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Martha's Vineyard Commission

DRI #706 371 Indian Hill Road Demolition

MVC Staff Report – 2022-2-3

1. DESCRIPTION

- 1.1 **Owner/Applicant:** Lois and Jeff Meyer; Philip Regan (Hutker Architects)
- 1.2 **Project Location:** 371 Indian Hill Road (Map 12, Lot 13), West Tisbury (22 acres)
- 1.3 **Proposal:** Demolition of a house built in 1840 and listed in MACRIS, and construction of a new single-family house.
- 1.4 **Zoning:** Residential
- 1.5 **Local Permits:** Demolition and building permits
- 1.6 **Surrounding Land Uses:** Residential, conservation

1.1 **Project History:** The existing Greek Revival house, known as the Captain Edwin Luce House, was built around 1840 and renovated in 1948. It is described in MACRIS as an “exceptionally fine example of the Greek Revival style so common in town and on the island during the mid-19th century.” In 1888, the house was sold to Albert Seaton Berry (Lois Meyer’s great grandfather) with 150 acres. In 1908, the house was left to his children and remained unoccupied until 1948 when Richard Berry bought the property from the family estate and renovated the house, including the addition of two dormers. In 1968, he sold the house and 21 acres to the Parker family. Much of the rest of the land was subdivided with some going to Sheriffs Meadow Foundation. The house was last occupied in 2017. In 2018, Jeff and Lois Meyer purchased the house and 22 acres, including an 18-acre conservation easement held by Sheriff’s Meadow Foundation. Additional accounts of the building’s history have been provided by the applicants, Lois Berry (wife of Richard), and the West Tisbury Local Historical Commission.

An earlier version of this proposal was reviewed as DRI 687 in 2018, but the project was put on hold at the request of the applicants. The applicants have since concluded that renovating the house is not feasible, and they would like to move forward with the demolition.

Project Summary: In addition to the existing four-bedroom, 2,464 ft² house, the property currently includes a one-bedroom, 560 ft² studio from the 1970s; three-bedroom, 1,089 ft² guest house; granite well house/creamery; and garage. The existing house, studio, and guest house would be demolished and replaced by a four-bedroom, 4,605 ft² house, and the granite well house would be restored. The total square footage of buildings on the property will increase from 4,113 ft² to 4,605 ft². The applicants currently graze sheep on 3-4 acres of the land, and plan to introduce additional agriculture on a small-scale in the future, but further details have not been developed. The applicants intend to occupy the new house year-round.

Lois Berry has provided the following reasons for deciding to demolish the house:

- **Condition** - *The house has not been restored, updated, or significantly maintained for 70 years. The last significant work done on the house was my father's rebuild in 1948. As a result, the home needs significant structural repair and rebuilding.*
- **Location** - *We are sensitive to the positive regional impact of historic homes, and we appreciate the preservation that has been fostered in the historic districts on the island. But this house is in the woods, in a relatively remote part of the island, and has no visual benefit or appreciation.*
- **Alterations Made to Date** - *After reading my father's records of the 1948 rebuild, it was clear he made significant changes. In our mind, this did not negate the historical style, but it limited it.*
- **Historical Significance** - *Other than Captain Edwin Luce and the age/style of the house, we are not aware of any other historical significance.*
- **Hazardous Materials** - *We have supplied a report detailing the significant amount of lead paint. This was to be expected, but nonetheless is a significant concern given the health conditions that result from exposure, in this case to workers during the rebuild, and family members thereafter. At present, it is exposed and represents a hazard. Doors, windows, floors, ceilings will have to be removed all together, as sanding or stripping is not an option due to the air born contamination that results effecting workers and contaminating the soil.*
- **Cost** - *The cost of restoring is significantly greater than building new given the condition of the house. We have sought the advice of Hutker Architects and Scott Stearns at John G. Early Contractor and Builder in this regard.*

2. ADMINISTRATIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 **DRI Referral:** Building Inspector, June 21, 2021
- 2.2 **DRI Trigger:** 8.1a (Demolition of a building listed in MACRIS)
- 2.3 **LUPC:** November 8, 2021
- 2.4 **Site Visit:** January 3, 2022
- 2.5 **Public Hearing:** January 6, 2022
- 2.6 **Second Site Visit:** January 25, 2022
- 2.7 **Post-Hearing LUPC:** February 7, 2022
- 2.8 **Deliberation:** February 17, 2022

3. PLANNING CONCERNS

- 3.1 **Water and Wastewater:** The existing main house has two cesspools that will be removed and replaced with a high-capacity infiltrator bed and 1,500-gallon septic tank. The existing guest house has a septic system and leaching field. The total number of bedrooms on the property will decrease from eight to four, accounting for the removal of the studio and guest house.
- 3.2 **Energy:** The proposed house will have all-electric utilities, with propane for cooking, and is designed to exceed the Building Code in terms of energy efficiency. The house will be solar-ready,

and the applicant has indicated the potential for onsite solar applications such as battery backup and power for the well house/creamery, but that is not part of the current proposal.

3.3 Character and Identity: The house is an example of Greek Revival architecture and is listed in MACRIS as well as a 1986 West Tisbury historic inventory. The building had a significant renovation in 1948, but has undergone periods of decay, as indicated in materials submitted by the applicant. The house is not in a highly visible location.

The West Tisbury Planning Board had submitted a letter during the MVC's review of DRI 687 (previous demolition proposal for the house) in 2018, which it resubmitted for the current DRI. The letter states that the board visited the site in 2018 and "determined that the house is in good condition. Rather than demolishing and replacing the whole house we urge that renovations be undertaken to make the kitchen larger while also allowing for the inclusion of more bedrooms. We respectfully urge that this historic house be saved from demolition."

The West Tisbury Local Historical Commission (WTLHC) provided comments on the building's history and significance in October 2021, including the following recommendations:

The house has retained its original look, shape, and proportions. The several fireplaces are original with the summer kitchen having a beehive baking oven on the side. The front entryway, hall and stairway and bannisters are original. The granite foundation blocks should be preserved in some way.

If the house is to be removed, the WTLHC would like to have the house and the original features documented with measurements and photographs for our files. Presently the house is in poor condition and current building requirements would dictate further cosmetic and structural changes for renovation.

The Meyers have respect for the history and provenance of the old farm and its surroundings. Clearing has restored some of the view to Vineyard Sound and stonewalls and grazing areas have also been restored. The proposed plans for a new house, while contemporary in nature, seem to echo the location of the original with its front facing gable.

The locations of both the original and the proposed building are not visible from Indian Hill Road when trees are in leaf. Other houses along Indian Hill Road are generally older or modest in nature and the area has retained a very rural look with farmlands and properties spaced well apart.

The applicant plans to salvage portions of the granite foundation of the main house for use in restoring the creamery. Other foundation stones would be used to supplement existing stone walls or as other landscape features, or incorporated into the new house. Some of the floors and railings may also be reused. The applicant has stated that the entire house would be made available to anyone who would like to reuse it in whole or in part.

A narrative regarding renovation and relocation as alternatives to demolition, including rough cost estimates, has been provided. The narrative states that a new house as designed would cost about \$4,695,000, compared to about \$1,480,000 for relocation/renovation/addition, and \$4,830,000 for renovation/replication/expansion of the existing house.

- 3.4 Structural Integrity:** The house has not been improved since it was renovated in 1948, and at that time it had been vacant for 30 years. The 1948 revision included the replacement of floors, doors, windows, and trim, and the addition of chimneys, roofing, two dormers, a new kitchen, and screened porch. A structural report by Sourati Engineering in 2018 concluded that most of the house does not meet current building codes, and that a renovation would entail replacing the foundation and adding an overlay of new framing, including new sheathing. The report states: “An alternative to this would be to deconstruct the existing frame and foundation and reconstruct the essence of the existing house with code compliant materials and practices.” A separate site inspection report by John G. Early Contractor and Builder in 2018 recommended demolishing the house, noting the high cost and other challenges associated with renovation, and the likelihood that only some framing, sheathing, and exterior trim could be preserved. A lead paint inspection in 2018 revealed lead-based paint on most exterior components of the building, as well as portions of the interior; and an asbestos inspection survey in 2018 revealed asbestos in the linoleum floor in the kitchen.
- 3.5 Lighting and Landscape:** Most of the property will remain as open space, with stone walls, some sheep grazing, and possibly other agricultural uses in the future. A landscape plan has not been provided.

4. PUBLIC CORRESPONDENCE

The MVC received 17 letters from the public following the public hearing, all in support of preserving the house. Common themes and concerns (in rough order of frequency) include:

- Historic demolition as a trend, threatening the loss of history
- Feasibility of restoration
- Significance of both the house and its rural location
- MVC mission to preserve historical and cultural values
- The house is a fine example of Greek Revival architecture
- The house is visible from the water and Obed Daggett Road
- Demolition by neglect
- The house is a reflection of the Island’s past when people lived closer to the land
- The house is in good condition
- Loss of materials associated with demolition
- Financial concerns of the applicant should not be part of the decision
- The visibility of the house should not matter
- The proposed replacement is not in character with the area
- Prior work on a house doesn’t necessarily reduce its significance