

To: Town Council Members
Date: May 9, 2025
Subject: Mount Lebanon Historic District Re-zoning Proposal

The following presents an overview of new zoning regulations proposed for the Mount Lebanon Historic District, the area commonly called Shaker Village and the location where five Shaker communities thrived during the 19th Century and continued to be the primary landowners well into the 20th Century.

The United Society of Believers, known as Shakers, a communal Christian society that espoused racial and gender equality and charity toward non-Shakers, dedicated their community to achieving heaven on earth. They left the Town of New Lebanon with buildings of designs and layouts reflecting Shaker values of simplicity and utility. Today, designers, architects and artists prize the aesthetic principles reflected in the buildings on Mount Lebanon. For historians, the Mount Lebanon location is of value because Mount Lebanon served as the central ministry of the Shaker Society.

The historic buildings on Mount Lebanon are primarily located on property holdings of five owners, including three institutional owners: Darrow School, The Abode of the Message and Shaker Museum and Library. Although historic preservation is not the primary purpose of the Darrow and the Abode, preservation, through re-purposing and re-use, has served to maintain many of the historic resources they own. The Shaker Museum took ownership of the North Family site with a charge to preserve the site's historic resources. However, whether the Museum has the financial resources to dedicate to their preservation is not evident. Recently, Darrow's financial condition was challenged. Darrow's future, though more optimistic now, cannot be taken for granted. Similarly, the Abode has undergone institutional changes. All of these changes have occurred at a time when northern Columbia County has witnessed a renewed demand for scenic, rural property, confronting elected officials, community planners and the public with both challenges and opportunities.

Against this backdrop, residents concerned about the future of the Mount Lebanon historic resources gathered as an advisory committee to the Town Board, under the name Shaker Preservation Committee to explore strategies to address the challenges and opportunities. In coordination with the town's Zoning Re-Write Committee, a list of goals and a plan for constituting a working group was presented to the Town Board. In February 2024, the Town Board adopted the following goals and tasked the two committees with constituting a working group to propose additions to the Zoning Law to achieve the goals:

- (1) Protect, preserve, and rehabilitate the Shaker buildings and architecture.
- (2) Protect, preserve, and rehabilitate the Shaker cultural landscape, including the family clusters, ruins, fences, hitching posts, stone paths and walls, and other character-defining features.
- (3) Protect and preserve the undeveloped lands, including the fields and woods, while

understanding that achieving these goals may entail accepting limited and respectful development.

(4) Put the Shaker buildings and land to use in ways that are consistent with certain Shaker values that have enduring appeal, including simplicity, quality, community, hospitality, equality, and innovation.

(5) Keep the Shaker buildings, landscape, and lands reasonably accessible by the public.

(6) Share the history we've been fortunate to inherit with our own community and visitors.

(7) Avoid chemical pollution and minimize excess noise and light pollution.

(8) Maintain easy access through Darrow Road to nearby residential roads.

(9) Revisit these goals over time to ensure each one is appropriate and to consider adding new ones.

The Mount Lebanon Working Group started its assignment with the shared conclusion that under the RA2/RA5 zoning currently in place in the District, long term preservation of the historic buildings and of the landscape's beauty are not guaranteed. Some buildings are in need of active efforts to preserve them. The Mount Lebanon Working Group intended to draft special zoning rules with the primary purpose being to provide property owners with the legal authorization to advance the Town's preservation goals through land use possibilities that can provide owners with economic opportunities that will simultaneously advance long term preservation goals and maintain the aesthetic qualities of the District.

The Mount Lebanon Historic District Working Group and its parent committees, the Shaker Preservation Committee and the Zoning Rewrite Committee, propose to achieve this objective through adoption of the proposed amendment to the Town's Zoning Code, which amendment will be applicable solely to the Mount Lebanon Historic District. The proposed amendment is comprised of the following elements:

1. Three zoning districts, each with its own bulk and area regulations. One district consists of five sites of existing and former Shaker building clusters i.e., the locations of the five Shaker community centers. A second consists of the largely open land located adjoining Darrow and Shaker Roads I between the first district. The third contains the remaining land in the MLHD, i.e., the largely undeveloped land located back from the public roads.
2. An amended table of permitted uses including new uses unique to the District. The permitted uses provide opportunities for the use of private property not generally available in the RA 2 and RA5 districts, but most will require Site Plan approval, Special Use Permits or both and if they involve modifying the outside of historic buildings or new construction they will need to follow the Design Standards.
3. Design standards applicable to alterations to historic buildings. These standards will limit alterations so as to preserve historic features.

4. Design standards applicable to new construction. These standards will require new construction to be compatible and not in conflict with nearby historic resources.

The Working Group has shared early drafts with its constituent committees and with representatives of each of the five property owners. The draft we are proposing for your review includes modifications based on those consultations. The elements of the zoning proposal work together to achieve the Working Group's ideas for meeting the Town's goals. We look forward to receiving your comments and answering your questions.

Mt. Lebanon Historic District Working Group

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