA was limited even at that time in the programming it could offer by the restrictions and shortcomings of the present building facilities. Almost all the rooms in the YMCA building at that time were considered undersized in relation to their function. The building, at one half century of use at that time, was considered to have already served its purpose. The report noted that the existing conditions of the building at that time were enough to warrant that expedient steps be taken as soon as possible. One recommendation from the report was not to spend much money trying to renovate the building, due to cost and continued lack of adequate space. The building currently limits the YMCA from fulfilling its mission. The YMCA's intention is not to turn anyone away and based on the current building, some 3,000 people each day are being turned away.

The applicant team noted a number of reasons that rehabilitation of the building is not recommended. The applicant team explained that the existing building has floor-to-floor heights that are very low for a building of this size. The current building width in the residential wing is approximately 32', leading to rooms that are 14' long by 7'-8' wide. The proposal is to put in 100 affordable housing units. The building currently sits 8' above the sidewalk. The first thought was to bring the building to ground level, but this has not yet been fully determined. This building should be a beacon for this area. The existing sides and rear of the building are not interesting, and the Staff Report states that the architecture is not unique.

The applicant team read a letter of support from City Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen.

Chair Parkes opened public testimony.

Kate Ryan (168 Willow Avenue) – stated that she would love to have a facility to take her children to. She does not currently take her children to the YMCA, due to the state of the facility. There is an issue with childcare in Somerville and it seems crazy that there is not currently an adequate YMCA facility for this.

Ron Cavallo (70 Victoria Street) – stated that the applicant team has made it clear that this is an antiquated building. This building, and the one previously discussed, should be demolished for a greater good for the City. This location is unique due to its location near the High School. This type of facility is needed for children in the City. The affordable housing proposed also further serves the community.

Diana Marsh (25 Madison Street) – agreed that the building has a nice façade, but she supports demolishing it to create a new YMCA facility that will benefit the community and its children.

Tom Bent (3 Harvard Place) – stated that the existing YMCA has outlived its usefulness. A new YMCA facility would bring many benefits to children in the City. He supports the demolition of this building to create a new YMCA.

Chair Parkes closed public testimony.

The Commission discussed the functions of the YMCA and its importance to the City. The programmatic goals of this project can likely only be met by this applicant at this particular location. The Commission discussed considering additional ways the structure could be preserved or memorialized while still moving the project forward. The applicant team agreed that it would like to do justice to this building and the surrounding area in the design. There are several components of the building that would also tell the story of the structure to be preserved.

Following a motion by Vice Chair Kelly, seconded by Member Bauer, the Commission voted unanimously (7-0) to find the property Preferably Preserved.

The Commission addressed findings:

- has functioned historically for the City as the YMCA
- architectural style is Classic Revival with Tudor, Gothic Revival, and Romanesque elements
- is important within the streetscape and extends the civic theme within the streetscape

Following a motion by Vice Chair Kelly, seconded by Member Chagnon, the Commission voted unanimously (7-0) to adopt the findings, as discussed.

RESULT:	PREFERABLY PRESERVED
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NOTICE: These minutes constitute a summary of the votes and key discussions at this meeting. To review a full recording, please contact the Planning, Preservation & Zoning Division at planning@somervillema.gov.