



Historic Preservation Committee of Mountain Lakes

THE CASE FOR LANDMARKING IN MOUNTAIN LAKES

February 18, 2020

Mountain Lakes Borough Council Members:

As residents of Mountain Lakes, we chose to raise our children here and participate in this vibrant community in part because of its unique visual character, which is immediately apparent to every first-time visitor. Mountain Lakes is a place with history, and Lakers are proud to be entrusted with the preservation of that history. The Mountain Lakes Historic Preservation Committee (HPC) was chartered by the Borough Council over 25 years ago. Among its activities, the HPC has achieved the listing of the Mountain Lakes Historic District in the national and state registers of historic places; gathers, maintains and displays an archive of our precious historic documents, photographs and artifacts; builds a growing archive of oral histories from senior Lakers; salvages original architectural components of Hapgood and Belhall houses for use in future restorations; and advises the Planning Board and Zoning Board of Adjustment on applications for development. In furtherance of a recommendation contained in the Borough's Master Plan, the HPC took the lead in formulating the Borough's groundbreaking 2012 Historical Preservation Incentives ordinance designed to encourage preservation, and discourage demolition, of Mountain Lakes' original historic homes by offering broad zoning incentives to owners who preserve their homes. The HPC consults with, and provides expertise to, Borough officials on questions relating to the implementation of this ordinance.

Another important component of the Master Plan historic preservation element, adopted by the Planning Board in 2010 and reaffirmed in the Master Plan update in 2013, was an ordinance that would establish a list of "Key Landmarks" consisting of various historic governmental, institutional and commercial structures in the Borough, and would "[p]rohibit demolition or the significant alteration of the exteriors of Key Landmarks." There is currently no protection, in the form of regulation or incentives, for the non-residential historic structures in the Borough. Loss of these structures (or their alteration in a way that is not consistent with their historic character) would have a profound impact on the historic character of our community, including its character as a planned residential park community designed by developer Herbert Hapgood, and with it a profound impact on the value of the real estate in Mountain Lakes. Numerous data-driven case studies conclude that maintaining and preserving architectural heritage makes long-term economic sense for communities.

In consultation with members of the Borough Council, the HPC has prepared a draft ordinance amending the Historic Preservation article of the Borough's land use ordinance to implement this Borough policy of protecting our important landmarks. This proposed ordinance, which was initially presented in draft form to the Borough Council for discussion on June 10, 2019, would accord "landmark" status to the Borough's most important historic structures. Over 90 New Jersey municipalities, including towns such as Chatham, Chester, Harding, Madison, Millburn, Montville, Morris Township, and Washington Township, have similar historic preservation ordinances, the vast majority of which are much broader in scope than the proposed update.

The updated ordinance *would not prohibit upgrading or renovating landmark properties*, but would prevent their demolition, and require that major exterior renovations and repairs be done in a manner that preserves their historic character. The structures on this list are familiar to all Lakers, and *all* are integral to our town's unique visual character and sense of place -- Mountain Lakes simply wouldn't be Mountain Lakes without them. The full list follows:

Briarcliff and Lake Drive Schools, St. Peter's Episcopal Church, the Community Church, the Boulevard and Crane Road Entrance Gates, the Esplanade, the Mountain Lakes Club, the Masonic Lodge, the Grimes House on Craven Road, the Station, and the Midvale Stores.

While all of the structures have significant historic value, only the original Midvale Stores buildings are owned and operated privately as a commercial property, and therefore most likely subject to a short-term redevelopment decision that could have a lasting, negative impact not only on its immediate neighbors, but on the very character of the town that we as taxpayers hope to preserve. Indeed, there was a serious development proposal made to the Borough Council within the past 15 years involving the complete demolition of these buildings.

The Midvale Stores buildings were an integral part of Herbert Hapgood's vision of the importance to a community of having its own commercial center, and are the only remaining commercial buildings built by Hapgood that occupy the Mountain Lakes streetscape. In addition to their architectural significance, these buildings also served a variety of public uses marking significant milestones in Mountain Lakes history, including use as one of the earliest public schools, the location where the Community Church of Mountain Lakes held church services before the church building was completed in 1914, an early location of the public library, and for nearly half a century from the time of its founding on March 20, 1913, the site of J. Yaccarino & Sons grocery store and a focal point of life in the community.

The updated ordinance, if enacted, would leave final decisions on any renovation application to the Planning Board, a voluntary group of Lakers who are approved by the elected members of the Borough Council. The people entrusted to preserve our history would ultimately be accountable to all voting, taxpaying residents.

We urge this Council to take prompt action to pass the updated ordinance.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alex Gotthelf', written in a cursive style.

Mountain Lakes Historic Preservation Committee
Alex Gotthelf, Chairman