

Highland Park Neighborhood Association

July 2022 Minutes

Meeting Date: July 12, 2022

President Elizabeth Sanfelippo called the July 2022 meeting of the Highland Park Neighborhood Association (via Zoom) to order at 6:00 pm. She welcomed everyone and introduced herself as President, Judy Jones as Secretary saying that Vice President Mark Ritter was unable to attend tonight. She thanked Stephen Foster, past president of the Five Points South Neighborhood for continuing to set up the neighborhood meetings on Zoom.

Sanfelippo asked if residents had received the June 2022 meeting minutes and whether there were any changes or corrections needed. No changes or corrections were noted. Ralph Crowe moved to approve the June 2022 minutes. Horace Hulsey seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

Sanfelippo performed a roll call as required by the city for virtual meetings. She noted there were no representatives from Public Works, the Fire Department or the Birmingham Police Department in attendance.

Sanfelippo reported the city has received the \$11,191.50 to repair the Highland Park neighborhood sign damaged by a driver. She said the city has asked the neighborhood to formally approve the expenditure. Ray Davis moved the neighborhood approve the expenditure to purchase a replacement sign. Horace Hulsey seconded the motion. The motion passed with 12 yeas and no nays. Sanfelippo reminded residents to report accidents in which neighborhood or public property is damaged so we can be sure it's reported properly and we are able to recoup funds for repairs.

Birmingham Historical Society/Majorie White

Sanfelippo introduced Marjorie White as Executive Director of the Birmingham Historical Society and the group's newest Highland Park neighbor. White shared the Birmingham Historical Society (BHS) has moved into the 'retail space' at the 'Greenbriar at Altamont',

where the Fitness Studio most recently was. White thanked Judy Jones for inviting her this evening. She told the group she had worked with BHS since 1976 which was the bicentennial of the American Revolution. White said the head of the Alabama Historical Society decided they would bring all the state's preservationists to Birmingham in honor of the bicentennial and allow BHS to show off the city but in 1976 there were no preservation activities going on in the city. She said they were supposed to run tours. White said she was new to the city and enlisted the aid of BHS old-timer Lib Brown. She said Brown immediately said "we have to go to the *Grand Avenue* (which White explained was Highland Avenue) to the mansions of the barons of iron and steel and have a picnic in Rhodes Park." White said at the time the Park was nothing but dirt but her friend and picnic organizer Margo Marx got Public Works there to clean up and excavate the wading pool and other park features - all of which represented quite a transformation. She said she was invited around that time to participate in the Highland Avenue Restoration Society, a group largely of older people who were attempting desperately to hold on to their homes and raise awareness to the area and how important it was. BHS did major national register nominations for the City of Birmingham, first for downtown and then they surveyed 2000 properties in Southside. The first national register residential district to be listed was the Rhodes Park District in 1982. White said this is contrary to what is said on Highland Park's website (1977) - that there were no historical districts in the city at that time. White said as she read that nomination today she was astounded that 94% of the properties in that district are 'contributing properties. White said she didn't know another neighborhood in the city that has that level of historic homes representing early periods in the city's history. She said through the 80s BHS remained involved in the neighborhood, that as the large apartment houses were being converted into the Historical Society accepted façade easements on them. She said the 4 or 5 properties included Altamont Apartments and the Highland Plaza. She said when BHS holds an easement on the property the developer receives tax incentives from giving away the right to demolish the building. She said those 5 properties on Highland are protected not only by the National Register and the local district but also by the easements. White said BHS is responsible for reviewing those each year saying if the property owners don't keep them up, they are supposed to take them to court. White said in the 80s BHS moved to Sloss to help with the preservation efforts there. She said Sloss is now doing great, many things now

going on there. White said fast forward to now and BHS has now moved into what was previously the Altamont Apartment Hotel. She said from their research the neighborhood was not happy to have it when it was built even though it was a luxury property modeled on major properties in New York. White said they found the original tenant, that at some point a Pharmacy moved in and the space was gorgeous with black walnut lined shelves for the pharmaceutical supplies.

White said BHS is now 80 years old, having been around since 1942. She said it is a group of volunteers interested in telling the story of the city through research, publishing, educational programs, national register nominations and their program in historic easements. She said principally they are a publishing house, that they publish newsletters and a book each year and hold various meeting and public programs. White said their website is www.birminghamhistoricalsociety.com. She told the group that while BHS was at Sloss they were totally isolated, especially since the new visitor center was built. White said they are in a much different position on Highland Avenue, that they have never had 'street traffic' before. She said Highland Park is the most welcoming neighborhood with people going by all the time. White shared they have ordered some exhibit panels so that pedestrians have things to look at as they pass. She said at some point they will plan some public programs and lectures. White said the Jefferson County Historic Commission has said they would like to have office hours there at some point, adding this was the group that worked with the process to obtain historical markers, that Linda Nelson was willing to come over and work with people who wanted to research their property and work toward getting a marker.

Mary Helen Crowe asked how people could volunteer to help. White replied saying to email bhistorical@gmail.com. She said BHS picks up volunteers in different ways, sharing that most of their volunteers over the last 15 years have been working in a garden they maintained at Sloss. She said they look forward to having more landscape presence outside the property on Highland. Marcy Morganbesser asked when the community was more past Covid if BHS consider some kind of open house. White said they look forward to doing that and will after they get moved in and renovations complete.

Judy Jones shared with Marjorie that Highland Park had just started an organization called 'Friends of Highland Park', that they have received their non-profit status and one of the components of the organization's mission was activities to maintain the historical character of the neighborhood - so there may be opportunities for collaboration. White said they've not done a book on Highland Avenue but she thinks it would be a really good book. She said one had been proposed but they only wanted to include the grand houses. She went on to say one of the most amazing things about the neighborhood is all the extraordinary historic apartments. White said when they were moving out of Sloss they found a copies of a publication they did years ago which was Willis J Milner History of the Development of Highland Avenue with the Water Works which is fascinating. She said she knows Highland Park will be interested in this information, that Highland Avenue was designed by railroad engineers which meant there were no cuts and fills, that it went around the ravines with springs. She said they also have all the Olmstead brothers plans for Rushton Park from 1924 and they are blown up exhibit size. She said interestingly the Rushtons rejected them because they didn't want an Olmsteadian park, they wanted a 'playground' for all the children, active not passive recreation.

Sanfelippo expressed excitement for the Historical Society being in the neighborhood and thanked White for coming to the meeting and sharing.

City Council Update/Councilwoman Valerie Abbott

Councilwoman Abbott reported they did not have a Council meeting today. She said the World Games are here and even though there have been a few stumbles and fumbles, so far things seem to be going well. She told the group there were venues all about, some relatively close to Highland Park and encouraged people to check some of the events out.

Abbott shared her office was putting all the city-related information they receive about anything and everything on their website (www.bhamdistrict3.com).

Abbott welcomed Marjorie White and BHS to Highland Park, adding there were a lot of preservation issues/opportunities in the neighborhood.

Mary Helen Crowe asked if there were any updates on the Sisters Houses. Abbott said she feels the city has been more motivated regarding the properties because of the obvious length of time the owner has dragged out renovations. Even so, Abbott said, she has yet to meet anyone who wants the properties demolished, they just want something to happen in a timely manner. Sanfelippo concurred with Abbott's description, saying we were in a holding pattern, waiting to see what was going to happen now that the owner has landed in a 'higher court'. Abbott said she didn't think the city realized he owned so many derelict properties. She said a Highland Park resident who went and spoke to a City Council meeting really got their attention.

A resident asked about other derelict houses in the neighborhood. Sanfelippo said if the resident was referring to a couple of properties on 28th Place, one on Highland Avenue and one on Rhodes Circle, she said if so, those are tied up in a probate court situation. She reported speaking to the nephew of the deceased owner, that he said they would get to work on the properties just as soon as they could get through probate. Ralph Crowe asked about the old Planned Parenthood building. Sanfelippo said someone had bought the building, that initially she thought they wanted to put condominiums there and subsequently decided not to do that and sold the property. She said the new owner had gotten in touch a month or two before but didn't have definite plans yet. Sanfelippo said she would circle back with that owner. Crowe asked if the development would involve a 'tear-down'. Sanfelippo said she didn't not think so. Crowe asked about the white building next to the restaurant Eats. Sanfelippo said she thinks it is owned by a physician who has used it for storage and research.

A resident brought up the abandoned house (Rhodes Circle and 11th) that has been a problem. The resident understood that an individual, who had been in the area last year and staying in abandoned properties, had returned. They have seen the individual enter the property through a broken window. They understand the situation is a 'catch 22', that there's very little the police department can do about the situation. They said, whether related or unrelated, there were at least three car break-ins last night in their area. Abbott asked about

the address for the property. They shared it was 2801 Rhodes Circle South. Sanfelippo thanked them for the update. She asked residents to keep her apprised of any similar type situations saying the neighborhood was in frequent touch with the South Precinct's Captain. She reminded the group that for the police to do anything about trespassing, the owner has to be present, identify the breach as trespassing and be willing to press charges.

A resident asked about whether an 'end date' for the current Water Works projects. Sanfelippo confirmed the Water Works was in the neighborhood, working on projects on 11th Ave South, Hanover Circle and a water main replacement involving 33rd, short Cliff, 32nd and 34th up to Altamont. She said the neighborhood is doing its best to keep residents informed, they have told BWWB they (and residents) need regular updates especially in the event of service disruptions or water discolorations. Sanfelippo said she feels information communication has improved slightly but acknowledged everyone in proximity of the projects is understandably frustrated. She said they did find out the water company expects to flush lines in the Hanover Circle area generally Monday mornings while they continue work. She said hopefully the water project will be completed around the end of July and the paving project can resume.

A resident asked Councilwoman Abbott for any information about the Water Works billing situation. She said many people had been complaining about it - when you might not get a bill for a month or two then get one for an excessively large amount. Abbott said they have received a lot of complaints about it, adding that the city doesn't have any control over the water works, that they are an independent company. She said her office has been told is that BWWB has had staffing shortages and absences in their billing area that has affected the situation. Sanfelippo encouraged residents to move from paper bills to paperless, that their bills seem to come via email in a timely manner each month. To send concerns, she said residents could email publicrelations@BWWB.org and copy the neighborhood at highlandparkneighborhoodal@gmail.com.

Mary Helen Crowe asked Sanfelippo if she knew whether the water company planned to finish all the work before cutting over to the new mains. Sanfelippo said she did not know. Crowe said she would ask one of the workers and let Sanfelippo know.

Announcements

Sanfelippo reminded the group that recycling is now the 1st and 3rd Wednesday of each month, that the next recycling pickup would be on July 20. She said the next large trash and brush pick-up will be on July 21 of this month.

Sanfelippo encouraged residents to continue reporting any issues through 'seeclickfix'.

Next Meeting. Sanfelippo said the next meeting will be held 6 pm Tuesday August 9, in person and Zoom, at the Highland Golf Club.

Mary Helen Crowe moved to adjourn the meeting. Philip Foster seconded. The July 2022 Highland Park Neighborhood Association meeting was adjourned at 7:18 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Judy Jones

Secretary, Highland Park Neighborhood Association