

Easton 9/11 memorial: Work starts as architect leaves job

Written by Laura Modlin, Correspondent
Thursday, 11 August 2011 10:54



As construction on the town's 9/11 memorial got underway in front of the library last Monday, a parting of the ways between the project's architect and the memorial building committee was developing.

And as of this Monday, the project's architect, Mark Halstead, of Mark R. Halstead Architect in Fairfield, had withdrawn from the project.

The memorial's design includes two 30-inch high stone walls, a small garden, three benches, an engraved granite stone plaque, a flagpole and a nine-foot-high wooden pergola.

The point of disagreement involves a design change the committee made to the way the memorial's pergola would be anchored to the granite slabs beneath the benches. Mr. Halstead claims that the changes would make the pergola "structurally unsound."

"I just can't expose myself to the liability," he said. "It's not safe."

Andrew Kachele, building committee member, said that the committee felt there would be maintenance and construction issues with the design the way Mr. Halstead submitted it and that attempts had been made to involve Mr. Halstead in the modifications.

"Mark's engineer did not want to discuss any changes," said Mr. Kachele.

Mr. Halstead sent a letter to Bill Martin, the town's building inspector, dated Aug. 8, detailing the issues he sees with the new design and removing himself as "architect-of-record" for the project. In the letter, he states that the building committee is no longer authorized to use his drawings and asks to pick up the copies on record at town hall.

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As of Tuesday morning, the pergola application at town hall has been withdrawn, according to Mr. Martin.

First Selectman Thomas Herrmann is requesting a status update from the memorial building committee for the selectmen's Aug. 18 meeting. The three-man Board of Selectmen formed the memorial building committee for the purpose of this project. There is no contract between the memorial committee and Mr. Halstead and he has not charged a fee for his contribution to the project.

In an interview, Mr. Halstead stated that he will not attempt to block the committee from building the memorial. "I don't want this action of mine to have any bad repercussions," he said. "I have the utmost respect for the committee."

According to Beverlee Dacey, memorial building chair, the construction is continuing but the future of the pergola is up in the air.

"We regret Mark's decision, but we respect him," said Mrs. Dacey.

Moving forward

At the helm of the current construction phase of the project is Todd Puglio, whose company, Earthworks, won the bid to install the memorial up until but not including the pergola. It began work last week by laying the concrete foundation (footing) for the memorial's masonry, stone walls and granite slabs. In order to secure the footings for the stone walls, it dug down 42 inches to the frost line.

"This way we can guarantee you won't have any movement with frost," said Mr. Puglio, "so we can be very confident it will stand the test of time."

He said that they are using similarly rugged techniques with all the components of the memorial.

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“We want them to be reasonably durable,” he said. “We want kids to be able to enjoy it.”

He sees the memorial as a celebration of spirit.

“The architect has definitely done that,” according to Mr. Puglio. The second order of business for the installation is placing the granite slabs. There is one — the plaque — which has an inscription of a quote by Helen Keller and there are three other slabs for the areas beneath the benches.

Then work may begin on the stone walls. There will be one on either side of the granite plaque. The stone walls are designed to replicate the twin towers.

“They are the exact proportions of the twin towers,” said Mr. Puglio.

The stones being used are New England veneer stone, similar to what one might find on the façade of a house in the area. The builders will be using hidden mortar joints to enhance the New England feel of the walls.

Assembling the walls is intricate work and each will take approximately one week.

While they are assembling the stone walls they will also be placing random-sized granite pavers on the ground where people will walk at the memorial. The flagpole with a fieldstone flagging beneath it, the planting area and the benches will be brought in towards the end of the project.

Fund-raising underway

As of the end of June there was \$37,394 in the memorial’s fund, according to Grace Stanczyk, Easton’s comptroller. This is after paying some incidental bills but before paying construction costs. The amount includes the nearly \$5,200 raised at a May 1 fund-raising concert.

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Dr. Sal Santella, treasurer of the building committee, said that they have enough to cover costs up until the pergola but a total of \$50,000 is needed to include installation of the pergola and completion of the memorial.

“Eventually, in the future, we will want to create a fund for maintenance,” said Dr. Santella.

Committee member Andrew Kachele said that even without the pergola people will be able to appreciate the message of the memorial.

“The bulk of the visual impact is going to come from the stone walls,” he said. “The pergola is a finishing touch.” The committee received three bids on the pergola. The low bid is from a company in Newtown and is good for 60 days from when bidding opened three weeks ago.

Among 9/11’s nearly 3,000 victims being honored by the memorial are Easton native Peter Hanson, his wife Sue and their two-year-old daughter Christine. Their names will be inscribed in the three benches.

Peter’s father, Eastonite Lee Hanson, has visited the site in front of the library since the construction began and is pleased. “I’m absolutely feeling good about what I saw,” said Mr. Hanson. And what he foresees is a place where children may learn about what happened on Sept. 11, 2001.

“That memorial is for the children of Easton,” he said. “They’ll be able to sit there and talk and learn about 9/11.”

Even today, many of Easton’s school-aged children were either not born yet on 9/11 or too young to understand, Mr. Hanson said.

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He sees the memorial as a place of “great communication” and hopes that it will be full of life with children playing around it.

“They’re going to be taken by the beauty of it in that setting,” said Mr. Hanson.

To get involved in fund-raising efforts, contact Dr. Sal Santella at 203-374-3161.