

ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW BOARD

The Architectural Review Board, as established by Town Ordinance # 78 and passed July 7, 1997, is to “evaluate applications for site, building, or sign development or redevelopment and construction from an architectural and aesthetic perspective with the goal of preserving the quality of our heritage and environment”. Authorization is also granted in ordinance #78 for the ARB to “adopt standards that will assist applicants in understanding what design features, materials and components are considered acceptable for consideration”. In order to “further the Architecture Review Board’s goal of improving the appearance and aesthetic quality of the town”, the ARB “may require that applications be evaluated in terms of overall quality, attainment of the goals of the Board, and ability to harmonize with the surroundings.”

In 2002 the ARB completed general Design and Development Guidelines, which are available at the Town Hall to all applicants for land use permits. We hope that our Guidelines will also be of use to the other land use boards and commissions in drafting new plans and regulations. However, it is our charge to consider applications in terms of their unique neighborhood context in a way that cannot be done in terms of town wide or even zone wide basis without resulting in a bland sameness.

Three industrial, two multi-family, two municipal and two office developments, as well five renovations and twenty-seven signs were reviewed this year in our regular course of duty. Additionally, single-family residences were reviewed as stipulated by the Zoning Commission for the subdivision of the former Castle Inn site.

By taking a pro-active policy in realistically considering the applicants’ needs and limitations, we have found this year almost all applicants have been receptive to and appreciative of our requests and suggestions, and generally willing to adapt to our conditions for positive recommendation. We have raised issues that might not have been considered by the owners, which by virtue of being out of the scope of their designers, would have otherwise “fallen through the cracks”. For example, we believe that many signs that would otherwise be tacked up without due consideration to their architectural placement, construction or support design (and look tacky) now dwell more comfortably in their neighborhoods. We do find, however, that many site planning considerations are already “locked in” by the time applications come under our review, and we would like to advise site designers earlier in the process.

It is also our observation that a significant loophole exists in that major architectural façade alterations, which (while requiring building permits) do not come under our review and do not require zoning permits because their building bulk and areas are unchanged. Certainly these alterations can be as significant to their neighborhoods as those that we do review, and we hope that some mechanism may be developed to provide such review.

The ARB has recommended reconsidering the zoning of portions of Route One where significant character is threatened, particularly between Elm Street and the Viaduct, and in the neighborhood of the Oyster River Crossing and westerly up to the developed area near Spencer Plain Road. Looking particularly at the issue of signage, we felt that many such areas are subject to harm by further proliferation of internally illuminated signage. After trying to specify which particular areas to recommend for eliminating such future signage, it was determined that only a town-wide ban would be feasible without being unfair or arbitrary, and such a recommendation was approved by vote. Also recommended were specific reduction of signage areas by zone, based on the experience of our reviews in which permitted areas proved excessively large.

We also strongly support the implementation of different Village Districts and Historic Rural Routes; for instance the standards and goals for upper Main Street would likely differ from middle and lower Main Street and Old Boston Post Road. It has also been suggested such a mechanism could provide public interest protection and good planning for a vital mix of waterfront uses in the vicinity of the natural deep-water landings of Saybrook Point and Ferry Point between the railroad and highway bridges. We look forward to assisting in defining and mapping a Village District or Districts in the nearest possible future, and to continuing to help to the best of our abilities in these and other planning considerations.

In the meanwhile we will continue the efforts of which we are most proud, helping with each application uniquely one at a time.

Jonathan M. Gibbs, *Chairman*