

Historical Commission: A Champion For Sandwich's Past - Editorial

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Being the oldest town on Cape Cod, first chartered by the state way back in 1639—136 years before the first shots were fired in the American Revolution—there's no wonder that Sandwich has two municipal committees with the word "history" in their titles.

One is the Sandwich Historical Commission and the second is the Sandwich Old King's Highway Historic District Committee.

The similarities in their names can cause some confusion, but, make no mistake, their responsibilities are quite different.

Want to paint the front door of your historic house Barbie Pink or Caribbean Green? Better go see the Historic District Committee. Need some help finding out who owned your old home during the Civil War-era? That's the Sandwich Historical Commission. Looking for some Community Preservation Act funding to repair a structure of historical significance? You might want to state your case to the historical commission first.

The Old King's Highway group is charged with reviewing proposed new construction or exterior renovations on existing buildings within the town's historic district, which includes all neighborhoods north of the Mid-Cape Highway. Its members determine the historical "appropriateness" of a project to make sure it fits in with the character of the district.

It is a regulatory board, whose members are elected during special historic district elections, held in late November. Only residents who live within the town's historic district can serve on this committee or vote in these special elections.

The Sandwich Historical Commission is more of an advisory board, whose members are appointed by selectmen.

Its job is to identify, document, preserve and protect historic and archaeological assets and to promote public awareness of the history of the town.

When the town was renovating the second floor of Sandwich Town Hall, members of the historical commission were asked for guidance. As the town prepares to renovate the Clark-Haddad building, the historical commission has a seat at the table.

"The way I describe it is the Old King's Highway Historic District Committee is concerned with the outside of a structure; really only the view from the road. The historical commission is focused on the inside, the outside, who lived there, and what's in the dirt it sits on," said historical commission member Lisa Hassler.

"We do a lot of research," she said, "and not only serve as the town's advisor, we also serve as an advocate for history."

"We're the antique squeaky wheel," added commission chairman Greg Anderson. "We're trying to bring attention to the importance of protecting our community's history."

Sometimes this advocacy work puts the group at odds with other town groups and officials.

Last month, the historical commission stepped into the fray over a new 100-foot long drainage swale that the town's public works department built along scenic Old County Road last summer, directly across from the historic Benjamin Nye Homestead. The group took issue with the work, chastising the DPW for being insensitive to the special historic and scenic nature of the area. It urged town engineers and DPW officials to come up with an alternate design that would be more in keeping with the nature of the neighborhood.

When it comes to Community Preservation Act funding requests for historical projects, such as repairing some of the town's oldest gravestones that have broken, crumbled or fallen, the commission plays a big role in deciding if the requests will move forward to Town Meeting for a vote.

Recently, the group has made it a priority to keep a closer eye on these CPA-funded projects, from start to finish.

The decision to provide more oversight came after it was discovered that plastic materials, rather than wood, were used in the restoration of the First Church steeple—a project paid for with \$200,000 worth of Community Preservation Act money.

Another such misstep was taken during the renovation of the old Greenville Schoolhouse on Route 130, when the building's original window sashes were thrown out and replaced with brand-new windows. The work on this building received \$55,000 in Community Preservation Act money.

Using plastic building materials and throwing out perfectly salvageable windows are enough to give a preservationist heart palpitations.

"Since both of these projects pre-date me, I can't say where the miscommunications were," Ms. Hassler said. "But there were gaps in oversight. We want to close those gaps and try to make sure things like this don't happen again."

"Really, what we're trying to do is to make sure this tax money is being spent correctly; that this money isn't just handed over and that's the end of it," Mr. Anderson said. "We want to make sure there is some accountability in place."

Both Ms. Hassler and Mr. Anderson say the town has been generally supportive of the group's efforts. But they also say the historical commission is underutilized.

"We're often thought of after the fact," Mr. Anderson said, "or sometimes we're underestimated or our opinions dismissed."

But underestimating the historical commission can come back to bite a project, especially if the project requires federal permits or is up for federal funding.

All such projects must undergo a National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 review to ensure the project does not impact historic resources. The historical commission is the local authority during these reviews.

For non-federal projects, the commission can also write letters to other boards and committees voicing support or opposition to a particular project because of historical impacts.

"Those letters can carry some weight, considering we're a town entity," Mr. Anderson said.

But Ms. Hassler and Mr. Anderson said they do not want to come across as antagonistic.

They oversee the town's historical marker program, work with property owners to get homes listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and work closely with the town archivist.

"We want to be helpful, and thorough, in protecting the historical resources of this town," Mr. Anderson said.

It's clear that the commission, as currently comprised, takes its charge very seriously, and the town is better off because of it.

