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St. Croix Historical Preservation Society Approves New Signage, Rejects Immediate Demolition Proposal

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Staircase in a historic, damaged building. By. GETTY IMAGES

The monthly meeting of the St. Croix Historical Preservation Society recently convened to discuss several applications before it.

The first was one for signage, submitted by Sandra Sanford for her forthcoming wellness center. During the meeting, officials addressed the relevant code requirements, ultimately culminating in a favorable decision for Sanford.

A seasoned massage therapist with over 13 years of experience, Sanford has been primarily mobile over the last few years but now seeks a stationary location for her practice, given the physical demands of the job. Thus, the advent of 'Ocean State of Mind,' a Massage Therapy office

set to open its doors on 41 A B, Queen Cross Street.

The application's crux concerned the installation of a new sign for 'Ocean State of Mind,' intending to replicate the size of the previous sign displayed by a retail store that previously occupied the space. Queries about the exact dimensions of the signage were raised, with Sanford being reminded of the eight foot minimum clearance between the top of the sidewalk and the underside of the sign required by code.

After Sanford's presentation and ensuing discussions, a board member moved to approve the application, specifying that "the sign is to meet the code requirements of being no less than eight feet from its lowest point to the top of the sidewalk. And it'd be the same size as the previous sign there." The motion carried.

Carlos Reyes came before the board next with an application for new construction on New Street in Christiansted. Reyes outlined the details of the narrow plot's design which required innovative solutions. To accommodate the client's request for three bedrooms, the construction would be vertically oriented, resulting in a two-story building with a small porch on the back to take advantage of the view.

Reyes confirmed that he had already consulted with the fire department and local laws, agreeing to leave a two to three feet space from the boundary line. While usually the restriction is five feet, the slim nature of the plot necessitated this adjustment.

Questions were raised about potential egress for the upper floor, to which Reyes confirmed a small deck would be added at the rear of the building for this purpose. He also clarified concerns about a column on the property, confirming it is located on government land, not the building's premises.

Additionally, he explained that the building would be constructed with concrete blocks, considering the area's hurricane risk. The external appearance was discussed, with considerations for color schemes and shutters being made.

Questions were raised regarding the building's square footage, potential for expansion, and site improvements. Reyes reassured officials that the client's needs had been met, and he agreed on the importance of early consultation with the committee for design input. The discussion ended with an agreement that more focus should be placed on the building's street-facing finish in future discussions, and the application for new construction was approved.

A project presented by John Golden for approval was the reconstruction of the rear porch of a building on Queen Street, Frederiksted. The structure, which was severely damaged by Hurricane Maria in 2017, has been pending repairs due to lack of funds. ""The existing covered porch was right here. As you can see, the entire structure of the porch covering has been blown away. We're not looking to make any changes. We just want to rebuild what is damaged, which is practically the whole thing," Golden said during a presentation.

Questions about the type and quality of drawings of the existing building were raised by one of the committee members, concerned about whether there was sufficient information to accurately restore the building. In response, Golden assured the committee that they were well prepared to conduct the repairs, and would be utilizing pressure treated wood in the reconstruction to make it stronger than before. The project gained a nod from CZM.

CZM then heard a request to tear down the second floor of 48 A King Street in Frederiksted, a decaying structure which was called “embarrassing to the town.”

However, committee members were not immediately convinced. They insisted on the need for more specific details about the second-floor structure before granting a demolition permit, arguing that the safety and structural integrity of the building, not just its aesthetic appeal, are vital considerations. One member cautioned that community complaints about the building's state alone do not justify an entire second-level demolition.

An inspection report indicated severe structural issues, with steel exposed in places and pillars falling apart, and concluded that the building, particularly the second floor, was unsafe.

The ultimate decision was for a site visit to be conducted by the committee for a more detailed evaluation of the property. The proposal now awaits further discussions scheduled for a subsequent meeting after the site visit.

Next was a technical review led by Mary Dema from the Virgin Islands Architecture Center for Built for Heritage, focused on a building located on Hospital Street. Left untouched for decades, the structure poses significant safety concerns, according to Dema. She expressed the need to secure insurance for the building before any renovation work could commence. This initial step entails boarding up the building for safety reasons and to prevent further deterioration.

Dema's plan was met with approval from the committee members, given the current state of the building. According to one member, the ceiling of the arcade is "literally falling from the sky", which emphasizes the pressing need for the building to be made secure.

The discussion also addressed the issue of encroaching vegetation. A committee member expressed concerns about a "damn tree" growing in the archway between the two buildings. He emphasized the need for immediate action as the vegetation threatened to undermine the stability of the structure.

Dema assured the committee that vegetation removal was part of the second phase of the restoration plan. She outlined that they were seeking funding through various grant applications, one of which was for \$750,000, which would cover comprehensive clean-up, stabilization, and lead paint abatement.

By the end of the session, it was agreed that the immediate focus should be on boarding up the building. Dema was asked to submit a diagram of the proposed solution, which the committee could review and approve electronically. The speed of this process is critical, as the building needs to be secured to obtain insurance and eventually secure the necessary funding for comprehensive restoration.