

Sunday N.B.
Standard-Times
July 15, 2018

OUR VIEW

Dartmouth exemplifies historic preservation done right

Determining how much of a town's history should be saved, which structures have the most value, and which would better make way for future development, is a complex process involving multiple, sometimes opposing stakeholders.

It requires transparency, negotiation, and as appropriate, public input.

The process also needs thoughtful consideration of property owners' rights and wishes and is a balancing act that not all communities do well.

Dartmouth is one town that has successfully pursued the preservation of town history, as demonstrated recently in its vote to delay demolition on the Earle House on Russells Mills Road.

The home, while in disrepair, retains many of the architectural features that were part of its original construction in the early 18th century.

It is a rare example of a colonial-era gambrel with original wall and door panels, and numerous rebuilt fireplaces and beehive ovens. Additional value lies in the many original construction techniques and materials that are still evident including gunstock corner posts, pegged beams and rafters, wide pine flooring and handmade door hardware.

In late June, the Historic Commission noted these features and their value in a public hearing before making the decision to enforce the six-month demolition delay. The delay allows them to work with current home owners to develop a plan to save the building, either by repairing and restoring it or, if that isn't feasible, moving it to a new location.

The home has survived demolition threats before and was successfully moved and rebuilt at its current location in 1927.

Homeowners appeared receptive to working with the commission.

Alice Flint and her husband had explored restoring the home but multiple obstacles kept them from pursuing that path. Unable to make it work, they submitted the demolition request, a tool used by communities to trigger a review of historical sites in danger of being destroyed.

What is interesting to observe about the commission's response to the request and subsequent public hearing is the value of the discussion between two groups who might have opposed each other.

Instead, when Ms. Flint expressed her frustration at being unable to identify an architect who could help them save their house, commission members jumped at the chance to help and offered to connect the Flints with an experienced architect as well as additional preservation experts who could help create an affordable restoration plan.

While all demolition delay hearings may not have such amicable outcomes, commission members deserve credit for having policies in place and people dedicated to thoughtful exploration of historical solutions in the best interest of the town and homeowners. Their forethought and dedication to preserving history may save yet another historically important home.

Now with the expertise of the Historical Commission, there is a good chance the Flints can save Earle House.

And, should it turn out the project is too substantial for the owners to pursue, the town will have another chance to decide if the house should be moved once more.