



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS  
OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT  
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MAYOR

*HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION*

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**ALTERATION TO A HISTORIC PROPERTY STAFF REPORT**

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Site:	53 Columbus Avenue	c.1874 Second Empire House
Case:	HPC 2013.075	Columbus Ave. / Warren Ave. Local Historic District
Applicant Name:	RCG Columbus Renewal LLC, Owner	
Applicant Address:	17 Ivaloo Street, Somerville, MA 02143	
Date of Application:	July 30, 2014	
Legal Notice:	Replace 2 chimneys	
Staff Recommendation:	Denial without prejudice	
Date of Public Hearing:	August 19, 2014	

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**I. BUILDING DESCRIPTION**

**ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:** From the Form B

*One of the most popular building styles in the Prospect Hill area during the 1870s and early 1880s was the Second Empire style for large center-hall or side-hall entrance dwellings. The concave mansard roof retains its decorative hexagonal slates. There are two segmental arched dormers on each side exposed to the corner intersection.*

*In spite of the asbestos shingled siding the house retains some of its Second Empire characteristics including its most distinctive feature of a decorative slate roof, paired cornice brackets, a two-story octagonal side bay and squared porch columns with capitals and brackets with drop finials.*



**53 Columbus Avenue 2014**

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT/EVOLUTION OF STRUCTURE OR PARCEL:** From the Form B

*Prospect Hill, one of the most substantial residential neighborhoods of Somerville, evolved throughout the late 19th century. Prior to that, it was an agricultural community of farms. Columbus Avenue, once known as Warren Avenue, ran from Walnut to Bonner Street until the 1870s when it was continued through Bonner property to Washington Street. Its proximity to Union Square, a center for commercial and transportation activity made it a desirable place to live. Columbus Avenue was and is half way to the top of Prospect Hill and only a few blocks from Highland Avenue where the civic center of Somerville was by the mid to late 1800s.*

*From 1875 Henry M. Abbott lived in this house. According to City Directories he was a "house-builder" and in all likelihood built his own dwelling. The late 19th century owner/occupant was John W. Vinal who lived here from 1887. He was a real estate and insurance agent in Union Square.*

**II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

*1. Proposal of Alteration:*

1. Remove the two existing masonry chimneys and recreate them with masonry brick tiles on cement board substrate supported on structural wood frame.

According to the Applicants, they are requesting this because the existing chimneys are both functionally obsolete and limit their ability to optimize the floor space in the three units below. They are currently planning alterations of the three residential units in the building. They need to capture this valuable floor space to enable them to relocate kitchens or bedrooms, to revise circulation, add bathrooms, add closets, or add laundries in the units. To design around the obsolete chimney masses and their enclosures is counter to their goals for the property.

They said their goals for the property include both interior alterations and exterior improvements, including the removal of the asbestos siding and revisions to the rear ell. Phase one of the work will include alterations to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> floor units. They need to start this work as soon as possible, ideally no later than the beginning of September. Phase two work ideally will take place starting May 2014; current planning includes alterations to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor unit and improvements to the exterior of the building.

If their ability to capture more floor space that requires the removal of the chimney masses within the building is not allowed then they will have to substantially alter their current plans and take a markedly different approach to this property. They said they do not have a fall back plan developed yet, however, it is likely that they would consider few improvements to the exterior and would retain the property in its current condition.

They said that the removal of the chimneys would not harm the exterior fabric of the building. The recreated chimneys would have all the features of the existing chimney. They plan to include the lead flashing, the step-back in the bricks, and the exposed clay flue lining. Upon the completion of the proposed chimney work, there will be no apparent difference to the building as viewed from the public way.

See the final pages for details and photos.

## II. FINDINGS

### 1. *Prior Certificates Issued/Proposed:*

C/NA	Alex Dimille	1994.039	1. Rebuild front porch.
C/NA	Marie Miele	2006.070	1. Repair and replace vinyl windows in-kind.

### *Precedence:*

- *Are there similar properties / proposals?*

While many Certificates have been issued to repair and maintain chimneys, several have also been issued to alter chimneys with regard to location and reconstruction as well as to allow chimney caps. These Certificates often ensure the mortar characteristics will be maintained and that the cap does not obstruct the chimney. While there are no Certificates that identify brick veneers as part of their alteration, the overall concern is to maintain the chimney in-kind. Several Certificates of Non-Applicability have been issued to remove and rebuild existing chimneys, and the replication of missing upper courses of chimneys based on physical or photographic evidence.

While the following do not meet HPC Guidelines, the Commission has granted Certificates of Appropriateness for reconstructed chimneys at the following locations: 178 Central Street (2004), 117 Washington Street (2011) and 30 Bow Street (2013) with Staff review to ensure that the size, texture, style and detailing match the originals. The distance from the street, the ability of a viewer to clearly see the alteration and the durability of the alteration were taken into consideration.

### *Considerations:*

- *What is the visibility of the proposal?*  
The chimneys are visible from both Columbus Avenue and Prospect Hill Park.
- *What are the Existing Conditions of the building / parcel?*  
The previous owners of the building which was designated as a Local Historic District in 1989, has had no work done beyond the porch repair in 1994, and the replacement of vinyl windows in 2006. The existing chimneys appear to be truncated and missing detail, a common occurrence when chimneys have been rebuilt. The bricks have a matte not smooth surface.

Chimneys with some corbelling and details can be seen at 58 Columbus, Avenue, 63 Columbus Avenue, and 69 Columbus Avenue as well as at 26 and 30 Warren Avenue. See photos at the end of the document for the comparison between the most complete and comparable chimney at 26 Warren and the existing chimney on 53 Columbus.

- *Is the proposal more appropriate than the existing conditions?*  
The chimneys currently exist and are emblematic external manifestations of the building's historic internal configuration and use. They are considered character defining features. The replacement of existing fabric with replicas and non-historic materials is strongly discouraged as the replacement creates a false image of the historic fabric and eliminates the historic record. See note on precedence above.
- *Is the proposal more in-keeping with the age, purpose, style and construction of the building?*  
The retention and reconstruction of the existing fabric is always preferable to its replacement with an imitation.
- *Does the proposal coincide with the General Approach set forth in the Design Guidelines?*

## GENERAL APPROACH

*The primary purpose of Somerville's Preservation Ordinance is to encourage preservation and high design standards in Somerville's Historic Districts, in order to safeguard the City's architectural heritage. The following guidelines ensure that rehabilitation efforts, alterations, and new construction all respect the design fabric of the districts and do not adversely affect their present architectural integrity.*

- A. *The design approach to each property should begin with the premise that the features of historic and architectural significance described in the Study Committee report must be preserved. In general, this tends to minimize the exterior alterations that will be allowed.*

The chimney is clearly visible on the photo accompanying the Form B which was written in 1989 and which included less architectural and historical information than today's requirements.

- C. *Whenever possible, deteriorated material or architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced or removed.*

The proposal removes the historic fabric and replaces it with a facsimile.

- D. *When replacement of architectural features is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence of the original or later important features.*

The new material is respectful of the original size, massing, and color of brick, but is a brick veneer.

- E. *Whenever possible, new materials should match the material being replaced with respect to their physical properties, design, color, texture and other visual qualities. The use of imitation replacement materials is discouraged.*

The proposed replacement material has the same visual size and proportions as the original material.

- F. *The Commission will give design review priority to those portions of the property which are visible from public ways or those portions which it can be reasonably inferred may be visible in the future.*

The chimneys are clearly visible from Columbus Avenue, Prospect Hill Drive and Prospect Hill Park.

*Roofs:*

1. *Preserve the integrity of the original or later important roof shape.*

There will be no alteration of the roof shape.

2. *Retain the original roof covering whenever possible. If the property has a slate roof, conserve the roof slates. Slate is a near-permanent roofing material, and deterioration is generally caused by rusted roofing nails.*

There will be no change to the slate roof.

3. *Whenever possible, replace deteriorated roof covering with material that matches the old in composition, color, size, shape, texture and installation detail.*

There will be no alteration in the roof covering.

4. *Preserve the architectural features that give the roof its distinctive character, such as cornices, gutters, iron filigree, cupolas, dormers and brackets. Downspouts should be inconspicuously located and should be painted to match the color of the siding.*

Chimneys are a major element in the visual cues of the history and use of a building. The elaboration or simplicity of a chimney, where it is located tells a lot about the building and its inhabitants. The existing chimneys are both very simple, indicating that they may have been truncated or rebuilt in a utilitarian fashion. No building permits were found for chimney repair.

### III. RECOMMENDATIONS

*The Staff recommendation is based on a complete application and supporting materials, as submitted by the Applicant, and an analysis of the historic and architectural value and significance of the site, building or structure, the general design, arrangement, texture, material and color of the features involved, and the relation of such features of buildings and structures in the area, in accordance with the required findings that are considered by the Somerville Historic District Ordinance for a Historic District Certificate. This report may be revised or updated with new a recommendation or findings based upon additional information provided to Staff or through more in depth research conducted during the public hearing process.*

Due to the loss of historic fabric, Staff determines that the alteration for which an application for a Historic Certificate has been filed is NOT appropriate for and compatible with the preservation and protection of the Columbus Avenue Warren Avenue Local Historic District; therefore **Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission deny without prejudice** RCG Columbus Renewal LLC, Owner **a Certificate of Appropriateness** for the replacement of two brick chimneys with brick veneer chimneys on 53 Columbus Avenue.

On rare occasions, the Commission has taken into consideration the distance from the street, the ability of a viewer to clearly see the alteration and the durability of the proposed alteration when the proposed alteration is a replica of the original and indistinguishable from it, and granted a Certificate of Appropriateness for such a change. If the Commission should choose to grant a Certificate of Appropriateness for the alteration of the chimney, Staff recommends that the chimney be replicated with the following conditions

1. The chimney is replicated as it might have originally been based upon the photo of the chimney at 26 Warren Avenue with the concurrence of an accredited structural engineer that this is feasible;
2. The chimney shall be reconstructed from attic level using new thin bricks and L-corners;
3. The thin brick veneer shall be consistent with the original brick in size, shape, texture and color; and
4. The chimney veneer bricks shall be set with mortar;





