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Public Information Gathering Nears End For Permanent Memorial Commission

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By Nancy K. Crevier

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Photo:

The Sandy Hook Advisory Commission is currently in Phase 3 of a four-phase information gathering process to solicit ideas and review offers. Members hosted the second of two public forums last week at Newtown High School.

With just eight of the 12-member Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial Commission (SHPMC) present — chairman Kyle Lyddy, JoAnn Bacon, Steffan Burns, Brian Engel, Alan Martin, Tricia Pinto, Donna Van Waalwijk, and latecomer Dan Krauss — community members were still outnumbered, Thursday evening, January 29, at the second of two scheduled public hearings for input on a permanent memorial to honor the lives lost on 12/14.

Six non-commission members were scattered about the Lecture Hall room at Newtown High School, as the 7 pm meeting got underway.

Mr Lyddy opened the meeting, intended to elicit public comments on a permanent memorial, by reading the charge First Selectman Pat Llodra [placed upon the commission members in September 2013](#). The commission is asked to determine if a permanent memorial is desired; if so, the nature, location, and funding of a permanent memorial; and to then make recommendations to the Board of Selectman, based on those findings.

There is no set time line “or end in sight,” as the commission works to accomplish its goal, said Mr Lyddy. “We have plenty of work to do,” he said.

The commission is currently in Phase 3 of a four-phase information gathering process to solicit ideas and review offers. The 26 families directly affected by the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School were given the initial opportunity to respond to an online survey, with 18 of those families providing input. The information gathering process will circle back to the 26 families in Phase 4, for final recommendations.

Phase 2 was completed in December, Mr Lyddy said, with responses from 50 staff members of Sandy Hook School, half of the parents from that school, and only a minimal response from the town’s emergency departments. First responders felt staff and families of Sandy Hook School should make the decisions, for the most part, Mr Lyddy indicated.

One important point of information received to date is that 92.5 percent of those responding support a permanent memorial of some sort, Mr Lyddy said. He repeated what the commission members have said since beginning their task: that they are not yet at the point where they are actively considering any of the many ideas for a permanent memorial they have received.

Richmond Jones, who presented at a regular SHPMC meeting last fall, again set up a display Thursday evening in the Lecture Hall of his proposal for a Memorial Park.

Sandy Hook resident Bob Gaines questioned the chairman as to why the commission continues to solicit information.

“If 92 percent have said ‘build.’ Why hesitate?” he asked.

“We are not hesitating,” Mr Lyddy assured Mr Gaines, adding that the commission wants to get as much information as possible before making recommendations. “We want to make sure people have a say and are heard,” he said.

Mr Gaines also asked whether funding for a permanent memorial is in place. According to Mr Lyddy, \$80,000 of money received post-12/14 by the town, has been set aside. Other contributions may be added to that, but fundraising is not the commission’s focus at this time.

Newtown resident Paul Babbage said that he had attended the first public hearing, January 20, as well.

“I am the chairman of the Atkinson Fund, and we have a fair amount of money to contribute [to a permanent memorial],” Mr Babbage said, “and we will donate it in Benny’s name.”

Longtime Newtown resident and Torpedoes Swim Team coach Glen “Benny” Atkinson died unexpectedly in 2010. An annual golf tournament in memory of Mr Atkinson has taken place for the past four years, and has raised tens of thousands of dollars to support scholarships to Newtown High School graduates, and to benefit local charities.

Ultimately, Mr Lyddy told the small crowd, the commission wants to be transparent in its process, and “do what’s right for Newtown.”

Responding to a question from Mr Babbage, as to whether questionnaires, such as the survey provided to Sandy Hook families and emergency responders had received, would be available to the public, Mr Lyddy said, “No.”

That online survey was very controlled, he explained, and the commission has not decided if a similar survey would be practical on a larger, uncontrolled scale.

Mr Gaines cautioned the commission members, saying “No matter what you do, you’re not going to make everyone happy. Opening [an online survey] up to the entire community could be dangerous. You could get a lot of negative feedback.”

Another community member, John Norwell, also questioned the wisdom of a townwide survey, later in the evening.

Commission member Alan Martin stressed, “We take our responsibility very seriously.” The commission will listen, it is an open process, and the final recommendations will be determined collectively, he said.

“In the end,” added Mr Lyddy, “we have to do what feels right in our hearts here.”

All responses are weighted, he said, with the 26 families being the most important part of the process. Even those families who did not respond in Phase 1 will be approached again, he said.

Finding A Location

Soliciting input from the small audience, Mr Lyddy addressed the issue of where a permanent memorial might be located. Mr Martin, who serves on the location subcommittee, said they are developing an inventory of properties.

“We will explore every potential site and recommend three to four sites,” he said. There is always a possibility that property could be donated for the memorial, he added.

The subcommittee takes into consideration the public accessibility of a property, that a property could be a destination site and private, and the security of the property.

Questions on the design component were fielded Thursday evening, as well. What the commission has gleaned so far, Mr Lyddy said, is that the permanent memorial components should be such that it ties in with natural elements; that it is accessible year around; and that it be located outdoors. It is also important that the memorial should not honor the event, but rather the lives lost 12/14.

Mr Norwell, president of Newtown Alumni Association, noted that the association had advocated for the permanent memorial to be placed at Fairfield Hills, in the area of the High

Meadows. Conversations with a nationally known artist and designer, he said, emphasized that location would determine the design. Having talked with the Connecticut Nursery Association and LaurelRock Company, Mr Norwell said that it would be feasible to cut a road to the High Meadows for accessibility.

“It would not interfere with the walking trails [at Fairfield Hills]. The area is pristine,” Mr Norwell said, “but it is not used for anything but mowing hay.”

He also offered to share the mailing list of Newtown Alumni Association with the commission, in order for them to test a wider survey.

Mr Gaines offered one final thought as the hour-long meeting wound down: “Do something that makes it go on in perpetuity.”

The commission members appreciated and were not discouraged by even a very small group at the public hearing, Mr Lyddy said. [A January 20 public hearing](#) also drew a very small crowd.

“We’re close. I think there’ll be more output in the next few months,” Mr Lyddy said, in closing.

The public is invited to contact the commission at SandyHookPermanentMemorial@gmail.com, or visit www.sandyhookpermanentmemorial.com.

The SHPMC meets the second Thursday of each month, at 7:30 pm, in the chambers at Newtown Municipal Center. The next regular meeting is scheduled for Thursday, February 12. The public is welcome to attend.