



Watertown City Council

Administration Building
149 Main Street
Watertown, MA 02472
Phone: 617-972-6470

ELECTED
OFFICIALS:

Mark S. Sideris,
Council President

Vincent J. Piccirilli, Jr.,
Vice President &
District C Councilor

John M. Airasian,
Councilor At Large

Caroline Bays,
Councilor At Large

John G. Gannon,
Councilor At Large

Anthony Palomba,
Councilor At Large

Nicole Gardner,
District A Councilor

Lisa J. Feltner,
District B Councilor

Emily Izzo,
District D Councilor

Report of the Committee on Economic Development & Planning Meeting Date: September 15, 2025

The Committee convened on Monday, September 15, 2025, at 4:00 pm in the Richard E. Mastrangelo Council Chamber, with remote participation by Zoom. Present were Lisa Feltner, chair; John Gannon, vice chair; and Vincent Piccirilli, secretary. Staff present were Erika Jerram, Director of Community Design, and Gideon Schreiber, Director of Planning and Zoning. Councilors present were President Mark Sideris, with Caroline Bays present via zoom. Also present were residents Linda Scott and Elodia Thomas, and Angie Kounelis was present via zoom.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss and make recommendations for strengthening the community notice requirements on upcoming projects, including demolition applications.

Councilor Feltner acknowledged two emails received from Rita Colafella and Linda Scott, which are attached to this report.

President Sideris began by stating he authorized the meeting to start at before 5pm because of the urgent nature of the request, and he wants a recommendation to be on the September 23rd Council agenda. He said one reason for this referral was a notice for demolition at 18-20 Washburn St, which is related to abutting parcels, that was mailed to abutters without the City Council's knowledge, and before posting to the city calendar, leaving Councilors in the dark and unable to answer constituent questions.

Discussion points included:

- The requirement for “enhanced” notification of projects was in the EDP Committee Report from March 2023.
- The “enhanced” notification process is in the Zoning Ordinance §9.02(a) but this only applies to projects that go to the Planning Board or ZBA, not the Historical Commission.
- For demolition delay hearings at the Historical Commission, the notification process is described in §153.05(A), and the “enhanced” notification does not apply.
- Demolition delay project details are usually posted as a link on the agenda 48 hours in advance of the Historical Commission meeting.
- A demolition delay project Public Hearing Notice is individually published 14 days ahead of time to the city website under “Public Notices” menu, but it does not include project details, and there is no notification emailed or shared on other public media tools.
- The abutter notices are *mailed* 14 days ahead of time, but it does not include project details, and the City Council is not included or notified.
- Department of Community Development & Planning is working on a new software package using opengov.com which will make the project submittal process easier in the future, and they expect supporting documents to be publicly available with this tool.

The Committee and staff discussed options, and one simple solution for notifications of demolition delay projects was identified. Since the petitioner's application with all the complete project details are received by the DCDP before the Public Hearing Notice is published, staff now plans to add the material to the website, as well as a subscriber email/text (formerly known as "Notify Me") when the Public Hearing Notice is published 14 days ahead of time. The City Council is to be copied on all relevant subscriber emails.

There is general confusion about how to receive notifications for meetings and agendas and where to find pertinent information compared to what may be found in legal public notices or city news and social media outlets or newsletters or emergencies. Changes have been made to how the "calendar" and "agendas" function on the website over the past year, and DCDP will work with the administration soon to clarify for City Council how postings for dates and agendas with related materials work, and how subscribers may receive notices for developer community meetings, and planning-zoning meetings and hearings for all associated projects. Staff will also look at how projects may be tracked; this may involve improving the information and function of "Current and Pending Project Reports".

- **Action Item:** Councilor Piccirilli made a motion, seconded by Councilor Gannon, that the Committee recommends the City Council requests the Administration, at the same time the Public Hearing Notice is published 14 days before the meeting, as required in Ch 153 Demolition of Historic Buildings §153.05 (A)(1) Commission hearings, that the complete petitioner's application be added to the city website, and a subscriber email/text notice be sent out to everyone who signed up with the link. Voted 3 to 0.

There was further discussion about the process for understanding the timing of, scheduling, conducting, and documenting Community Meetings per Ch 155 Zoning Code §9.02(a) Noticing and preliminary review requirements. The Committee requested that the Department of Community Development & Planning review both the language of the Ordinance, as well as the associated regulations, and present an analysis to the City Council identifying potential changes to strengthen intent and address concerns raised by Councilors and the public, for a possible future referral to the Committee.

The meeting adjourned at 5:31 pm.

Report prepared by Vincent Piccirilli

Attachments:

- a. Zoning Ordinance §9.02(a)
- b. Demolition Ordinance §153.05(A)
- c. Email from Rita Colafella
- d. Email from Linda Scott

Ordinance. The lot corners and bounds shall be indicated by such stakes and bounds as shall be required by the Inspector of Buildings.

- (c) No premises, building or structure, altered or in any way changed as to construction, use, or number of dwelling units under a building permit or otherwise, shall be occupied or used without an occupancy permit signed by the Inspector of Buildings, which permit shall not be issued until the buildings, structure, or premises and its uses comply in all respects with this Zoning Ordinance and have been approved by the Zoning Enforcement Officer.
- (d) A temporary occupancy permit may be issued in appropriate cases.

§ 9.02. Noticing and preliminary review requirements.

- (a) Community Meeting(s). For projects with four or greater residential units, or for non-residential projects with 10,000 square feet of new development or greater, the Petitioner will conduct a Developer's Community Meeting no less than 10 days prior to submission for Planning Board or Zoning Board of Appeals approval. The meeting will provide an opportunity for the public to understand and comment on the specifics of the project, the details of such project shall be made available to the public, through submission to DCDP, no less than 14 days prior to the meeting. The Petitioner shall coordinate planning this meeting with DCDP and the City Councilor who represents the district where the project would be built. The meeting shall be announced by the Petitioner no less than two weeks prior to the meeting. The required advertising by the Petitioner shall include a notice distributed to abutters and abutters to abutters pursuant to DCDP's Enhanced Noticing Requirements. Upon confirmation of the meeting time and place with DCDP, said Department will also announce the meeting by posting an announcement on the City website, with the City Council and using the City web-based notification system. Within one week of the meeting, the Petitioner shall submit a summary of what was discussed at the meeting to DCDP. At the discretion of DCDP, a second meeting may be required in instances of large projects with a community impact, or a project with circumstances that would necessitate a second meeting.
- (b) Design Standards and Guidelines. The following requirements must be satisfied for design review as indicated, for any development with four or more multi-family residential units and/or 4,000 square feet and more of non-residential development that requires Site Plan Review and/or Special Permit under this ordinance:
 1. For projects with between four and nine residential units, and for any non-residential or Mixed-Use project between 4,000 square feet and up and up to 10,000 square feet, Watertown's applicable Design Guidelines will be considered as part of the Site Plan Review and/or Special Permit review.
 2. For projects with 10 or greater residential units, or for non-residential projects with 10,000 square feet of new development or greater, or any Mixed-Use project, the Petitioner's/Developer's proposed project shall be subject to a formal consultant design review.
 3. Process and Timing: Prior to submittal for Board review, any project as defined in (b)(2) shall undergo a formal design review. The review will be conducted with representatives of the Petitioner/Developer, the DCDP staff, and Watertown's Design Consultant to determine and discuss the proposed project's conformance with the applicable Design Standards and Guidelines.

Within 14 calendar days of the design review, Watertown's Design Consultant will submit to the DCDP a written report analyzing the proposed project's conformance with applicable Design Standards and Guidelines.

The Petitioner/Developer may, in consultation with DCDP, have his/her proposed project undergo additional design review with the City of Watertown's Design Consultant after completion of the required Community Meeting noted above.

determination and forward a copy of the application to the Chair of the Commission to conduct a preliminary review as set forth in § 153.04.

- (2) If the Zoning Enforcement Officer determines, pursuant to the Department's demolition delay regulations, that the application does not constitute a substantial demolition, the Zoning Enforcement Officer shall within five business days of receiving the application notify the Building Commissioner in writing of the determination. Upon being notified of such determination the Building Commissioner may issue the building permit if all other requirements pertaining to the requested permit are met.

§ 153.04. Preliminary review by Historical Commission.

[8-8-2023 by Ord. No. 2023-O-54]

Within 15 days after receipt of a copy of a permit application, the Chair (or Acting Chair, if applicable) and a second Commission member designated by the Chair shall either:

- (A) Make a written determination that the building is not significant and so advise the Historical Commission and the Building Commissioner in writing, after which the Building Commissioner may issue the demolition or building permit for the renovation/alteration if all other requirements pertaining to the requested permit are met; or
- (B) Forward the application to the Commission for a hearing outlined in § 153.05 and notify the Building Commissioner in writing of such action.

§ 153.05. Commission hearings.

[8-8-2023 by Ord. No. 2023-O-54]

- (A) The Commission shall hold a public hearing at its next regularly scheduled meeting on all applications reviewed for historic significance which did not receive a written determination that the building or buildings were not significant. Public notice of the time, place and purpose of the hearing shall be disseminated as follows:
- (1) Written notice posted at the Administration Building and on an internet website operated by the City of Watertown at least 14 days before the hearing; and
 - (2) Written notice mailed to the applicant, to the owners (as they appear on the most recent local tax list) of all property abutting the subject property and all abutters to the abutters within 300 feet of the property line, and to the other persons as the Commission shall deem entitled to notice, at least seven days before the hearing.
 - (3) In addition to the above requirements, the Commission may also require that applicants post a written notice at the Watertown Free Public Library and/or on an internet website offering local news and public notices online at least 14 days before the hearing.
- (B) The Commission may request that an applicant for a permit for demolition or renovation/alteration that is the subject of a public hearing under Subsection (A) provide additional information about the building(s), including the reason for proposing exterior demolition, the building's condition, and a description of the proposed reuse, reconstruction or replacement of the exterior elements that would be demolished.
- (C) The Commission shall decide at the public hearing whether the building is significant, whether it should be preferably preserved, and whether a demolition delay period will be imposed. The determination of the Commission may be postponed if agreed in writing by the applicant.
- (1) If the Commission determines that the building is preferably preserved, the Commission shall notify the Building Commissioner and applicant in writing. No demolition permit may then be issued during the time period set by the Commission, starting from the date of the

Economic Development Meeting - Monday, September 15, 2025

From Rita Colafella <colafella@gmail.com>
Date Sun 9/14/2025 11:36 AM
To Piccirilli, Vincent J <vpiccirilli@watertown-ma.gov>

Dear Committee,

I wanted to attend but couldn't. I am glad the City Council President sent this to committee. This is sorely needed.

To strengthen community notice requirements for upcoming projects, Watertown should create a link on the city website titled "Want to develop a project in Watertown?" or something like that. The page should outline a schedule of meetings which identifies a sequence, a timeline and a set of expectations and/or best practices. A link to resources should also be provided - available species, city staff contacts, where to advertise, design templates and particular ordinances to be aware of such as the demo delay.

Some best practices for a developer's community meeting include having the developer's project manager run the meeting, providing meeting ground rules, having an outline of the meeting, assigning a notetaker and tech assistant, and having a method for moving on from irrelevant topics. Without a recommended course of action, the developer will just do what is recommended by the first he/she talks to. Preparation upfront will prevent settled points from coming back up at downstream meetings, and thereby preventing delays.

Thanks,
Rita

Email from Linda Scott 9/15/25

Dear City Council Members,

Thanks for holding this meeting on strengthening community notice requirements, in your attempt to make community input more relevant.

Allow me to give you just a few personal examples and observations of how a Watertown resident's input on projects can be (and is frequently) by-passed, ignored or manipulated.

First is an "Error" of Commission:

After researching a 125 year old building on Main Street and discussing it with Larry Field, Senior Planner in the Watertown Department of Community Development and Planning (DCDP), I brought individual copies of this research to the Planning Office for dissemination to each of the Historical Commission members.

It's the Historical Commission's job to gather the pertinent information on a building before decisions are made about historical preservation, and given the vast amount of data associated with this building, it was respectful to give these materials to the Commission members for their scrutiny and review as soon as possible.

It was a year later and quite by accident that I discovered that Larry Field, after consultation with Gideon Schreiber, (currently the Director of Planning and Zoning), decided not to share that research with the Historical Commission.

As Larry said in his e-mail: "I've added Gideon because I think we could use his advice. The packet is about the 104 Main Street block and Linda is against its demolition. I think that if we think something is going to come up for hearing and adjudication that we don't just send out materials in advance as "educational."

The outcome of this process was that although the Historical Commission could see the building's historic value, the developer's plans were already completed BEFORE coming before the Commission.

Even though the Chair of the Historical Commission advised Commission members that new building plans should not be a consideration in deciding whether a building should be preferably preserved, it overwhelmingly was. It was, in effect, a done deal.

Next an "Error" of Omission:

On another matter coming before the Planning Board, and having learned from the 104 Main Street debacle, I sent certified letters to each of the Planning Board members from the US Post Office, just across the street from City Hall.

According to the US mail's records, the Department of Community Development and Planning received these letters about 19 days in advance of the Planning Board meeting. These letters sat at City Hall, undelivered to the Planning Board members until just before the meeting, and thus too late to be read and be part of the conversation.

But, here's the really tricky part. The contents of my letter, I was told, would be attached to the official record on this project, as if it actually played a role in the decision that was made. It also added to the thin veneer of purported public input, helping to legitimize the "public process."

Yes, there are many ways to take the “public” out of the public process.

Here’s a couple more:

Procedures are not followed or followed too strictly (example: One resident wants to speak, and it’s decided that even though he took the time to attend the meeting, and he’s the only one with his hand up, he’s denied. Technically, Gideon advises the Chair of the Board that she doesn’t have to allow this resident to speak. No, he’ll just have to send his written input into the Planning Department instead, where, you guessed it, it’ll go unread and unconsidered and be labelled as “public input” and be attached to the final records for this project.

And lastly,

Meeting materials assembled by Staff and developers are incomplete and arrive on the same night that they are to be presented and discussed, a practice that is forbidden in many other communities. The public sits there with inaccurate, not updated and inscrutable materials, making it next to impossible to follow along and play a meaningful part in the process.

You folks on the City Council had that experience yourselves, just last week when reviewing the DCDP’s plans for How and Bemis Parks. It makes you feel kind of irrelevant, doesn't it?

So, ladies and gentlemen, you have your hands full here. I don’t envy you. It can be very difficult to fix something that’s been broken and institutionalized that way for so long. I’m looking forward to seeing the solutions that you find. It’ll mean a lot to this community!