Members present: Kathie Northrup and John Giotas. Jim Sullivan, the Town Council representative, was not present due to illness. The meeting was called to order at 6:35 p.m. at the Hooksett Public Library.

K. Northrup: Tonight we want to hear public input about the proposed demolition of the house at 53 Martin’s Ferry Road, owned by Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU). This hearing has been posted and published by Hooksett’s Administration office. I want to first give you some background on the procedure and on the responsibilities outlined in the regulation.

Under Section 17 of the Town’s Development Regulations, the Code Enforcement Officer refers to the Heritage Commission any demolition application for a building 50 years old or older and with 500 square feet or more of gross floor area. The Heritage Commission then meets and makes a determination of “...whether the building might be of historical or architectural significance.”

We had that meeting on January 30, 2020, and did find the so-called Underhill home potentially historically or architecturally significant, citing the historical connection to Mr. Underhill, the distinctive architectural style, and the importance to the character of the area, one of the most historic in town. The regulation then calls for a public hearing to hear the concerns, comments, or alternatives that are proposed by the Commission or members of the public.

If, after hearing the comments and the results of further research, the Heritage Commission finds that the building is significant and its loss potentially detrimental to the town, we will have a meeting with the applicant to discuss the alternatives offered. If no alternatives to demolition have been identified and agreed to by SNHU, it is free to proceed with demolition, and the Code Enforcement Officer shall issue the permit.

This regulation is referred to as “demolition delay” not “demolition deny.” While the regulation does not prevent demolition, it provides a valuable time-out to explore alternatives. That’s what we’re here to do tonight. Scott Greeb, the Assistant Vice President of Facilities Management for SNHU, is here with us.

K. Northrup: I am opening the Public Hearing at 6:37 pm, asking that speakers state their names and addresses for the record. I ask, also, that speakers confine comments or alternative ideas to the 53 Martin’s Ferry Road house. We are here to discuss its value and potential, not other projects going on in town.

Martin Cannata, 3 Blood Drive, Hollis, NH: My wife and I are former owners of this property. We would like to know the time period for the delay.
K. Northrup: It is 49 or 50 days. I will check to get the exact number of days.

J. Giotas: I toured this building and found it to be in good shape. Some things need to be done, but it is move-in ready. The heat and electricity work. It could be sold.

PUBLIC INPUT:

Brian Baer, 13 Whitehall Road and Historical Society Treasurer: We have had a great relationship with SNHU over the years. This house was built around 1900 and Fred C. Underhill, Hooksett’s first Citizen of the Year, owned it for about 20 years. There is a mix of the old and the new on the SNHU campus. This building could be used for CTE programs - architecture and engineering. It is one of the last three buildings of that age in the Martin’s Ferry area.

Gail Mayberger, Boston: We owned this house from 1956 to 1969. Why do they want to tear down this lovely home?

S. Greeb: It is not necessarily our end game to tear the building down. We have not used it and have a concern about liability. We are open to alternatives. We started the demolition process but are open to selling the building. We want to listen to ideas. Our concern now is that someone might break in and get hurt, or they might break in to steal copper. No one from SNHU has spent a night in that house for a long time. SNHU has spent no money on it. The roof leaks and the chimney leaks.

M. Canata: As a former owner of the house, I can speak to its integrity. As to concerns about people breaking in to steal copper, how about an alarm system funded by SNHU? Has that been considered?

S. Greeb: That is an idea. There is also the likelihood of mold.

Karla Vogel, 3 Blood Road, Hollis: My husband and I sold this house to SNHU in 2013 with the understanding that it would be maintained as a residence for faculty or students. It is highly livable. The roof was rebuilt 20 years ago; it only needs shingle tabs. The property includes 4.5 acres - up to the cemetery. We restored this house with love. It would not take much to fix it.

Diane Valade, 87 Kimball Road and Historical Society Secretary: I am always looking for a place for our historical items. We have items stored at the old Prescott Library and at Town Hall. This building could be a place for SNHU and for us. The building could be used to have classes for students to learn about local history. So many historical things could be done. We have albums, manuscripts and diaries written in cursive. This building could have a school room where college students could learn to read cursive writing; the ‘new kids on the block’ often do not know how to read or write in cursive. It would be an asset to keep this building going because we have to know where we are from.

Tony Lacasse, 12 Joanne Drive: Going along with Diane’s point, what I was thinking is that the current place for historical items is very small and not accessible because it has
no parking. This is a great PR opportunity for SNHU to partner with the Historical Society
to tie into local history and the schools. This would foster community (civic) engagement.
SNHU could donate this building, reaching out to Hooksett. Lots of people want to branch
with SNHU, and it would be tax deductible. There are many positives for both sides. It’s
a feel-good story - a non-profit helping another non-profit. There are lots of personal
relationships with this house, and there is value in the community.

Roger Duhaime, Hackett Hill Road: I grew up in Hooksett and live in a 200-year old home.
My barn has a typical Yankee patchwork roof. I chair the Town’s ZBA and serve on the
Economic Development Committee. SNHU has grown. We cannot get back land that gets
developed, and we cannot get back the old homes which are demolished. This old building
is a nice home, and the sidewalk is already there.

Alex Walczyk, Town Councilor: The historic value of this property should be taken into
consideration. Many who have lived in this house are here tonight. It would be a shame
to lose the home’s historic value. Mr. Underhill donated land for schools. I attended the
Underhill School. The roundtable is a good idea. Don’t just demolish it.

D. Valade: There are changes occurring in Hooksett. I get calls from Jim Sullivan or
Kathie Northrup about historic buildings which might be demolished, and I rush to take
pictures. The Roundhouse at SNHU is an example. I took pictures of the inside, and I
have taken many pictures of historic places in Hooksett. It would be great to have a place
to display these pictures. When the tower behind Mount St. Mary’s was demolished, a
woman I saw the next day could not remember what had been there.

K. Northrup: As part of the public notice process, notices were posted on a couple of
community Facebook sites. Most of these have been available to the applicant on public
sites, but I will highlight a few of those which offered alternatives:

Looks like it would make a nice B&B! Would love a place like that to put
family in when they come for a visit over a hotel. If it’s owned by the college,
it would make a great place to teach hospitality management classes.

Airbnb rental. Short-term day rental for business functions or small
weddings. Multi-use office spaces. All of these things can be run by
students much like a student-run newspaper. I was the business manager
of our college newspaper and it really set my entire career in motion. Every
job I’ve ever had was built off of that management job. I now own my own
education-based editorial business...all because of an opportunity I had in
college.

Has anyone offered the option of having the school use it for student or
faculty housing? Seems to be fair to both sides.

K. Northrup: Most of the other comments favored reuse or sale. Because Stephanie
Nelson is not here, I will read her message in its entirety, although this goes beyond our
request to confine remarks to the merits of the house.
“Hello,

I am unsure if I will make it to the meeting at the library, but wanted to give a bit of input. I live around the corner on Sherwood Drive and have been a bit alarmed by SNHU’s expansion. The stadium is now looming over the neighborhood as a light pollution eyesore and can be so loud during events the music sounds like a car parked in front of the house playing music too loud. When we call the University to complain, they tell us to call the police if they are breaking a rule/law. So, we are already not on great terms. They already demolished other buildings on their property when they have not been able to make their plans work, so they don't have higher taxes on the property.

I don't know if that is the plan for this property as well. My understanding is they wanted this to be a guest house, but because of residential zoning they can't have more than three guests at a time residing there. They wanted more so they just boarded it up. Now that their plans can't be fulfilled, they will just demolish it since they can't have their way.

With this property being of historical value and in a residential area, it would be best kept and not torn down just for a small tax purpose. If they are looking into expanding their campus, I am still not for this project. They have already turned our quiet neighborhood into their backyard and don't seem to care about being good neighbors. The thought of them creeping further down the road feels like they are surrounding us. It is an unnerving feeling.

S. Nelson, Sherwood Drive resident of 31 years”

K. Northrup: I also have an email from Brian Rosato:

“I am an outgoing Charlotte, NC resident, about to relocate to the state of Vermont. As I learned the news, as an incoming Vermont resident, I am going to block the demolition and plan to sign a new agreement with SNHU to declare the home as historical ground, protected by the federal historical law. With the agreement in place, I plan on maintaining the ground of the house for all SNHU students to reflect the culture of the University. My former roommate, Marlana George, also a permanent resident of Charlotte, NC and also a current senior SNHU student taking online courses, believes the house should reflect the culture of the University and that SNHU should model the house at every opportunity to reflect itself to future generations. As I prepare to get started on the idea of not demolishing the house, I hope a deal can be made sometime in the next few years. Please deliver this to the public, and I will start working with SNHU as soon as possible.

Brian Rosado"

K. Northrup: The Commissioners will now offer their considerations on this petition I will start with information I’ve thought about to this point and the results of further research.
I have been concerned about this house for a long time. Whenever you see an old home sitting unoccupied, it doesn’t bode well. SNHU purchased it in 2013 and used it off and on for a couple of years. It has been vacant since. I have been concerned that a further period of vacancy would make it a candidate for demolition.

A search of the Assessor’s database reveals that SNHU owns much of the land in that area. In the last several years, houses dated to 1900, 1920, 1840, and 1833 - houses in varying conditions - have been demolished. At the corner on North River Road, SNHU uses an 1880 home for programming. The other houses saved, at the very south end of the property, were 1830 and 1938 (as I recall, this one was moved.). Both are used for University functions. In the interest of full disclosure, the 1938 Morrissey house also has a clipped gable but does not present the example which the Underhill house does.

Martin’s Ferry is one of the oldest settlements in town. Doing research for the roadside marker, I found that before it became part of Hooksett, this was one of Chester’s earliest settled areas, dating back to 1775 with a doctor, a log schoolhouse, a trading post, and, of course, the ferry run by the Martin family for decades. There was also a railroad depot, along with a post office that operated from 1883 until 1903.

I appreciated SNHU’s earlier efforts to blend the old with the new. The various architectural styles are so interesting when driving through campus. If saved, there’s the possibility of 100+ year-old buildings anchoring each end of the campus. This is an interesting example of New England/Hooksett architecture. Its retention would help to preserve community character. Not a lot of these houses are left in town, and certainly not in such an historic area or in its condition.

This also was the home of Fred C. Underhill from 1925 to 1950. He was the first Hooksett Citizen of the Year in 1959. I’m sure you have figured out by now that it was Mr. Underhill who donated 22 acres across the road in 1957 for the Fred C. Underhill School. Both Fred and his wife are buried in the adjacent Martin’s Cemetery.

What might take the place of the building is not a major consideration. It’s not the merit of the replacement but that the existing building contributes, has value, and should be kept.

K. Northrup: I spoke with Megan Rupnik, State Survey Coordinator, NH Division of Historical Resources, and she offered these comments:

“This circa 1900 home has elements of Queen Anne and Craftsman styles. The most notable feature would be the clipped gable end on the façade, called a jerkinhead roof, the shed roof dormer on the side wing, and the wraparound porch. It is of architectural interest. Additions show the evolution of domestic architecture. It is unlikely that any new construction would mimic the existing building. Our office, the Division of Historical Resources, does not have a regulatory role in these local matters, but we do encourage the re-use of historic properties, which have intrinsic value and are often built with higher-quality materials and might be a better long-term investment than new construction.”

K. Northrup: I spoke with Jennifer Goodman, Executive Director of the NH Preservation Alliance, and she offered this comment:
“If an alternative to be considered is the sale of the home, I will help with marketing to our network. Our website and newsletters feature historic homes for sale to the preservation community and would get a very wide distribution.”

K. Northrup: I contacted Nicholas Williams, Hooksett Town Planner, about housing availability. He advised that vacancy rates in both Merrimack and Hillsborough Counties are under one percent (1%). He said that there is hardly any housing available for immediate consumption, and the last thing we want to see in this housing crisis is for good quality housing to be demolished, especially if it is of architectural or historical significance.

K. Northrup: I also contacted two of the prior owners. The Maybergers owned the home from 1956 until 1969. They furnished me with photographs. Martin Cannata and Karla Vogel owned the home from 1994 until 2013. They provided a list of the renovations they made to the property which is on the display board this evening. The Mayberger daughter has memories as a child growing up there. The Cannata/Vogel family looked back at working on all the renovations and improvements they made to the home. They estimate that they easily invested $125,000 in improving the property over the years. They said they left a lot of their hearts and energy there.

One of the former owners lives out of town; the other out of state. Both have fond memories of this house as a home. In talking to them, interestingly, both said whenever they are in the area, they take a drive by to see the house.

K. Northrup: Hooksett’s Planning Board is considering at their next meeting - only one meeting - two subdivisions for 64 new homes. Compare that to Hooksett having approximately 115 homes built in 1900 and before, according to the Assessing database. We could each probably point to ten or twelve of these that are beyond saving. It is called demolition by neglect. They are long vacant with no upkeep. When we see one in such good condition as this one, it seems to make sense to try to preserve it.

I do want to thank SNHU for their maintenance of the house. It is certainly not one of those neglected homes.

In summary, I will be basing my decision on the following: This home is the only remaining building of its age and style in Hooksett and along that strip of Martin’s Ferry Road. The architecture is unusual (unique clipped gable), its removal would impact community character, its retention would help to preserve and protect an historic place or area of historic interest in town, and its condition appears good. The historical significance is related to Mr. Underhill.

K. Northrup: John, any comments?

J. Giotas: I have lived in Hooksett for 40 years, watching old homes disappear. This house is quintessentially historic. The diversity offered by the old and the new is great.

K. Northrup: Would anyone else like to offer a public comment?

S. Greeb: This process is good for SNHU. I am glad I came, and I will attend again if such a situation arises in the future. It is good to see the various perspectives.
K. Vogel: I want to thank Kathie Northrup for the Commission’s consideration. The house almost needed demolition, but the work we did turned it around significantly.

K. Northrup: I am closing the public hearing at 7:25 p.m.

K. Northrup: I find the property does have architectural and historical significance. My suggested alternative would be repurposing by SNHU. If that is not possible, I would favor the sale of the property so another family like the Maybergers and the Cannatas could make it a home again. And, maybe in 50 years, that family will also drive by to check it out.

J. Giotas: I agree.

K. Northrup: John, do you care to make a motion?

J. Giotas: I move that the Commission declare the property at 53 Martin’s Ferry Road to be significant and its loss potentially detrimental to the town, and, pursuant to the demo review regulation, that the Commission meet with the applicant at their convenience to discuss the alternatives proffered, our recommendation being that if the university does not wish to retain the building for reuse that it sell the property.

K. Northrup: I second the motion.

The motion was voted unanimously in favor.

J. Giotas: I hope that more old buildings will be declared significant because their loss is detrimental to the Town.

The meeting adjourned at 7:30 p.m.

Kathleen Northrup, Chair

Kathleen Donnelly, Recording Clerk

February 19, 2020