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Town of Stafford

Stafford Historical Advisory Commission (SHAC)

Remote Meeting Held Via Zoom due to COVID-19 Mitigation Efforts

Monday, November 23, 2020

7 p.m.

Minutes of the Regular Meeting

**1. The meeting was called to order at 7:41 p.m. due to technical difficulties with the conferencing software.** Members participating in the remote meeting were Leonard Clark, chairman; Donald Passardi, vice chairman; Jamie Furness, Roger Ingraham, and Beth Magura, recording secretary. Becky Kraussmann, Greg Post, and Barbara Frassinelli, alternate, did not participate. **A quorum was established.**

Also participating in the meeting was Amber Wakley, Town of Stafford Grant & Marketing Specialist.

**2. Review of the minutes of the Oct. 26, 2020, regular SHAC meeting**

Donald Passardi made a motion to approve the minutes from the 10/26/2020 meeting; this motion was seconded by Roger Ingraham. The motion was unanimously passed by the group.

**3. 2021 calendar of SHAC meetings.** Chairman Clark proposed the following schedule for SHAC meetings: Jan. 25, Feb. 22, Mar. 22, Apr. 26, May 24, June 28, July 26, Aug. 23, Sept. 27, Oct. 25, Nov. 22. There will be no meeting on Dec. 27. Mr. Passardi made a motion to accept the schedule, Mr. Ingraham seconded, and the motion was unanimously passed.

**4. The Allen Bridge on Spring Street: "What is next for the bridge?"**

**4A. Seismic refraction imaging of the Allen Bridge.**

On Sept. 4, 2020, Mr. Cowperthwaite informed SHAC that **the State of Connecticut had hired NDT Corp. to use seismic refraction techniques to assess the river bed composition underlying the Allen Bridge.**

On Nov. 10, Devin Cowperthwaite, director of public works, received a report from NDT Corp. regarding **the scour analysis at the Christopher Allen Bridge.** He is now awaiting the final assessment of CDOT engineers who will interpret the NDT Corp. findings.

A copy of the 21-page seismic refraction report was sent to all SHAC members for their information. SHAC members discussed the NDT Corp. report and agreed that the content is technical in nature and not easily understood by a layperson.

Why CDOT is studying scour of the channel bed at the Allen Bridge at this time is unknown to SHAC.

Commissioner Beth Magura observed that **"scour" was recorded by State of CT engineers in a 2017 routine bridge inspection report for the Allen Bridge.** (She had obtained the 2017 report from Rick Zulick, former DPW director who left the job in Sept. 2019.) In that "In-Depth and Routine Inspection," dated 9/27/2017, in Section 61, "Channel and Channel Protection," the bridge received a rating of 6, which was further described this way: "4 ft. deep + scour pool under structure and along abutment #1."

For the record, **on the next page is a diagram from the 2017 report with areas of scour indicated:**

**The Christopher Allen Bridge, Spring St.**

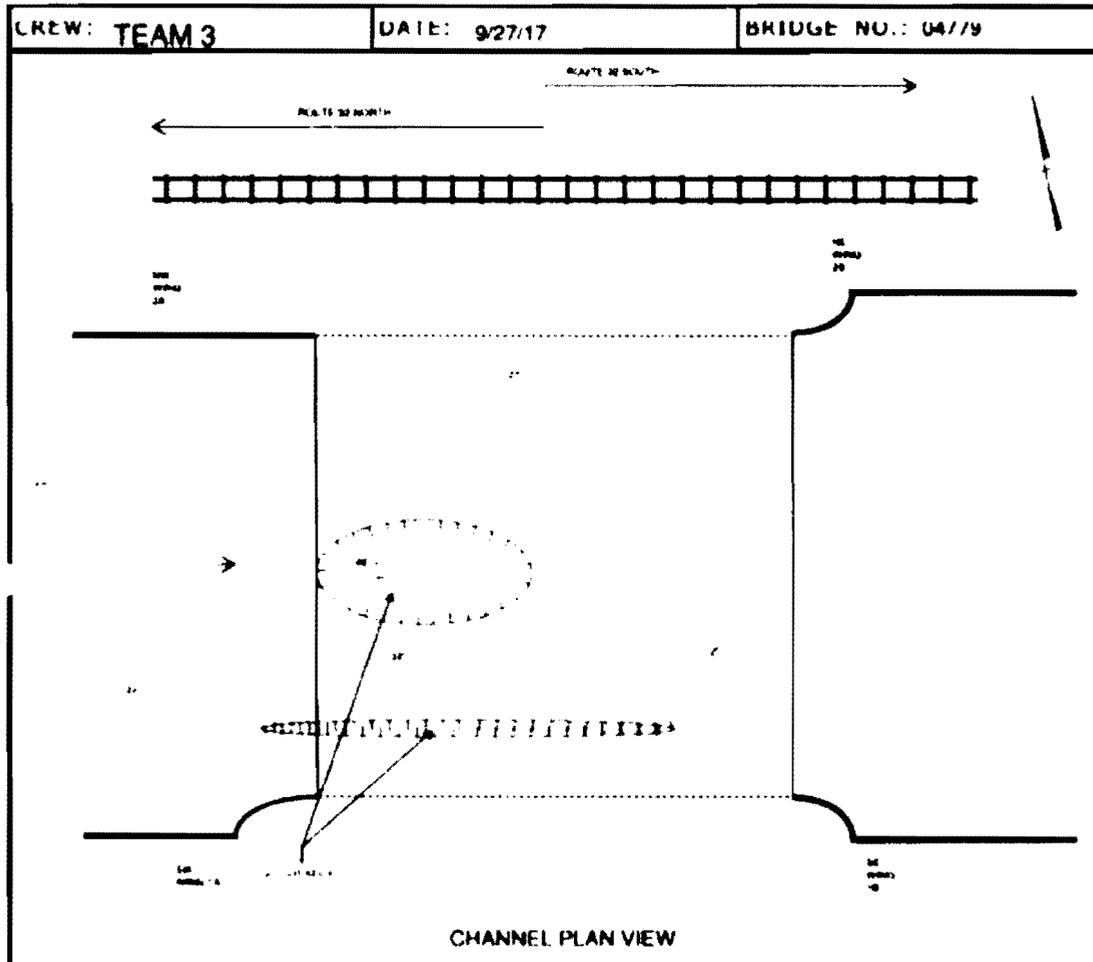
Excerpt from the State of CT Dept. of Transportation's "In-Depth and Routine Inspection," dated 9/27/2017; page 19.

Scour areas in the channel under the Allen Bridge are shown below in the drawing.

Sketches  
Inspection type: In-Depth Routine  
Inspection Date: 9/27/2017  
Inspected by: Team 3

Bridge No: 04779

Town: STAFFORD  
Carried: SPRING STREET  
Crossed: MIDDLE RIVER  
Inventory Route: Non-NHS



#### **4B. Recommendations to Dept. of Public Works.**

SHAC members spent time discussing a draft memo to Director of Public Works Cowperthwaite listing recommendations for protecting the Allen Bridge in the near term (see Appendix 1).

**5. Discussion of a written request to the Board of Selectmen that SHAC be allowed to serve in a citizen oversight capacity for historical structure repair and maintenance.** Ms. Magura proposed that this matter be tabled until the Jan. 25, 2021, SHAC meeting; all present agreed in the interest of finishing the meeting by 9 p.m.

**6. Discussion of the Stafford Brownfields Advisory Board activities related to assessment of the Witt building by environmental engineering and urban planning consultancies.**

Amber Wakley, grants specialist, informed SHAC that **on Tues., Dec. 15 at 6:30 p.m., there will be a virtual public engagement event in conjunction with the Board of Selectmen meeting.** At that time, David Gamble, principal of urban planning architects Gamble Associates, will present many ideas for adaptive reuse of the Witt building in Hyde Park. Ms. Wakley said this will be an introductory meeting via Zoom software and no final decisions on development will be made at that time.

On 11/04/2020, Ms. Wakley provided SHAC members with a link enabling access to a 69-page digital document prepared by Gamble Associates, showing a variety of reuse concepts.

Those who had examined the concepts offered by Gamble Associates agreed that the imagery was spiffy and likely to cause enthusiasm for developing the Witt building.

Proposed concepts included:

- upscale condominiums (a condo association would own the building),
- mixed uses, such as half the building for age-restricted housing and the other half a “community campus,” consisting of meeting space, a theater, and a gym.
- luxury rental apartments
- affordable housing, consisting of one-bedroom and studio apartments that are handicapped-accessible and include on-site management and case management services; a few apartments in the cited development were dedicated to social service referrals to address the needs of the chronically homeless. In this particular case, a statewide human services and community development agency had secured a 99-year-lease for the property from a church.

Chairman Clark again pointed out that, because the Witt building is located in a public park, **no land can be sold with the building.** Ms. Wakley assured SHAC that she had informed Gamble Associates about citizen use of Hyde Park for civic events. Interest in adjacent property would likely be toward the rear of the Witt building for parking, she said.

Ms. Magura remarked that it appears many arrangements exist to enable adaptive reuse of old buildings. **What arrangements other than sale of parkland would be possible?** She cited “North Square at the Mill District” in North Amherst, MA. It was stated in some documentation found on the Town of Amherst website that “...the nonresident property owner retains ownership of this land, ownership of adjacent land yet to be developed, [receives] a considerable multi-million dollar pay-out for the ground lease and a steady stream of commercial revenue—all without significant investment towards the project and without clear conditions or accountability.”

Chairman Clark again asked if **community college or technical training uses** are being considered in Gamble Associates' design concepts. Some discussion ensued about the changing demographics and consolidation of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system. Ms. Magura wondered if this topic merits another round of research to bring knowledge up to date.

**The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on any adaptive reuse plans was discussed.** Mr. Ingraham remarked that the demand for physical classroom space may be in decline for the foreseeable future. The psychological effects of COVID-19 would also affect the practicality of turning the old kitchen into a communal kitchen for entrepreneurial activities.

Mr. Passardi reminded the group **about the idea of using a partially demolished Witt building as a type of park pavilion structure**, such as one that Hyde Park Commission Chairman Rick Hartenstein had seen in Greenville, SC. Ms. Wakley said she had not forgotten this idea, which had been conveyed in a Nov. 3 memo from Ms. Magura to the Brownfields Advisory Committee (see Appendix 2).

**6. Public comment.** No members of the public participated in this meeting.

**7. Old business.** There was no old business.

**10. New business.** There was no new business.

**11. Adjournment.** Mr. Passardi made a motion to adjourn, and Ms. Magura seconded the motion, which was unanimously agreed to by the group. The meeting adjourned at 9:01 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Beth Magura  
Recording Secretary  
Stafford Historical Advisory Commission

Appendix 1 is on page 5.

Appendix 2 is on pages 6–7.

**APPENDIX 1. SHAC minutes (11-23-2020)**

**November 24, 2020**

**To: Devin Cowperthwaite, Town of Stafford Director of Public Works**

**From: Stafford Historical Advisory Commission\***

**Subject: Protecting Allen Bridge in the near term**

**Members of the Stafford Historical Advisory Commission have discussed the Old Structures Engineering report about the Allen Bridge (received in Aug. 2020) and the CDOT–commissioned seismic refraction geophysical investigation report (received in Sept. 2020).**

**To protect the Allen Bridge in the near term, we have drawn up the following recommendations:**

- (1) The Town should avoid using road salt on the bridge until water seepage is remediated.**
- (2) The Town should put up load limit signs or restrict trailer trucks using the bridge until load testing can be completed.**
- (3) The Town should expedite removal of all invading vegetation growing between the veneer stones.**
- (4) The Town should retrieve the delaminated veneer stones that fell from the southwest wing wall in February 2018 to ensure they are preserved for use in repair of the bridge.**

**We would greatly appreciate your feedback on the recommendations above.**

***\*SHAC members are Leonard Clark, chairman; Donald Passardi, vice chairman; Jamie L. Furness; Roger Ingraham; Becky Kraussmann; Greg Post; Barbara Frassinelli (alternate); and Beth Magura, recording secretary.***

To: Brownfields Advisory Committee

APPENDIX 2

Date: 11/03/2020

From: Beth Magura, member of BAC; recording secretary of the Stafford Historical Advisory Commission

Subject: Retaining ownership of Witt building to safeguard Hyde Park; return of the Witt building site to parkland

In May 2017, the Stafford Historical Advisory Commission (SHAC) was appointed by the Board of Selectmen, and members began to study the circumstances surrounding the Witt building. SHAC's *Report 1* presents the breadth and detailed nature of our deliberations; this report has been shared with the Brownfields Advisory Committee via the Dropbox link. SHAC suggests that everyone take the time to read it.

During our deliberations, we uncovered history previously unknown to us, which shifted our focus to the preservation of Hyde Park—the original gift. Buildings come and go, but the land is eternal—a gift in perpetuity to the people of Stafford from a native son.

Recommendation 1 of SHAC's *Report 1* urges the Town to retain ownership of the Witt building in order to preserve Hyde Park in perpetuity, as the Park's benefactor, Isaac Perkins Hyde, had specified in 1897. The Town agreed to this stipulation when officials accepted Mr. Hyde's bequest of about \$1.5 million in today's currency. Consequently, the Town should not relinquish ownership of any land acquired with Mr. Hyde's bequest.

### Retaining ownership of the Witt building to safeguard Hyde Park

Gamble Associates has advanced the concept of mixed residential/office reuse in Scenario 2 of the Dropbox document titled "Adaptive Reuse Scenarios."

Such a mixed-use plan centered on leasing to an entity would have the benefit of not involving the sale of the Witt building with any land bought using Mr. Hyde's bequest.

On page 3 of "Adaptive Reuse Scenarios," Gamble Associates has highlighted an entry from Appendix 2 of SHAC's *Report 1* (see below). This is what Gamble calls "Scenario 2: Mixed Residential/Office Reuse."

Proposed use of the Witt building	Would the use require a zoning change?	Proposed use is achievable via (1) sale, (2) lease or (3) retained by the Town	Does the transaction require the creation of a deed? (See footnote 1 below the table.)	Would the developer benefit from a "Historic District" or "Historic Building" designation? (See footnote 2 below the table.)	Does the use conform to benefactor I.P. Hyde's 1897 bequest to create and maintain a public park in perpetuity for the benefit of the people of Stafford?	Would on-site parking for the proposed use adversely affect citizens using Hyde Park?
Mixed use	Yes	Lease, sale, or retained by the Town	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

By retaining ownership of the Witt building, the Town could grant an entity a triple net lease. A triple net lease requires the lessee to assume the costs of property tax (not applicable in this particular case), regular upkeep and maintenance, predetermined lease payments, and the cost of utilities and heat.

The leasing entity could then renovate the building, and the cost of renovation could be written off on their tax return as leasehold improvements instead of depreciating the entire building, which is done when an entity owns the building. The triple net lease itself can also be written off by the lessee. These are two elements that can be used to offset income taxes by the lessee. This could also be part of any deal to bring in a community college or other educational entity, depending, of course, on their tax situations. The roof and the parking lot may remain the responsibility of the Town. Read more about triple net leasing here: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/t/triple-net-lease-ann.asp>

**Marketing to a prospective lessee.** To a prospective lessee, the location in Hyde Park is picturesque and appealingly close to the walkable Main Street area that is being revitalized by entrepreneurial and civic activity. This

Appendix 2 (continued)

is incentive enough to garner the interest of an entity wishing to establish a toehold in Stafford. An additional incentive is the substantial environmental legwork that is being done in advance by Weston & Sampson, which will be identifying the need for remediation of hazardous substances, etc. Architectural drawings by Gamble Associates form the groundwork for further conceptualizing and refinement by a prospective lessee.

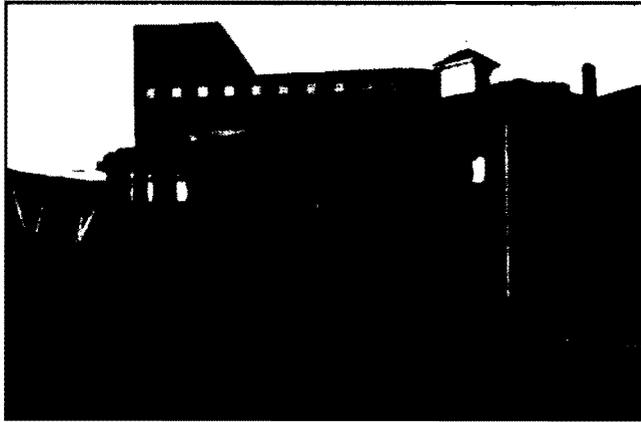
This U.S. EPA brownfields grant sets the stage for the Town to retain ownership of the Witt building, while seeking an entity with a vision worthy of the historically unique Main Street–Hyde Park area of Stafford Springs.

**Proposal to Add a "Scenario 3" to Gamble Associate's portfolio.** Environmental remediation of the Witt building site would clear the way for the Town to create a commemorative pavilion that could incorporate some of the former high school's Art Deco façade elements, which are of architectural and historical interest.

Amidst our brainstorming, I'd like to propose that Gamble Associates generate ideas akin to the Wyche Pavilion in downtown Greenville, SC. [See more photos at this link: <https://www.joshjonesphoto.com/venue/wyche-pavilion/> ]



↓ *The Wynche Pavilion in downtown Greenville, SC. A riverfront mill building converted into an open-air pavilion.*  
← *Wedding party in the Wynche Pavilion.*



In recent years, citizen groups in Stafford have installed a bandshell for concerts at the base of the hill below the Witt building. In the era of Covid-19, retirees have been seen having socially distanced lunches on the stage at midday. The creation of a River Walk by volunteers has been halted temporarily in its early stages due to the pandemic, but intentions are ongoing. Until this year's Covid-19 public health restrictions, a citizen-inspired annual Blues Festival has taken place each August in Hyde Park. Beginning last year, the Stafford Garden Club began adorning the Soldiers Monument with an encircling floral planting to honor those lost in the Civil War. **The people of Stafford are reclaiming Hyde Park as the haven it was always meant to be.**

Such avid citizen involvement in Hyde Park warrants consideration of how to safely remediate the contamination associated with selective demolition of the Witt building and the heating oil leak that occurred in the past. **Fully restoring the Witt site to Hyde Park furthers opportunities to make the Park the cultural and economic centerpiece it once had been in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Very few towns have such an asset for development; we should not squander this public inheritance by relinquishing control of any portion of Hyde Park.**

**I also propose that Weston and Sampson advise the Town on partial building demolition and site cleanup to accommodate a proposed Scenario 3, in which the building is reconfigured as a parkland structure of some sort.**

*end of 11/03/2020 document by Beth Magura, BAC & SIAC member*