INTERVIEW: MHZC AND METRO PLANNING STAFF ON THE GREEN HILLS EAST SHORT HISTORY

VERSION 1.0 · 2026-06-11 · ALEX PEMBERTON
COMPANION TO "VENEERS OF HISTORY IN GREEN HILLS EAST", *NASHVILLE SCENE*

FINDING

Robin Zeigler (MHZC), in a June 1, 2026 interview alongside Metro Planning staff, confirmed she authored the Green Hills East Short History, could not reconcile its model-home identification with the deed record, and said she had looked for racial restrictions in the deeds without finding them.

SUPPORTS IN THE ARTICLE

- *Zeigler was the author and researcher of the Green Hills East Short History*
- *the staff's account of how the Short History was researched and sourced*
- *the staff's framing of Green Hills East as primarily an architectural matter*

ABSTRACT

On June 1, 2026, beginning at approximately 3:30 p.m., three Metro government staff sat for a recorded telephone interview with Alex Pemberton: Robin Zeigler, Senior Preservation Planner at the Metro Historic Zoning Commission (MHZC), who authored the Green Hills East Short History; Joni Williams of Metro Planning's design studio, who addressed process and the forthcoming preservation plan; and Richel Albright of Metro Planning, who addressed department history, the overlay's procedural status, and the thanks that opened and closed the call.

The interview covers four areas. First, how Short Histories are made: Zeigler explained there is no standard template, the research drives their content, and different ones have been written by different staff or consultants; Williams added that the MHZC is at its core an architectural review board, so the research focuses predominantly on structures. Second, the model-home identification: Zeigler said she identified 1637 South Observatory Drive through newspaper articles, "by address and maybe by photos," and deed and directory research, but could not recall specifics and offered to pull her notes; Pemberton noted that no *Tennessean* article gives an address, and that 1637 was bought in January 1927 by Mizella Burton Grant — A. M. Burton's daughter — not by Holt Bean, the buyer the paper named. Third, the covenants: on the minimum-cost covenant, Zeigler said "In [the] deed"; on racial restrictions, she said that on "the deeds that I looked at, I didn't see it," though "I was actually kind of looking for it," and that she had "looked up one yesterday and didn't see it." Pemberton read the racial covenant aloud, and Zeigler confirmed she had not seen it. Fourth, staff framed Green Hills East as architecturally focused, confirmed the overlay's withdrawal and that a refiling would be a new

application, and described a coming Metro preservation plan as a chance to revisit research standards.

The transcript below is produced from Deepgram Nova-3 automatic speech recognition with speaker diarization (four speaker channels). It has been edited for filler words only (um, uh, you know, filler like, stutter-repeats), with consecutive same-speaker fragments merged into single turns. All other words, word order, false starts carrying content, and colloquial grammar are preserved verbatim. Speaker attribution between Williams and Albright rests on Joni Williams's self-identification at the outset of the call; all other attribution is as diarized. Turns where attribution is uncertain are marked [speaker?]. Uncertain words or names are marked [?].

INTERVIEW

Speaker-number mapping used: SPEAKER 0 = PEMBERTON; SPEAKER 1 = ZEIGLER; SPEAKER 2 = WILLIAMS; SPEAKER 3 = ALBRIGHT.

PEMBERTON: Okay. So thanks again for joining. We've got a lot to cover in an hour here. I think, you know, again, sent a topic list, so hopefully you feel prepared. If we can start — why don't we just start by, Robin, if you could walk me through what is a Short History? How does it get made? Who researches it? Who writes it?

ZEIGLER: The research is done by lots of different people, and the writing too — staff of the Metro Historical Commission, staff of Historic Zoning Commission, or maybe even a consultant. So over the years they've been written by different people and researched by different people. The purpose of them is to help the commission decide whether or not it meets the standards that the ordinance lays out for them for creating a historic overlay.

PEMBERTON: And what is the standard? What does that mean?

ZEIGLER: The ordinance lays out the standards that a property would need to meet in order to qualify for an historic overlay. So that's Section 17.36.120. And there are five standards that are really pretty aligned with the National Register process as well.

PEMBERTON: And so the Short History is sort of what makes them understand whether this is historically significant or not?

ZEIGLER: Yeah. It's a tool that they use.

PEMBERTON: And so who specifically wrote the Green Hills East one? Do you know which staffers?

ZEIGLER: Yeah, that was me.

PEMBERTON: That was you? Okay. Great. So I've got a few copies here in front of me. Obviously you have a finished one. There's one — I believe it was called "A Short History of Historic Green Hills East" — that looks like a less finished version. I think there's a January date attached to it. I'll kind of work off of that and ask a few questions from there because it has several more pieces of documentation; it's got some footnotes with sources and things like that. I know you've made some changes in what seems like a finished version over time. It seems like this is maybe a fuller version of the research that you did.

WILLIAMS: Alex? So — this is Joni. Just one quick second. I think you're not seeing a less polished version and a more polished version. What you're seeing is one that had to sort of conform to the formatting that the MHZC team typically uses, and the actual full document. So you're not seeing an evolution in time. You're seeing one that's formatted and one that is more of the actual product and the working document, if that makes sense.

PEMBERTON: Got it. Absolutely, that does make sense. Thank you for that. And so — is there a written standard, written template? Is there, like — are those sections, like, "we need to cover this, this, and that"? Is that just purely formatting? I've read a few of these by now and some of them seem different, but that may just be over time.

ZEIGLER: I don't know what you mean by a written template with different sections. Can you —

ALBRIGHT: Are you talking about the staff report?

PEMBERTON: I'm talking about the Short History. So I see we've got one that has the map of the district, the proposed district, and then it starts with "A Short History of Green Hills East." It goes into development, it goes into the home construction, it goes through these different sections. Is it like — is there a sort of standard template that says we need to talk about how the land was subdivided, what it was before, or is this sort of case by case basis?

ZEIGLER: I think you're talking about the staff report. So the first few pages — the first six pages — you're right, there's a template to the report, and then after that is the Short History. So are you asking about the short —

PEMBERTON: I'm asking about the Short History. Yeah. I'm asking about the short history. This one, I think — and correct me if I'm wrong — starts "A Short History of Green Hills East NCZO". It has a picture of the "Opportunity Green Hills" advertisement, a little clip of Green Hills prior to home construction, and a couple sections — Development, Home Construction — that Short History.

ZEIGLER: Again, I'm so sorry, I don't fully understand the question. There's no template to the Short Histories. The — it's the research that drives what they say.

ALBRIGHT: One thing too, Alex, to just kind of remember is the Historic Zoning Commission at its core is an architectural review board. And so I think the research that is predominantly focused in these Short Histories is on the site, structures, buildings, and the like, if that is helpful.

PEMBERTON: Yeah. Absolutely. And we will get to that. But this document is pretty important to the determination of whether the MHZC should recommend a historic overlay or not. Right? Because otherwise you would just say that this area has beautiful architecture or whatever.

WILLIAMS: Alex, I want to go back to the section that Robin was referencing in the code — Section 17.36.120. There are five very explicit pieces of criteria that the commission is tasked with considering. And so this is just one of the pieces of evidence — the short history is just one piece of evidence or content that the commission reviews when they're considering whether or not an area rises to the level of those criteria. So we're happy to send that to you if that's not already on your radar, that section of the zoning code.

PEMBERTON: Yeah. I've got that. Thanks. I think it was one and three that they found a recommendation for on this one. So — why don't we talk about that, the case for significance? Robin, if you could. As I understand it, there are a couple pieces. I can just read off: "The district is the namesake for the larger Green Hills area and a significant representation of the national initiative to promote homeownership and educate about modern materials and construction practices beginning in the late nineteen twenties." And as I understand it, that "national initiative" was the Better Homes in America movement, and that is via its association with the Tennessean Model Home. Is that correct?

ZEIGLER: That's right.

PEMBERTON: So — what sources did you rely on to identify the Tennessean Model Home? Because as I understand it, there weren't addresses for this area back at that time.

ZEIGLER: There weren't specific buildings. We can send you a copy of the history — it's all footnoted.

PEMBERTON: I've got that in front of me.

ZEIGLER: So I've used newspaper articles. There was a book called *The Book of a Thousand Homes* that's on the preservation technology website. And mostly newspaper articles. So it wasn't about picking out specific houses, although there is one that was repeated as a model home in the *Tennessean* over and over and over again. But it was also about looking at the architectural form and style and seeing those kinds of houses in plan books of that era from that organization.

PEMBERTON: But that was one of many plan books, right, that went back?

ZEIGLER: Yes.

PEMBERTON: I mean — like, Lockeland Springs has a number of these houses that were built off plan books preceding this. Right? So that — it's that specific connection to that Home Owners' Service Institute, that specific connection to the Better Homes in America campaign with the Tennessean Model Home that sort of made this one significant in a way that other neighborhoods built with plans from plan books are not necessarily, for that reason. Right?

ZEIGLER: Again, that's sort of a broad statement. And I think you mentioned Lockeland Springs — that's a much earlier development. I don't know if there's much of a comparison there.

PEMBERTON: Okay. Well, that's fine. Moving on. So most of the Short History — a large part of the short history, I don't want to say most — but it talks about the Tennessean Model Home located at 1637 South Observatory Drive. How did you identify that home at that address as the Tennessean Model Home?

ZEIGLER: Through the newspaper articles.

PEMBERTON: Through the newspaper articles. And did they have an address? How exactly?

ZEIGLER: I believe it was by address and maybe by photos. I can't remember exactly. This was done a couple of years ago.

PEMBERTON: I tried to do the same. They were not addressed. I never found an address for the Tennessean Model Home. So if you have, I'd like to see it, just to make sure that I've got the record right. But so you saw photos — you presumably saw the construction photos. Right? You saw all the descriptions of the model home being built and this and that from the *Tennessean*. Correct?

ZEIGLER: I don't recall photos of it during construction.

PEMBERTON: Okay. But you did see — stories where it says, you know, "brick veneer" and "the Tennessean Model Home nearing completion," things of that nature?

ZEIGLER: That's correct.

PEMBERTON: Okay. So we've got a brick veneer house on a wood frame. Right?

ZEIGLER: Mhmm.

PEMBERTON: I see in the footnoted version you've also consulted a Sanborn map, which I see noted as the 1951 Sanborn map, but it looks like the 1957 because a lot of the houses are not filled in, color coded. Regardless, it looks like the house that you've identified is, in both the 1951 and 1957, entirely filled with pink shading. Do you know what that means for a Sanborn map?

ZEIGLER: I believe that was that it's a brick veneer.

PEMBERTON: That means it's entirely brick, structural. So a brick veneer would be a yellow shading with a pink border. So — this leads me to a little bit more: Given the significant modifications over the years, how did you connect 1637 — which is this large sort of sprawling Tudor, which is noted as being entirely structural brick on Sanborn plans and other things — how did you connect that to this pretty diminutive, symmetrical English cottage style building that's shown in these *Tennessean* photos as being this new model home?

ZEIGLER: I'll have to get back to you on that. This was researched a couple of years ago. But I can pull up my old notes and give that to you.

PEMBERTON: And did you triangulate the identification of the home in any way other than looking at photos and *Tennessean* clippings? I see that there's one — it looks like a map that sort of maps onto, or eyeballs onto, 1637. Did you go through deed records or anything to sort of verify that — that this goes back and Holt Bean, who they said was the buyer in the *Tennessean,* owned this property? Did you do any of that?

ZEIGLER: I did.

PEMBERTON: Okay. And so you found Holt Bean owned Lots 12 and 13?

ZEIGLER: That's just a level of detail I don't remember. But I looked at deeds, directories, newspaper articles, maps, photographs.

PEMBERTON: Okay. Because I did the same. I was not able to find Holt Bean ever having owned 1637 South Observatory. It was actually purchased by Mizella Burton Grant — who I'm sure you probably are aware was A. M. Burton's daughter — in January 1927, while the Tennessean Model Home was under construction. I looked as well, because it's pointed out on the short history, at 1612 North Observatory. Did you trace the deed records there?

ZEIGLER: I'll have to get back to you. I don't remember. We definitely looked at deed records, certainly not for every single house. So I'll have to get back —

PEMBERTON: But this one — 1612 North Observatory — it's noted here that the same floor plan is evident in 1612 North Observatory. Would that have required a different level of investigation than any other house in the neighborhood?

ALBRIGHT: Where — Sorry, can you say what page you're on and what section, Alex?

PEMBERTON: Yeah. So on the footnoted version — let's see. Where was I?

ALBRIGHT: Is that page seven?

PEMBERTON: Yeah. So there are several photos on page seven. I'm looking for where it specifically says that the floor plan is evident. But regardless — 1612 North Observatory was on your radar. Right? And you did some deed search and did not find — or did find — Holt Bean as having owned 1637, but not 1612. Is that am I understanding that correctly?

ZEIGLER: I don't —

WILLIAMS: Hey, Alex. Can I just kind of cut to the chase here maybe? Are you just disagreeing as to which house was the Tennessean's house?

PEMBERTON: Yes. We have confirmed through deed records, census records, photographs, everything else, that the Tennessean Model Home was misidentified.

WILLIAMS: Okay. Thank you for bringing that to — Okay.

PEMBERTON: Yeah. Absolutely. And so the next thing that I want to ask about is — because we looked through the deed records and because we saw who owned this house, we saw that all of the deed records refer to a set of restrictive covenants. Those covenants, I think, are referred to in the short history as minimum construction cost — I think it's $5,000 minimum construction cost that varied across lots. That would be on page seven, footnote 14. It looks like that's cited to the *Tennessean*, not to the deed record. Is that correct?

ALBRIGHT: I have — wait. I have footnote — you said footnote 14?

PEMBERTON: Footnote 14. Yeah.

ALBRIGHT: I have that on page six. I don't know if that's helpful, Robin. Page six.

PEMBERTON: I may be looking at a different numbering system here.

ZEIGLER: Footnote 14 isn't referencing a deed.

ALBRIGHT: But footnote 15 on page seven is the only footnote. It says "New Subdivision Sells Rapidly," *Tennessean*, 02/06/1927. Is that what you're referring to?

PEMBERTON: That's right. That's the one.

ALBRIGHT: What was the question on that again? Sorry.

PEMBERTON: So it was the minimum construction cost as part of the deeds — which is where that's located. It's a covenant. Right? So that was determined through the *Tennessean*, not through the deed itself. Is that right?

ZEIGLER: That footnote should have been the sentence before it.

PEMBERTON: Okay. So where did you see the minimum building restriction?

ZEIGLER: In the deed.

PEMBERTON: Okay. So you also saw the racial restriction?

ZEIGLER: I didn't.

PEMBERTON: Okay. It is — it's the line immediately below the minimum building restriction.

ALBRIGHT: On the deed?

ZEIGLER: On the deeds that I looked at, I didn't see it. It's really common to have that, so I was actually kind of looking for it. But on the ones I looked at, we didn't find it. So we don't do in-depth

research on every single house — neither does the National Register nomination.

PEMBERTON: But these covenants were recorded with every deed in the neighborhood. Are you aware of that?

ZEIGLER: And so you've researched every single house?

PEMBERTON: Yes.

ZEIGLER: Interesting. I just looked up one yesterday and didn't see it.

PEMBERTON: Hmm, okay. Fascinating. Yeah. So — well, they are referenced, they are by reference. So I'll read you — this is Book 919, page 110, and this is the deed from T. J. Haile Jr. — who you may know as the builder of the Tennessean Model Home — to Holt Bean. It references restrictions and conditions contained in the deed, record Book 700, page 653. And so that's where those restrictions are contained, specifically for that house. Again, when they were sold to the initial purchaser, every house in the neighborhood contained these restrictions. So — I can, if you want, go ahead and read you what that one looks like. Do you want to do that?

ALBRIGHT: Yeah. Go ahead and read it.

PEMBERTON: Yeah. So this one has a $7,500. This is the third clause — the $7,500 restriction. And then the fourth clause, which begins immediately after the number $7,500 — the fourth says: "Neither said property nor any part thereof shall be aliened or conveyed to persons of African blood or descent, and no person of African blood or descent shall be permitted to own or occupy the premises except in the capacity of servants." So you didn't see that in any of the deeds — it shares a line with the price. That's correct.

ZEIGLER: I didn't see it. But we would love to see whatever research you're willing to share with us, because the overlay has been withdrawn. And if it's refiled at some point, there's an opportunity to revise all this.

PEMBERTON: Yeah. So I think that would probably be a good idea, because the errors and omissions here are pretty significant. Obviously a lot of this is pretty pro forma. But I sort of want to talk about this racial restriction a little bit more and how this factors into short histories in general. Obviously these covenants, as you noted, Robin, are widespread — I think about 40% of the parcels in overlays trace back to a racial covenant. But none of the short histories acknowledge that. Is that because you simply didn't find them, or is that an editorial decision, or is that just not important to what you do?

ZEIGLER: I mostly haven't written them, so I have no idea. Quite a few were written before my time, written by other people. I've written, like, two.

PEMBERTON: Should they be rewritten if they don't include something like that?

ZEIGLER: Oh, I think that we could always be rewriting them. There is always new information, always new ways of seeing old information. I think that would be great.

PEMBERTON: So we've found — and part of the story will be just simply that 19 of the 27 conservation overlays do have racial restrictions somewhere within them. And none of the short histories reference those, which is pretty important. Obviously, over the last couple of years, through the NPS Underrepresented Communities Grant and other efforts, you've started to focus more on expanding and diversifying into historically Black neighborhoods. Right? Can you tell me a little bit about that process and what you all have done there and the importance of that?

ZEIGLER: That's the work of a different department — that's the Metro Historical Commission. But I can speak to the fact that we have multiple predominantly African American communities. Lathan's Court is one of my favorites. It's one that I did write, that was started by the first African — or one of the first African American — police officers. He owned the land, he started the development, he continued to live there. That's one I feel a lot of connection to… Marlin Meadows. I'm drawing a blank on the name of the other one.

PEMBERTON: Haynes Heights and Haynes Manor maybe?

ZEIGLER: Haynes Heights. Yeah. Those — that was fun to put together as well. Really great people there.

PEMBERTON: Those were really well done. They did, again, really focus on the African American history and that social history. And I look at Green Hills East and I see that missing. We've got a nice big list of important homeowners, things like that. How much does the social history matter to these — what are architectural histories?

ZEIGLER: It depends on the history of the neighborhood. So some of the overlays are based on their architectural designs. Some of them are based on how they developed — like Lathan's Court. It's split levels and ranches, so in terms of architecture, it's nothing really special, but in terms of its history, it is. So it just depends on the history of the neighborhood and what makes it significant.

PEMBERTON: So — is it significant that a neighborhood was deliberately segregated? Is that a significant part of the social history?

ZEIGLER: I don't know if it's significant — if it alone would be the reason for it to be an overlay — but it's certainly an important part of its history.

ALBRIGHT: And, Robin, to the point that you made a second ago, some of these reports are far more based on an architectural versus how the neighborhood was created, and that's where it seems like more of that social component and cultural component comes in. Whereas with Green Hills East, this feels more so on the architectural component. I hear what you're saying, Alex, in terms of these restrictions within the deeds, and that is an important thing. But it sounds like each overlay, as they

are reviewed and researched, it may be different based on what is the story being told of a community. Is that fair to say, Robin?

ZEIGLER: That's right.

PEMBERTON: I get that. And I think that — I mean, what sort of threw me to this one and looking a little bit more into it, as you know, I've written on similar subjects in Nashville's history — what drew me to this one was just how closely the architecture and that social history are linked. This Better Homes in America model home — I don't need to tell you, Robin — was very much designed around an ideal of how to live, how to socially live.

ZEIGLER: Right.

PEMBERTON: It's encoded in the floor plan, right? And I thought that it was interesting in this one that there were servants' quarters, because — as I understood it, I've read a couple books on Better Homes in America — for the most part they were not designed with servants' quarters, and servants — Black domestic workers in that period — tended to live in other neighborhoods and come in if they were hired. So I thought it was interesting that there were servants' quarters, through sort of triangulating the owner and tying the ownership back to 1612 North Observatory to identify that as the model home. I saw that they did actually have a live-in servant. Her name was Sally Carpenter. She would have obviously slept in the basement and worked in the home throughout the day. So I just want to sort of understand: Is there such a clear distinction between architecture and architectural history and social history? Can you make that distinction so clearly?

ZEIGLER: I didn't look at floor plans, and I don't know what the existing floor plans are. I haven't been inside — well, I've been inside one house. So I'm not — we didn't go into that level of detail.

ALBRIGHT: Because, typically, Robin, your commission is looking at the exterior, not the interior.

ZEIGLER: It's a short history. It's not an in-depth history of the entire neighborhood. It's to provide information to the commission about the exteriors, about its history, so that they can determine whether or not it meets the qualifications and to give us some idea of physically what the exteriors look like, so we know what we're protecting through the guidelines. It is not in any way an exhaustive history of the neighborhood.

PEMBERTON: It should be an accurate one, though. Right?

ZEIGLER: Yes.

PEMBERTON: Yeah, okay. So — I do see exterior photos again of the model home, and it looks like one plan book home. But otherwise this reads to me — and I'm not a trained historian — but it reads to me like it's largely a social history. It is about the movement toward homeownership in the early 1920s. It's about how that model home and the owner of the model home — his career arc — developed, and who lived in the neighborhood. That's a social history. Right?

ZEIGLER: Who lived in the neighborhood was just included to give you an idea about the history of the neighborhood. It's not significant because of who lived there.

PEMBERTON: And so what specifically made this neighborhood significant? We had criteria one and three. But could you describe that in a little bit more specific, layman's terms, outside of just, here's what the code section says?

ZEIGLER: It's in the report as well, but it's based on the fact that it was this national movement for home building.

PEMBERTON: And so the sourcing for the characterization of that national movement — the Better Homes — I see only one footnote related to that, and that looks like it was that *Book of a Thousand Homes*, that comes from the Home Owners' Service Institute, which is the publishing arm of that movement. Right?

ZEIGLER: Correct.

PEMBERTON: Was that the only source consulted, or were there other sources that just didn't get cited?

ZEIGLER: We look at lots of different things that don't actually make it into the histories.

PEMBERTON: Do you have an idea of what else you looked at to sort of characterize the movement?

ZEIGLER: I'm sorry. I don't. It's been a couple of years.

PEMBERTON: Yeah. Well, again, I'm fairly familiar with this topic, have read a number of books, and I think that the connection again between that social history and especially that history of segregation and this movement were a bit more closely linked than what I read here. I don't want to continue beating this. I think you guys understand what this is and where it's going and what the story is going to be. Maybe how we can spend the rest of our time productively is talking about what an accurate history looks like — what a somewhat complete history looks like — and how the MHZC sees that going forward.

ALBRIGHT: Yeah. Before we jump into that, Alex — one, I'm grateful that you are bringing forward some things that, again, as Robin said, if this is brought back by the councilmember, we can make these edits and modifications. And one of the things that the Historic Zoning Commission staff have been with the Planning Department for a year now — just a little over a year. Or no, it'll be a year in July. Time flies. And one of the things that I'm grateful for is they have helped us think about processes within our own purview, but also vice versa, helping them think about how they're reviewing things and researching and the like. And we'll be doing a preservation plan, starting with a scope later this year and then doing the work, hopefully in earnest, in the next calendar year. And some of these questions that you're raising could be helpful questions as we're building out a scope

of how are we using guidelines, how are we using research, how are we using social histories versus just architectural structural histories when we're working on these reports. And so I just wanted to, one, thank you for elevating some of this, and two, we are never so set in our ways that we can't modify and change things and make sure that we're doing the best and highest productive work as well.

PEMBERTON: Yeah. For sure. Can you tell me a little bit more about the preservation plan? You mentioned some opportunities to set standards, set guidelines, that template for how you do that. How could some of the things that I've raised be better handled through that process? How would MHZC and Planning approach that?

ALBRIGHT: Sure. I'll take a quick stab, and then, Joni, if you want to jump in, because I know you'll probably be drafting an initial scope. Some of it is, let's make sure that as we are moving forward — we've got a template obviously for a staff report, but maybe there are templates and things that are put in place as we're doing specific research. I think Robin is correct — these histories reveal themselves based on the research. Let's make sure we've got things in place of utilizing different types of sourcing — just, being specific to what we're discussing today, I think that's an easy step to implement — and making sure that we understand the guidelines in writing these. Joni, I know you've probably given a little more thought to the preservation plan as a whole.

WILLIAMS: Sure. So I think, Alex, one important thing that we've been chewing on over the last year or so is how do we plan for preservation? That is not something that most people do proactively. Typically — most cities, and I think this is true across the board — preservation tends to be reactive. And I think Nashville has a really important opportunity to be more proactive on preservation. And so that might look like individual iconic buildings. It might also look like neighborhoods, for a variety of meaningful reasons. But it also may be to strategize about what the criteria are for a neighborhood being meaningful for preservation. And so — this is probably some of the inner workings, Alex, that don't matter, but I want to share them with you anyways — we will have a neighborhood come to us and say, "We're experiencing this, that, or the other, and we want to think about the zoning tools available to us." And this happened even before Historic Zoning came to Planning. So you might look at a contextual overlay. You might look at the two-story overlay. You might look at a community design overlay that can be customized. You might look at a preservation overlay. And so the one that always comes to mind for me is the Primrose neighborhood, that's just inside 440, where they felt very open to new construction, open to change, but they just wanted some design criteria in place. And so thinking about how we grow and preserve simultaneously is going to be a really important component of the preservation plan. Now what that means in the actual prioritization of what kind of history we're preserving — whether that's architectural significance, social significance — I think is up for rigorous debate as we move into that very, very extroverted, community-based conversation, in — as Richel mentioned — 2027.

PEMBERTON: Yeah. So what I'm hearing is that there's an opening for a more proactive preservation approach where, rather than waiting for neighborhoods — which it sounds like has been the model — waiting for neighborhoods to come and say, "Hey, we want this," maybe it's MHZC staff proactively identifying neighborhoods and then going and starting that process. Is that what I'm hearing, or am I creating that?

WILLIAMS: No. I think you're right. So the historic zoning has been around for fifty years in Nashville, going back to the mid-seventies. A lot of these neighborhoods were under extreme pressure from urban renewal. And so forty, fifty years ago — which I think you're referencing some of our earliest and oldest historic zoning overlays — those neighborhoods, it was a grassroots effort. Right? It was a grassroots effort by the people who live there for preservation efforts. And so I think the question moving forward is: what is preservation in the middle of the twenty-first century? What does that mean from an architectural standpoint, from a social history standpoint? There will come a time when people are talking about whether or not to preserve McMansions.

PEMBERTON: Tall skinnies — those will be preserved in a few years, right?

WILLIAMS: So I think there's a really meaningful and robust conversation to have there, because it's a strange thing to be planning — which is forward-looking — for preservation, which is usually backwards-looking, and requires some kind of understanding of what we value in the current day, in hand with what was being discussed in a previous day.

PEMBERTON: Yeah. Right. There's never preservation — in history is never just entirely about history. Right? It's always a negotiation with the present. And I guess I'd like to hear, and the future — I'd like to hear a little bit from Robin. How do you think, in 2026, that — that negotiation is working. Is it working? What would you change?

ZEIGLER: I think that's part of the role of the preservation plan. So it won't be just what do I think? It's going to be what does Nashville think.

ALBRIGHT: Let me also kind of give you, again, like, peel back the curtain a little bit. It has been really great over the last year to have the Historic Zoning staff be part of our department and in these everyday conversations. We have a weekly meeting every Tuesday where staff will bring issues — either cases that are early pre-app cases, or things that they're facing — and it's a room full of our assistant directors, but also Historic Zoning staff, land development, design studio, and we're working in real time and talking through some of these issues. "Did you think about this?" And being able to have their voices on some of these cases to help elevate things that maybe our land development staff would not have ever thought to look at — I think it's really, again, as we're experiencing a lot of growth, how do you manage growth? And it's not just about infill new development, but also manage growth in terms of preservation as well. I think it's been really great to watch and see all this collaborative work happening within the department.

ZEIGLER: I agree with that. And I think that it's giving us an opportunity to really think beyond historic zoning. And that's what the plan will hopefully let us look at as well — that Nashville, because it's the whole county, is incredibly diverse, and historic zoning isn't going to be a tool that works for every area. So that's one of the things I hope we'll look at too: what other tools can we create to preserve in different ways and preserve different types of development.

PEMBERTON: That's an interesting point. I think, Robin, I'm sure you are well aware, but the history of this growth management that I'm hearing again and again is that it used to be — back when historic zoning started — that was, like, the only tool. Right? That was pretty much the only thing that you had to shape form other than zoning. And now that you've got contextual overlays, urban design overlays, the two-story overlay — what's the role of historic zoning and its sibling conservation zoning in that context? Why does historic zoning matter?

ZEIGLER: Because it preserves our historic character. All those other tools don't prevent demolition. But the historic overlays do. So that's an opportunity to preserve housing that — a lot of our historic neighborhoods are diverse in terms of size, so you've got a lot of diversity of people. You've got a diversity of pricing. And so preserving that preserves that diversity of people too. And it keeps things from going to the landfill. Our landfills are overly full, and it's better to use what we've got than throw everything away and start over.

PEMBERTON: Yeah. I would say that's a planning consideration. And what I'm hearing is that these are really tightly linked — and obviously they're even more tightly linked now that historic zoning is part of Planning. Is there a threat or a worry that the history part gets subsumed a little to the planning part?

ZEIGLER: Not on my end.

ALBRIGHT: I don't think so. Alex, as you know, Lucy — her background, she comes from DC — and so I think she has a deep reverence for history and historical spaces and places, not just the built form, but also preserving natural forms as well, which is why we're doing the countywide ecological conservation strategy to think about preservation in that matter as well. I would say I think that the histories matter at a leadership level. I don't think Lucy would mind me speaking on her behalf.

ZEIGLER: And it's a balance, right? There isn't any point in keeping these buildings if they can't be used by people. And so it's as much looking forward as it is looking back. You've got to — just preserving the building as a museum — they can't all be museums. They've got to be working, living structures. So you've got to take into account modern needs and the changing needs of the city.

PEMBERTON: So let's spend our last little bit here talking about what that sort of future looks like. Some of these short histories — they serve not only this function of supporting the recommendation for historical merit, right, but they also then sort of become like the official history of the neighborhood in a way. So if we look at those and we say, well, some of these things might be outdated, or they

may be incomplete, or we might need to go back and look at these — what does that process look like?

ZEIGLER: I really think that histories are a living document. They're always changing as we find out more information. Every historian builds off of the work of the people before them. So I think they're ever-evolving. And that may be something that comes out of the preservation plan — that now is a good time to look at some of those older ones, maybe all of them, and update and revise.

ALBRIGHT: Well, and not only update and revise — but, Alex, to your point, for some people this may be, in their minds, a record of the history of their neighborhood. So if we're looking at a short history that is predominantly structure-focused, building-focused, that's not fair to say that's just the history of the neighborhood. It's a component of it. And so is it the role of the Historic Zoning Commission to have a full-blown exhaustive history that includes all pieces, or is there some sort of other partnership? And maybe that's something the preservation plan recommends — that there's deeper, more exhaustive work, but that would probably require either a partnership with a consultant or working with our friends over at the Historical Commission. There's a focus, a little bit, with historic zoning.

PEMBERTON: I would say — and I don't mean any offense by this — but having read through these short histories, I think you do see a little bit of a difference in Haynes Heights, for instance, which had that dedicated consultant and had some outside eyes, in the depth and the breadth of the history. Is that helpful? Because as I understand it, it's quite rare for a short history with an overlay application to really have any outside eyes on it going through that process. It's written by MHC and MHZC staff, but then it sort of goes to the commission — and as I understand it, they tend to say, "This is great, looks nice" — and then it goes to Planning Commission, and they sort of assume historical merit has already been cited by the MHZC, and then it goes to the council. What's the value of having outside eyes and having some additional checks? Do you feel like there's enough of that today?

ZEIGLER: I think that — and this may not be what you were saying, but it kind of sounded like it — the commission isn't approving the short history. Right? They're just making a recommendation based on the criteria laid out in the ordinance. The Planning Commission probably doesn't really take into account the history. They're looking at, does it meet the plan — the community plan? And then council takes all of that information and new information and public information and political information to make a final decision.

ALBRIGHT: Also, Alex, to your point or question about consultants, outside eyes — there are a ton of projects within Metro and our department certainly where we do kind of bring in a consultant to help us. Maybe it's in an area that we don't have full-blown subject matter expertise — and I'm not saying that for this particular work. But I think there can be some merit to having additional help and review, especially as a department that has grown rapidly in just the five years that I've been here, added a lot of staff, and we are continuing to take on more and more projects. It can be beneficial in that way.

But that is also like — anytime you bring in a consultant, that's you're not just letting things go to them and taking everything that they do and just not reviewing it. There's still a lot of work to be done with consultants. I'm not totally sure if I understood the question completely, but —

PEMBERTON: No. I think between you and Robin it was answered. So thank you. I appreciate that. So — what is the status now, to your knowledge, of the Green Hills East overlay? I talked to Councilmember Jeff Preptit, and it sounds like they're still going through some community engagement, re-engagement process. What's going on on the Metro Historic Zoning Commission and Planning Commission side of that?

WILLIAMS: Sure. So, Alex, I believe it was heard by the MHZC and they recommended approval. I don't think it went to the Planning Commission — Councilmember — it was deferred.

PEMBERTON: Planning Commission, and then withdrawn.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. And so from our standpoint, it's been withdrawn. It's an inactive application — or it's a withdrawn application. And so if and when Councilmember Preptit is ready to move forward, he would bring us his content, what he's heard from the community. There's always — it would be a brand new application. So there's time to discuss the boundaries of the overlay, the contributing, non-contributing — certainly making sure that our notes about the history are accurate and fulsome before we move something forward. It would go back to the MHZC and it would go back to the Planning Commission as a new application in both circumstances and then obviously on to Council. And our understanding is I think he's in the middle of kind of a neighborhood survey or polling process where he's making some pretty strong efforts towards engaging everyone in that process. And so hats off to him for that rigor.

PEMBERTON: Yeah. Absolutely. Okay. Well, we are actually now starting to come to the end of our time. I really appreciate the time that you've given me. I know that carving out an hour from three schedules — three busy schedules — is not easy. So I really appreciate it, especially on fairly short notice.

ALBRIGHT: Alex, really quick — I just want to, again, reiterate, thank you for bringing forward things that — while I do believe Robin did an exhaustive search of things that may have been missed — we're always willing to modify, update. And so I do appreciate you bringing forward some of this for us to look at. And if there are specific deeds [?] that you've found, we would love to see them.

PEMBERTON: Happy to share notes. And would love to see the notes on your side as well, if you're able. We can sort of share notes and see maybe what we both got right and wrong. So I'll now just sort of — open mic. Is there anything — I know that we've covered a lot of ground, but open mic — is there anything that we haven't covered that any of the three of you have thought about throughout this conversation that you feel like readers of the *Scene* should know, residents of this potential overlay should know, just general folks in Nashville should know?

ALBRIGHT: I don’t have anything.

ALBRIGHT: [speaker?] Yeah. I can’t think of anything.

PEMBERTON: I’m getting nose-shaking. Okay. Okay. Well, then with that, I again really appreciate it. As I said, I’m all out of questions. I think we’ve covered a lot of ground — finally covered a lot of ground. So I will, like I said, once we hang up, get this recording, run it through an auto transcriber, and have an auto transcribed copy sent along with that for your records and so that you can fact-check me if you see anything wrong in the *Scene*. And then we will go from there. I’m happy to share notes — obviously assembling that, still have mostly been writing, and there’s only so much that can fit into the *Scene*. I know we have a lot more outside of that. Happy to share notes outside of that. And yeah, we can roll on from there.

ZEIGLER: Thank you.

ALBRIGHT: Awesome. Thank you. Alex, if anything else comes up as you’re writing, feel free to shoot us over some questions, and we can do our best to help you there as well.

PEMBERTON: Yeah. Will do. Absolutely.

SOURCES

A recorded telephone interview conducted by Alex Pemberton on June 1, 2026, with Robin Zeigler (Senior Preservation Planner, Metro Historic Zoning Commission), Joni Williams (Metro Planning), and Richel Albright (Metro Planning); transcribed with Deepgram Nova-3 (automatic speech recognition with speaker diarization) and edited for filler words only. Speaker attribution between Joni Williams and Richel Albright is best-effort; Williams is identified by self-introduction early in the call, and Albright is the remaining staff voice. Words or names marked [?] are uncertain transcriptions. The untouched diarized recording file remains the raw record.

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