

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

Tuesday, June 27, 2007
at 4:30 p.m.
held in the
Conference Room A, City Hall

Meeting commenced at 4:35 p.m.

Members in attendance were: Councilor John W. Hynes - Chair, Vernis Jackson, Mary Bailey, Valerie Cunningham, Jack McGee, Deputy Public Works Director David Allen (for Steve Parkinson Ex-officio member), Suzanne M. Woodland (Ex-officio member). Councilor Laura Pantelakos was not in attendance.

Also attending were, Deputy City Manager Cindy Hayden and David Moore of the Community Development Department.

Consultants attending were Roberta Woodburn, Wendy Anderson, Dr. Deborah Mack, JerriAnne Boggis (Woodburn & Company Design Team) and Ellen Marlatt and Dr. Kathleen Wheeler (Independent Archeological Consultants).

With respect to the minutes of May 29, 2007, Mary Bailey moved for approval and Vernis Jackson seconded; the minutes were unanimously approved.

Robbi Woodburn reviewed the design process and emphasized that the Committee is still in the conceptual design phase. She said she was interested in gathering committee members' thoughts regarding the public design forum held on June 19th. She said the consultants will look for more guidance from the Committee.

Robbi suggested that each member of the committee be recognized to share their thoughts on the forum, prior to a discussion.

Jack McGee indicated he was won over by concept plan 4. He thought a vertical art piece instead of the trees in the contemplative space would be appropriate. He said he took issue with the state archeologist's concerns expressed at the June 19, 2007 public forum regarding tree roots. He also made mention that the survivability of trees was important. He said he would like to see the 1789 Petition incorporated.

Vernis Jackson said she is not emotionally attracted to any of the designs. She noted that people tend to gravitate to the circle in concept plan 4. She would like something that is distinctly Portsmouth and has a distinctly African message. She prefers a simple message and is looking for something emotionally stronger. She was impressed with the input of the community.

Mary Bailey liked concept plan 4 but still needs something special in that contemplative space. Ms. Bailey was also pleased with public participation.

Valerie Cunningham agrees with other Committee members and says that she does not favor any conceptual plan. She said she would like to hear from the Woodburn & Co. subconsultants especially Dr. Mack & Ms. Boggis. She indicated she would like something that speaks to her as a burial ground. She is looking for an artist's input to generate the theme. She read a piece describing the differences between a White cemetery and a Black cemetery. She summarized the reading by saying Black cemeteries do not try to create a sense of heaven on earth; death is apparent and not hidden.

There was general discussion regarding ideas for the space with more African themes, including specific reference to materials Valerie Cunningham brought in.

Robbi Woodburn asked whether the committee saw the space available on Chestnut Street as a place, as a memorial or as a park with a memorial. She asked the committee if they favored the concept of the space broken down into three spaces and if the contemplative space should be above the location where the burials were found.

Valerie Cunningham agrees with the idea of the three spaces as "beginning", "journey" and "contemplative". However, she added that the committee needs an artist to weave in the elements and provide more creativity.

Dr. Mack said some criteria from the committee are needed. She asked the committee what it hoped to feel or see in this space. She said an artist would need some direction such as criteria for what the committee wanted.

Valerie Cunningham believes we can enumerate the criteria for an artist.

There was a general discussion regarding elements and possible criteria.

Valerie Cunningham indicated that Africans are decorative people who choose to adorn and embellish their persons and surroundings.

Deborah Mack indicated there had been care and attention to the death/burying process at Chestnut Street.

Valerie Cunningham read a portion of an article from J. Dennis Robinson regarding the importance of this site and the opportunity presented in the design process.

Chairman Hynes, recognized Mr. Robinson, who was in the audience, to speak during the meeting. He spoke about the opportunity presented in this project and how public art can achieve what the Committee is speaking about.

Seeing other members of the public wishing to be recognized, the Chairman asked for a motion to open the meeting to the public. Jack McGee moved to allow comment from the public at the meeting. It was seconded by Vernis Jackson and all agreed.

Fern Cunningham, a sculptor from Boston, discussed her work on the Harriet Tubman project in Boston's South End and her involvement in the Harriet Wilson Project. She discussed how, during the Harriet Tubman process, she was allowed free rein to create a sculpture. She believes it is appropriate to trust the artist. Artists, she argued, don't need a lot of criteria.

Deborah Mack discussed the option to hold a public art competition and pointed out there are multiple methods for procuring an artist.

Robbi Woodburn indicated that after the discussion today, we may have enough information to bring an artist on board.

Napoleon Jones-Henderson, who is an artist, said his concern is that artists often come in too late in the design process. He asked rhetorically, if the site is a cemetery or a memorial or a park. He said the 1779 petition is a unique element of Portsmouth Black History. This is a sacred place due to burials.

Councilor Hynes reminded the committee that we want to do justice to those buried there and that the City is committed to doing what is right.

Cindy Hayden said she thought the meeting had included a lot of great discussion. She recommended that the staff look at how the committee could bring an artist onto the project. Staff could then come back to the Committee with options and recommendations.

Jack McGee wondered if it is really time to bring in an artist. He had some concern with regard to cost.

Cindy Hayden clarified that staff would come back with more information and recommendations and that the committee could make a decision at that time on where to go from here.

Valerie Cunningham indicated that money should not be the driver at this juncture. She said federal monies were obtained for NY due to lobbying efforts. She agreed that the committee will need to pursue fundraising.

Cindy Hayden summarized some of the key ideas that had been brought up during the meeting. They included: that Chestnut Street is a sacred place, the space should be evocative of the site's powerful history, that the site should be unique, and that the space recognize the Africans and African descendants who are buried there.

Suzanne Woodland reiterated comments she had heard earlier in the meeting including the need to include color, have the site appear less manicured, have a sense of peace but uneasiness, and the ability to be emotionally evocative to all.

Robert Steifel, a member of the public, was recognized by the Chair. He wanted to advise the committee that the term "memorial" is usually the term used to commemorate something that is not present, and remembers the past. He said the treatment of the site as sacred space, brings the importance of the site to the present.

Dr. Deborah Mack asked the committee if they wanted the voices of the buried to speak. Jack McGee's response to this question was "yes in some form". In response to this question, Dr. Kathy Wheeler indicated less information on bollards would be preferable to her; instead she suggested the space convey the voices of those buried there.

Valerie Cunningham asked JerriAnne Boggis to share her views about what was being discussed. Ms. Boggis said it was important for the committee to focus on what the emotional response the committee wants for the site. JerriAnne Boggis reviewed the process by which

the Harriett Wilson sculpture was decided upon and said the development of criteria for the artist to be guided by was important.

The committee generally discussed their next steps. There was consensus that a Burial Committee meeting be held sometime late in July and that the committee wanted to keep progressing on this project.

There was a motion by Jack McGee, seconded by Mary Bailey to adjourn the meeting by unanimous vote at 6:30 p.m.

Submitted by: Assistant City Attorney Suzanne Woodland