

**DRAFT MINUTES  
BLUE RIBBON COMMITTEE ON  
AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND  
(CHESTNUT STREET)**

Wednesday, February 16, 2005  
at 4:30 p.m.  
held at the  
City Council Chambers, City Hall

**1. Call to order:**

Meeting commenced at 4:35 p.m.

Members in attendance were: Councilor John W. Hynes, Chair  
Councilor Laura Pantelakos, Mary Bailey; Valerie Cunningham, James Splaine,  
[Steve Parkinson, and Suzanne M. Woodland (Ex-officio members)].

John McGee arrived at 5:00 p.m.

Also attending Dr. Richard Boisvert, State Archeologist.

Vernis Jackson was unable to attend. Ms. Geraldine Palmer attended on behalf  
of Ms. Jackson.

John Burke was unable to attend the meeting.

**2. Vote on January 19, 2005 Meeting Minutes:**

By unanimous vote the draft minutes of the January 19, 2004 meeting were  
approved.

**3. Presentation by Hannah Orestis:**

Ms. Orestis is a senior at Portsmouth High School who served as an intern in the  
Legal Department. She investigated methods to memorialize the site. Her  
proposal to commemorate the African Burial Ground was to install granite posts.  
She explained that she thought the posts should be made out of granite for  
two reasons:

1. That New Hampshire is recognized as the granite state; and
2. That granite is one of the strongest and most durable rocks.

Under her proposal the posts would be 5' in length, inclusive of 2' underground  
for stability. The width and depth would be 16" x 16" with a 45° cut/slant at the

top of the post which would allow room for engraving. She contacted Swenson Granite Works who priced the granite posts at \$349.00 per post.

Ms. Orestis submitted a handout with her proposal which included drawings of the posts and dimensions which will be kept on record in the Committee files.

**4. Presentation by Steve Parkinson of Street Closure Proposal:**

Public Works Director Steve Parkinson reviewed with the Committee sketches which he prepared showing a partial street closure. These sketches incorporated comments made by the various Committee members at previous meetings. (Those sketches are on record in the Committee files.) In summary, Chestnut Street would be closed at the Court Street end. Three distinct green areas would be created. Parking would be eliminated from the street. Two-way traffic would enter and exit from State Street. There would be a width of 20' for the travel lanes. This is a reduction in the usual 24' feet required for dual travel lanes given that the street should not receive a high volume of traffic. The proposal reflects some potential changes to the bank entrance. In addition Mr. Parkinson suggested that it may be possible to gain some additional green space on the westerly side of Chestnut Street by narrowing certain driveways. Communications with affected property owners would have to take place. Mr. Parkinson reviewed the location of existing utilities along Chestnut Street. Mr. Parkinson pointed out that these are not engineered plans; engineering work still needs to be reviewed to explore drainage and other issues related to any changes in the street.

Atty. Woodland gave a brief overview of the process going forward, namely a recommendation from this Committee to the City Council. The City Council would then likely refer to the Planning Board for its review.

Jim Splaine emphasized that he wanted to see the public continue to have input at all levels.

Eric Weinrieb, a Chestnut Street abutter, indicated that he liked the proposal. He questioned the turning radius for cars at the dead-end and also raised a question with regard to plowing. He also encouraged the Committee to send this proposal to all abutters on Chestnut Street.

Councilor Hynes responded that abutters would have an additional opportunity to provide input as this matter would be going to City Council then likely referred to the Planning Board and then back to City Council.

Councilor Pantelakos raised a question with regard to drainage. Mr. Parkinson indicated that the drainage issues could be engineered, it is just that the engineering has not been done yet.

Mary Bailey raised a question with regard to Mr. Parkinson's suggestion to modify certain driveways. Mr. Parkinson responded that we would have to engage in discussions with property owners to determine their interest with that concept.

Valerie Cunningham stated that the plans looked great.

Geraldine Palmer also thought the plans looked great.

Councilor Pantelakos also thought the plans looked very good. She wanted to hear from the State Archeologist, Mr. Boisvert, in terms of his thoughts on the plans.

Mr. Boisvert is pleased with the plans. He had an opportunity to review them prior to the meeting. He has spoken with the local archeologist on the project, to identify a place within the proposed green space for re-interment. He has identified a section between the new manhole and the sidewalk on the westerly side. It is an area that has been fully excavated and thus sterile. By utilizing the space between the manhole and the sidewalk, the City would not disturb any other remains that may be in place in Chestnut Street. He believes there would be sufficient space in that area for re-interment. He thought it was a good design from an archeological point-of-view in terms of recognizing where other graves may be in the Chestnut Street area.

Councilor Pantelakos wanted to hear from Banknorth in terms of the proposal. Mr. Parkinson and Councilor Hynes represented that they believe the bank is not opposed to a partial street closure. A representative from the bank was at the meeting to observe, but did not comment. Councilor Pantelakos asked if we could get something in writing from the bank in terms of satisfaction with the proposal.

Jim Splaine indicated that he too really likes the plan. He also appreciated Hannah Orestis' thoughts with regards to the posts. He is hoping that there can be more input as the process goes forward with respect to landscaping and memorial ideas. This is an opportunity to develop some park space in this area of town. He is hopeful that we can make this area look beautiful and not just very good.

Jack McGee indicated that he also liked the proposal and appreciated Hannah Orestis' work.

Eric Weinrieb raised again the idea of possibly renaming this portion of Chestnut Street. This would resolve the confusion that now exists with regard to Chestnut Street because Chestnut Street is not continuous. It starts and stops.

Jack McGee indicated that he thought renaming was a good idea. There was brief discussion that that would be an issue for possibly a later date if the Council wants the Committee to explore that issue.

Valerie Cunningham made the following motion to recommend to the City Council the following:

**MOTION:** The Committee recommends that the City close a portion of Chestnut Street as shown on a plan prepared by Steve Parkinson, Public Works Director and presented at the Committee's meeting of February 16, 2005. (Partial street closure at its intersection with Court Street; elimination of all on-street parking; and creation of green space on the westerly side of Chestnut Street.)

Councilor Pantelakos seconded the motion and the vote was unanimous.

**5. Update regarding Student Government Day:**

Mary Carey Foley was in attendance at the meeting. She advised that Arthur Hilson at Portsmouth High School would probably love to rally the students with a contest with regard to renaming the street or to otherwise participate in any other further activities.

She gave an overview of the planning for Student Government Day. The students will be meeting with City Staff on March 23<sup>rd</sup> with Student Government Day taking place on March 30<sup>th</sup>. Ms. Foley and Atty. Woodland will be coordinating as the dates get closer.

Jim Splaine again indicated his support for student input and broader public input on any possible monuments and any renaming of the street.

Council Hynes responded we have plenty of time and opportunity for further input after the Council gets a look at the recommendation.

**6. Other Discussion:**

Roger Syphers of Syphers Monument Company was present at the meeting. He indicated his interest in working on any monuments/granite work done at the site. He is currently working with the Cemetery Committee. He submitted sketches of various monument shapes including an obelisk and rectangular shape. He was asked to submit a letter to the Committee reflecting his interest in creating or installing a monument.

Ms. Cunningham indicated that Mr. Syphers is doing work now at the North Cemetery.

Jack McGee asked Mr. Syphers about iron fencing. Mr. Syphers indicated that he knows someone who does iron fencing. He also noted that sometimes iron fences are stolen.

Mr. McGee also inquired about an alloy which would have the appearance of iron fencing and Mr. Syphers responded that an alloy was available.

Mr. Boisvert stated that anything that gets put in the ground should be coordinated with him so as not to disturb any additional graves. Responding to an earlier comment about putting utilities underground on Chestnut Street, Mr. Boisvert stated that if that were considered, great caution would have to be exercised because of the risk of disturbing more graves.

Mr. Parkinson noted that it might be possible for some of the utility companies to reroute certain lines overhead to some degree. This might provide some relief visually but not run the risk of disturbing any additional gravesite by trying to put utilities underground.

Valerie Cunningham asked whether the Department of Public Works will have to go back into that area. Mr. Parkinson responded that he will do everything he can to avoid work in that area. There are technologies available that will help limit the risk of having to disturb that area.

Mr. McGee asked Mr. Boisvert if he were aware of any grants or funding that might be available for the development of this site. Mr. Boisvert indicated that he was not aware of any funding sources. It is his recollection that the Old Graveyard Association provides certain services but was not sure about funding. Mr. Boisvert has indicated that he does not have any funds available from his office for the development of sites for re-interment.

Ms. Cunningham and Mr. Splaine had an exchange with regard to funding options. The New York City African Burial site may have had some federal money to develop the site although it may have been federal property to begin with. The state representatives will speak with the Governor's office to see if there are any monies available. It may also be helpful to have contact with the Congressional delegation to determine whether there are any funds available at the federal level.

Councilor Hynes weighed in that a fundraising committee would have to be established at a later point once we hear back from City Council with regard to this plan. He also indicated that there may have to be a split of private and public monies to do all the work proposed.

Ms. Cunningham applauded the process used to reach the decisions to date. She thought this process could be touted as a model for other communities who may meet certain issues.

Diane O'Leary McGee, an interested Portsmouth resident, weighed in that she too thought it was a very good and respectful plan.

Ron Pecunies, another Portsmouth resident, also indicated that he thought it was a very good plan.

Motion was made to adjourn at 5:45 p.m. and all concurred.

Submitted by: Assistant City Attorney Suzanne Woodland