

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL HARDSHIP PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

**Scott Wilds, Acting Chair
Commission Offices, Room 578, City Hall**

2 March 2005

Present

Scott Wilds, Office of Housing and Community Development, Acting Chair
James Brown
Kafi Lindsey, City Planning Commission
Vincent Rivera, AIA
Harris Steinberg, AIA

Laura M. Spina, Historic Preservation Planner
Richard Tyler, Historic Preservation Officer

Also

Peggy Conver, Chestnut Hill Academy
Frank Steel, Chestnut Hill Academy
Betsy Longstreth, Chestnut Hill Academy
Eric Rahe, Bower Lewis Thrower Architects
Jason Sieminski, Esq., Drinker Biddle Reed
John Gallery, Preservation Alliance
Stephan Salisbury, Philadelphia Inquirer

Mr. Wilds recognized the presence of a quorum and called the meeting to order at 10:03 a.m.

500 West Willow Grove Avenue, Chestnut Hill Academy

Owner: Chestnut Hill Academy

Applicant: Eric Rahe, architect

History: Wissahickon Inn: 1882-84, Hewitt Brothers, architects and William Mackie, builder; Commons Building: 1905, Frank Miles Day, architect; Woodward Gymnasium, c. 1907, Frank Miles Day, architect; Kingsley Gymnasium: addition to Woodward 1956 and 1959, Martin & White, architects; Kline Science Building: c. 1950, Martin & White, architects

Project: In concept – Demolish commons, both gymnasiums and science building, construct two buildings and parking lot

Frank Steel, Headmaster of the school; Betsy Longstreth, Director of Development and Fundraising; Peggy Conver, Business Manager; Jason Sieminski, Esq., and Eric Rahe, architect for the project, represented the Chestnut Hill Academy. Mr. Sieminski began the meeting by highlighting Section 9 of the Commission's Rules and Regulations and offering to the Committee that a programmatic hardship for the Academy would prove to be an economic hardship. He stated that keeping the Commons and Woodward

gymnasium does not meet the Academy's needs and, therefore, would cause an overall economic hardship for the school.

Mr. Steel said that the Academy is committed to preserving historic buildings on campus as evidenced by the investment of \$9.5M in the Wissahickon Inn. The Academy has a commitment to the community and does not charge community groups for their use of its fields. Lastly, the school is committed to its students and providing them with the best possible curriculum and facilities.

Mr. Steel further explained the Academy's various programs for lunches and physical education. He noted that many of the upper classmen coordinate programs with neighboring Springside School.

Mr. Tyler noted that the Commission and its Committees never questioned the school's needs, just the buildings' proposed locations. Mr. Wilds asked if the Academy had given the architect the assumption to preserve these buildings when creating the master plan. Mr. Rahe said that initially the Academy had, but keeping the buildings leads to economic hardship for the school.

Ms. Conver noted that the Academy worked for several years with two other architectural firms before Bower Lewis Thrower yielding plans that had buildings all over the campus before settling on this particular plan. Mr. Tyler noted that the application appears conclusive, not demonstrative, of a hardship.

Mr. Steinberg commended the Academy for its goodwill to the community; however, he noted that he did not see the hardship in keeping the historic buildings in a \$15M project, when all of the options shown were within 5 to 10 percent of the project costs and all within the programmatic goals of the school.

Mr. Sieminski reiterated the five goals of the Academy: preservation of existing open space; respect for the Wissahickon Inn and the Chestnut Hill Historic District; respect for CHA's neighbors and surrounding community; the Wissahickon watershed regulations, and the school's programmatic needs and fundraising ability.

Mr. Wilds noted that Option 5 fits closest to the school's programmatic needs and does not infringe on the steep slope of the watershed. He asked the architect if the team investigated the idea of only demolishing one of the buildings. Mr. Rahe responded that they did not know how to distinguish one from the other so they treated them as a unit.

Mr. Rahe then explained to the Committee the various options and their economic impact for the Academy. The Committee concentrated on Option 3, which basically preserves only the Willow Grove Avenue façade of the Commons building. The Committee members asked if the architects could expand the ideas of this option by moving the gymnasiums further towards Springfield Avenue, creating a bridge over the watershed. This idea would, perhaps, preserve more of the Commons and some of the Woodward gymnasium. Mr. Rahe replied that the concept was not explored by the architecture team.

The Committee then discussed Option 5. The economic figures for this option are the highest for construction as well as future operation. The overall construction costs for the proposed project total \$15,965,000. Option 5 raises the construction total by

\$672,500 to a total of \$16,637,500. The Academy says some of the additional costs come from the fact that the second building would be more visible from Willow Grove Avenue and, therefore, would have higher grade materials in the façade treatment, rather than the façades of the proposed building, which has less prominence on the site. Also, Mr. Steel stated that having athletic facilities in two different locations would require additional staff, which the school budgeted at \$50,000 a year. Over the course of 20 years, the total comes to an additional \$1M. The Academy has an operating budget of approximately \$10M a year.

Ms. Longstreth noted that the Academy had undertaken a \$10M capital campaign in the past for the work on the Wissahickon Inn. The total campaign costs for this building campaign would total approximately \$25M and to raise an additional \$1M would prove burdensome. Mr. Steel acknowledged that \$8 to \$12M may be raised through a bond.

John Gallery of the Preservation Alliance commended the Academy on its preservation of the Wissahickon Inn, but opined that the engagement of the Historical Commission through the Academy's four year design process would have been helpful. He noted that Option 5 solves many of the school's objectives, including eliminating construction in the watershed, close location to parking facilities and the preservation of two significant buildings, and it allows the school the continued use of its athletic facilities during the period of construction. He noted that the community is not unified in its support for the project since the Chestnut Hill Historical Society still remains opposed to it. He asked the Academy if the Historical Commission were to approve the demolition, would the school as a means of mitigation agree to donating an easement for the rest of its open space to an entity such as the Chestnut Hill Historical Society or the Preservation Alliance.

Mr. Brown made a motion to recommend not finding a financial hardship, pursuant to Sections 14-2007(f) and (j) of the Philadelphia Code and Section 9 of the Rules and Regulations. Mr. Steinberg seconded the motion.

The Committee members emphasized to the applicants that the lack of finding a hardship did not preclude them from returning to the Committee and Commission with additional information. Mr. Tyler reiterated that the Commission questions not the Academy's programmatic needs, but the prior attempts before reaching the proposed solution. After further discussion, the Committee agreed to table the discussion until receiving further information.

The Committee and the Academy discussed a schedule for the submission of the additional information. They reached an agreement to reconvene during the month of March with the intention that the issue would return to the Commission at its April meeting.

Mr. Brown and Mr. Steinberg withdrew the motion.

The Committee then outlined the addition information it wanted:

- Strong analysis of reuse options for the existing buildings – i.e. science classrooms, offices, athletic facilities, dining, etc.
- Architectural implications and site planning possibilities of Option 5
- Fleshed out costs for Option 5
- Reconfiguration of Option 3 as discussed by Committee members

- Investigation of preserving only one of the buildings
- Prior architectural documents from previous deliberations – whatever is on paper
- Response to giving an easement on the open space

The Committee voted to table the discussion pending the receipt of the additional information.

The Committee adjourned at 12:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Laura M. Spina
Historic Preservation Planner