



CITY OF SOUTHPORT
HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING
July 28, 2025
2:00 PM
Minutes

Members Present:

Chair Charles Drew
Vice Chair Bonnie Bray
Joanne Wesson
Katherine Hufham
Bonner Herring
Tal West
Alexis Gore-Graves
Jim McKee
Josh Cline McGee

Staff Present:

Maureen Meehan, Planning Services Director
Penny Tysinger, Historic Preservation Commission Planner
Tori Deviney, Deputy Clerk

- A. Chair Drew called the meeting to order at **2:00 PM**.
- B. Ms. Graves gave the Invocation.
- C. Chair Drew led everyone in the Pledge of Allegiance.
- D. **Approval of Agenda**

A motion to approve the agenda was made by Mr. McKee and seconded by Ms. Wesson. Motion passed unanimously.

E. Public Comment

Robert Palmeter, 308 N. Dry Street

Asked for clarification about properties marked as “study areas” on the historic district map and questioned whether there are fees for a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA), and expressed the view that Historic Preservation members should reside within the historic district.

Tom Gregory, 230 N. Caswell Avenue

Voiced concern that the yacht basin is excluded from the historic district, stressing its historic importance and role in the city’s character.

Andrew Laing, 6217 Pebble Shore Lane

Stated that while he believed the guidelines could ultimately be a good thing for the City, he urged members to also consider the perspective of property owners and developers. He noted that his project might be the first to come before the Commission and explained that demolition of the existing building was very likely due to cost factors. He stressed that while many developers and owners would be willing to work with the Commission; approval timelines should be shortened. He shared that it had already taken two and a half years to secure a zoning permit for his project with Bull Frog Corner and urged the Commission to consider the impact of lengthy processes on those trying to invest in the community.

F. Old Business

1. Review of Public Hearing Comments from 7/1/2025 Board of Aldermen Meeting
Debbie Barnes’ questions were reviewed. She asked for clarification on grandfathering of existing conditions and whether changes would be required going forward. She also referenced issues such as purchasing windows, hurricane shutters, and temporary air conditioning solutions. The Commission acknowledged her comments but did not have any additional comments to add.

Chair Drew reminded members that the commission cannot alter the guidelines directly at this stage but may recommend changes to the Board of Aldermen (BOA). Several members, including Vice Chair Bray and Mr. McGee, suggested strengthening the document’s introductory section to emphasize the goals of preservation and the intent to protect Southport’s character. Members agreed that without this context, provisions may be misinterpreted as overly restrictive.

Director Meehan explained that while installing a permanent fixture, such as a window unit, on the front of a building would not be appropriate, staff understood that emergency situations may arise. In such cases, staff would be willing to work with property owners to find temporary solutions.

Mr. McKee specified that while this was acceptable for the present, the Commission must remain careful about setting precedents. He stressed that the Commission’s role was not to act as an HOA and noted the group had been working on these matters for three years. He emphasized the need to “make sure it’s right” even if that required additional time.

Vice Chair Bray shared her concern that statements made during previous meetings were not fully reflected in the written draft. She pointed out that the language in the document used phrasing such as “if possible,” which could weaken intent. She recommended inserting language early in the document to state clearly that the overall goal is to maintain Southport’s historic character. In her view, adding one or two paragraphs of intent at the

beginning would help guide future interpretation while still allowing flexibility as circumstances evolve.

Mr. McGee agreed with Vice Chair, Bray, stating that such framing should be upfront. He also raised concerns with language under the July 10th section titled *Site and Setting*, noting that it included provisions on tree removal and air conditioning placement that might be inappropriate. He argued that those elements should be reconsidered or removed.

Mr. McKee countered that many of those issues were already covered under existing city ordinances. Mr. McGee replied that in some cases the draft risked overstepping the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO).

Chair Drew responded by recalling that the Commission had previously steered away from regulating landscaping directly, instead relying on the UDO to enforce those items. He stated that he wanted to strike provisions related to tree removal, plantings, and minor COA alterations, noting that they could create complications if left in. As an example, he described a historic home on East Moore Street where the removal of a single bush would effectively eliminate the property's entire yard. He emphasized that the guidelines were intended as recommendations for the Board of Aldermen's consideration and cautioned that if the Commission began dissecting these landscaping provisions further, it could require restarting the entire process.

Mr. McGee asked how the Commission should summarize. Chair Drew recommended providing a summary to Director Meehan, who could then deliver the recommendations to the Board of Aldermen.

Mr. McKee raised the question of fences and walls, particularly in front yards, and asked how much of that topic is already addressed in the UDO. He suggested that a careful review be done to identify areas of overlap.

Chair Drew cautioned the group against becoming too deeply involved in every detail, stating that it was important to include provisions that reflected the public's concerns. He emphasized the need for public buy-in. He reflected on how he had recently walked past the Brunswick Inn and would hate to see a situation where someone purchased the property only to demolish it.

Mr. Herring agreed but observed that he did not believe the current owners would take such an action. He stressed the importance of protecting properties for the future. He compared his comments to those made by Mr. Jesse Pierce at a recent Board of Aldermen meeting, explaining that he believed current owners should be exempt. He reflected on Southport's heritage as a fishing town and remarked that while that identity has changed, the Commission should remain mindful of balancing protection by reducing burdens on present property owners. Mr. Herring shared that some residents felt the document-imposed restrictions such as living in a homeowners' association (HOA). He reiterated that he would favor exemptions for current owners.

Vice Chair, Bray, then, asked how such an exemption could be structured. Mr. Herring responded that he would support exemptions for current owners and their direct descendants, but not for future third-party purchasers.

Mr. West reminded the group that the Board of Adjustment exists to handle exceptions on a case-by-case basis, particularly for unique hardships or unusual circumstances. He emphasized that the goal was not to burden existing property owners but to guard against developers that would undermine Southport's historic character. He emphasized that the community must focus on preservation because outside developers are not invested in the town's future; "they are not your friends; they are coming in to take our money and leave after they are done."

Mr. Herring responded that, while he understood Mr. West's concern, it was also important to balance regulation with allowing property owners to make a fair profit, referencing "the Bull Frog corner guy" as an example.

Chair Drew reminded the group that the guidelines themselves do not prevent demolitions. He stressed that not every property owner would act with the same commitment as individuals "like a Bonner Herring or a Joey Pierce." To illustrate, he recalled his experience as Code Enforcement Officer with the Alberta McCloud house. In that case, despite efforts to save the property, one heir refused to sign off, ultimately forcing demolition.

Mr. Herring acknowledged Chair Drew's point but reiterated his belief that exemptions for current owners represented a fair solution and a reasonable compromise. He stated that this approach would allow the Commission to protect the community while not overly burdening present property holders.

Vice Chair Bray raised the question of what would happen in situations with multiple owners. Chair Drew replied that such cases often lead to dilapidated houses, with heirs unable to agree on the property's future, eventually resulting in the house being demolished. He expressed doubt that the Commission could fully resolve such inheritance-based complications.

Ms. Wesson shared that during the Christmas Historic Homes Tour, she often receives requests for brochures, even from people outside Southport who appreciate the town's character. Ms. Wesson also noted the AMUZU Theatre, observing that while it would be cheaper to tear it down, the owner remains committed to preserving it, reflecting the community's values.

Discussion returned to the draft document, particularly the section on *Site and Setting*. Chair Drew and several members agreed that landscaping provisions, including tree removal and plantings in rear or side yards, should be struck, as those areas are already regulated under the UDO.

Mr. McGee proposed that everything listed under *Site and Setting* (pages 15–16) currently classified as a minor COA, be removed, except for alterations to docks, piers, and bulkheads, which should remain as a minor COA. He also recommended leaving in the installation of window units and fans as a minor COA. Mr. Mckee noted that docks, piers, and bulkheads fall under CAMA regulations.

Chair Drew stated he had no issue with removing provisions related to fences in rear and side yards or plantings in rear and side yards but expressed hesitation about deleting language on alteration of docks, piers, and bulkheads.

Motions

- Motion by Mr. McGee, seconded by Mr. McKee, to amend the earlier proposal:
 - Remove all *Site and Setting* items currently shown as minor COAs, **except**:
 - Alterations or removal of docks, piers, and bulkheads (to remain as a minor COA).
 - Installation of window air conditioning units and fans (to remain as a minor COA).

The motion, as restated, recommended that under the “Site and Setting” category, all items currently shown as minor COAs related to landscaping — including fences in rear yards and non-visible side yards — be removed. However, the provisions for existing bulkheads, sidewalks, and installation of window air conditioning units would remain as minor COAs.

Mr. McKee further suggested adding language to clarify that the provision also applies to the “invisible/fronts of structures.”

Motion carried unanimously.

Chair Drew referenced the question of why the Yacht Basin had been excluded from the district, referencing earlier comments by Rich Bandera. Director Meehan explained that the recommendation to exclude the Yacht Basin had come from the consultant. She added that the comprehensive plan identifies the area as a “historic waterfront,” and once the plan is adopted, state-level protections would apply.

Vice Chair Bray asked when those protections would take effect, and Mo clarified that they would begin as soon as the plan is adopted. Chair Drew confirmed that some protection would be in place, to which Director Meehan responded that it would become a state rule.

Chair Drew then asked whether a public hearing would be required if the Commission wished to add the Yacht Basin to the district. Director Meehan stated that this was ultimately a legal question for the City Attorney. She added that any existing uses in the yacht basin would be allowed to continue.

Chair Bray asked about repairs or changes if properties in the yacht basin were included in the historic district. Director Meehan clarified that uses and conforming status are separate issues. Any non-conforming use would remain, but property owners would need to obtain a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) for repairs or changes.

Vice Chair Bray followed with a hypothetical: if the Yacht Basin Eatery closed and Edgewater took its place, would the new business be allowed to look the same as it does now? Chair Drew answered that such decisions would ultimately fall to the Commission. He suggested gathering input from the City Attorney for clarity before proceeding further.

Mr. McGee posed another hypothetical, asking if a property owner decided to construct a three-level parking deck in the yacht basin, could the Commission prevent it? Mo responded that a three-level structure would likely exceed height limits and face

environmental constraints. However, she acknowledged that UDO does not explicitly prohibit such a use.

Chair Drew reviewed the statutory 180-day limit on COA approvals, explaining that while municipalities may adopt shorter deadlines, they cannot extend beyond 180 days. Ms. Tysinger explained that the 180-day provision accounts for projects with multiple phases requiring several boards, though most COAs are resolved on the day of the meeting.

Mr. McGee asked whether, by disregarding preliminary steps, the timeline could be shortened once an application is formally made. Ms. Tysinger responded that the timeframes are written to provide applicants and staff with flexibility to address every potential issue. Mr. McGee remarked that any developer's first step should be to consult with the Planning Department. Chair Drew suggested setting a 90-day timeline for minor COAs and retaining 180 days for major COAs. Director Meehan recommended consulting the attorney to confirm legality.

Mr. McKee asked what happens if the 180 days expire without resolution. Chair Drew responded that applicants could sue for failure to act.

Chair Drew suggested that COAs should be free, while Director Meehan recommended charging a fee for major COAs, noting that the cost should not necessarily be as high as for a variance but should reflect the City's workload.

Vice Chair Bray asked what other towns charge. Director Meehan provided comparisons: Wake Forest, Washington, and Edenton all charge fees, with Edenton differentiating between residential and commercial cases. She clarified that those fees do not fully cover staff or attorney time.

Vice Chair Bray suggested that the City might consider absorbing the cost rather than charging applicants. Chair Drew noted the Board of Aldermen would ultimately decide the fee policy.

Ms. Graves and Ms. Hufham both commented that ownership inside or outside the district did not necessarily matter, as older homes outside the district still carried historic significance. Ms. Graves noted that although her home lies outside the district, it is 127 years old and was still historically significant. Ms. Hufham added that she also lives outside the district but co-owns a home within it.

Mr. West shared that he had recently read an Our State magazine article highlighting Southport as one of North Carolina's most charming small towns, noting that each town featured had a historic district. He described such protections as "cheap insurance."

Mr. McKee stated that the Commission had made progress and that Mr. Herring's idea on easing burdens for current owners was worth exploring. He emphasized that the group was "on the right track" in preserving what Southport already has.

Vice Chair Bray agreed but cautioned against applying exemptions in perpetuity. She added that in addition to the "three P's" of preservation, the discussion had also underscored three "C's": consistency, compatibility, and contributing, principles she said were critical to guiding Southport's future, as guiding principles, much like traffic laws, to

ensure fairness and preservation.

Mr. McGee reiterated his hope that the attorneys could find a way to shorten the 180-day window to 90 days. Ms. Wesson expressed that the document was “a living, breathing document” that could be adjusted over time.

Chair Drew thanked everyone, stating his appreciation and hopes the community can see the willingness that the Commission has to work and compromise on this. He reminded the group that, like the work of the founding fathers, the document would need to be revised and refined over time.

Someone from the audience raised concern about the decision to split West Brown Street, with one side of the street included in the historic district and the other side excluded. She questioned the wisdom of the move, remarking that “it’s already getting pretty sticky as it is,” and suggested it was neither wise nor considerate. She jokingly referred to the southern side as “SOB — South of Brown.” She then asked how inclusion in the historic district would affect a dilapidated house. The Chair clarified that such matters would be handled through code enforcement, noting that property condition issues should be reported directly to that department.

G. Adjourn

A motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Mr. West and seconded by Mr. McKee. The motion passed unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at **3:18 PM**.

X 

Charles Drew
Chair

X 

Tori Deviney
Deputy Clerk



