**Wiscasset Historic Preservation Commission**

Minutes, 3/3/16

Present: John Reinhardt, Gordon Kontrath, Wendy Donovan, Jib Fowles, Susan Blagden

1. Call to order

The meeting was called to order at 5:00 pm

2. Consideration of February 4, 2016 minutes

The minutes were approved without changes.

3. Introduction of new town planner

Wiscasset’s new Town Planner, Ben Averill, was introduced

4. Presentation by Chris Closs, Field Service Advisor from Maine Preservation

Maine Preservation is the state’s private sector preservation group, founded in 1972 and based in Yarmouth. In his role as a Field Service Advisor, Mr. Closs provides information, guidance, advice, and grant assistance.

Maine Preservation is an advocacy organization. It offers a number of programs, including:

“Protect and Sell Program”, an option on threatened historic buildings

Historic easement program

Help with Historic tax credits on commercial rehab projects

Awards Program

Most endangered list, which has a 70% save rate

Mr. Closs then addressed a list of questions which had been compiled by the Commission.

1) How does he feel that the Wiscasset Historic Commission (WHC) can best use the Maine Historic Preservation Commission (MHPC) in our local historic zone and protection of local historical sites and homes?

The MHPC can best be used as a resource. It has no regulatory authority, but years of experience and a network of resources to call upon. (For example, if a resident gets a high price on a quote for restoration work, the MHPC can review the quote and offer other solutions.) Mr. Closs has observations on the Wiscasset ordinance that he will send to the Commission in writing. He feels it is generally sound, and that it can be tweaked to make it (and the Commission) more user-friendly.

2) Can he give us any history as to other historical commissions in Maine using the state and federal guidelines and what success was achieved?

He will send us a list. He also provided the Commission copies of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, which is used by everyone. The philosophy is: preserve and repair first, replace only if you must, replace in kind. Successes vary widely. There has been an uptick because of the Maine St Program and because people understand how preservation increases property values and civic pride.

3) Please tell us about your organization and its mission and what sorts of things you are up to these days?

This was covered in his introduction.

4) A big picture question: What is your perception of the current state of the historic preservation movement in Maine?

The current state is an inclining curve. There is a new statewide preservation plan, good structure in the state, and statistics re. investments. The preservation movement is also helped by the current trend of sustainability – the “greenest” building is the one that’s already standing.

5) Should we apply to be a Certified Local Government Program? What are the advantages of this? Please help us understand the work of this program.

He would recommend that to us as a 5-year goal, if not earlier. Being a CLG would enable us to apply each year for grant money from MHPC, averaging $10-20,000. It would shorten the pathway to working with the Park Service, and help buildings be added to the National Register more quickly. It also raises the bar of professionality for our commission. We have half of the steps already in place.

6) Could you discuss the National Register of Historic Places as it applies to Wiscasset? If a property is registered, how does this influence what the property owner can and cannot do? Are there tax credits involved?

The National Register is an honorary designation, but has no teeth. It can protect buildings from other agencies (DOT, etc.), but has no effect on private property. He will send us a list of benefits.

7) Are there any towns similar to Wiscasset that are further along the historic preservation path that might serve as models for us? What can we learn from their experience?

Towns to looks at would include: Belfast, Biddeford (the mills), South Berwick (mills), North Berwick (Sullivan School), Gardiner, Hallowell, Norway, Fryeburg, Skowhegan, and Houlton – all towns with “ascending economic impact”. Wiscasset benefits from tourism, so our goal should be to convert downtown spaces to year-round producers, and increase jobs. We should use the Maine Street approach, focus on small business and incremental growth.

We should contact Lorraine Francis at the Maine Downtown Foundation ane become part of the network.

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8) What advice would you give us on working with local government?

Be sure to tie in the planning board, conservation commission, and zoning board of appeals. Copy minutes of our meetings to other organizations.

9) What general guidance would you give us on how best to protect Wiscasset’s rich architectural heritage?

Improve on the ordinance we have, work with the Town Planner on the economic development side. Reach out to local businesses and concentrate our efforts there.

10) What are some do’s and don’ts you might offer us?

Don’t worry about regulating house colors – the next owner will most likely change it again anyway. Focus on windows instead.

Do add a “demolition delay provision” of 60-90 days. It’s a good cooling off period that will allow for a second look.

Don’t regulate interiors – this can be done through a preservation easement in special cases.

11) From your experience, what are the issues that get residents hot under the collar?

Preservation looks after the cultural health of our communities. We should be creative and helpful in offering solutions. We should encourage new construction if done properly.

The next commission meeting will be Thursday, April 6, 2016 at 5:00 pm.