

STAFF REPORT 03-13-2024 MEETING

PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG

APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2024-00089

ADDRESS: 477 WEST ALEXANDRINE

HISTORIC DISTRICT: WILLIS-SELDEN LOCAL

APPLICANT: ROBERT SLATTERY/477 WEST ALEXANDRINE LLC

ARCHITECT: STEVEN C. FLUM

OWNER OF RECORD: 477 WEST ALEXANDRINE LLC

DATES OF STAFF SITE VISITS: 07-01-2023, 01-24-2024

SCOPE: ERECT MULTI-FAMILY BUILDING WITH REAR PARKING LOT

EXISTING CONDITIONS

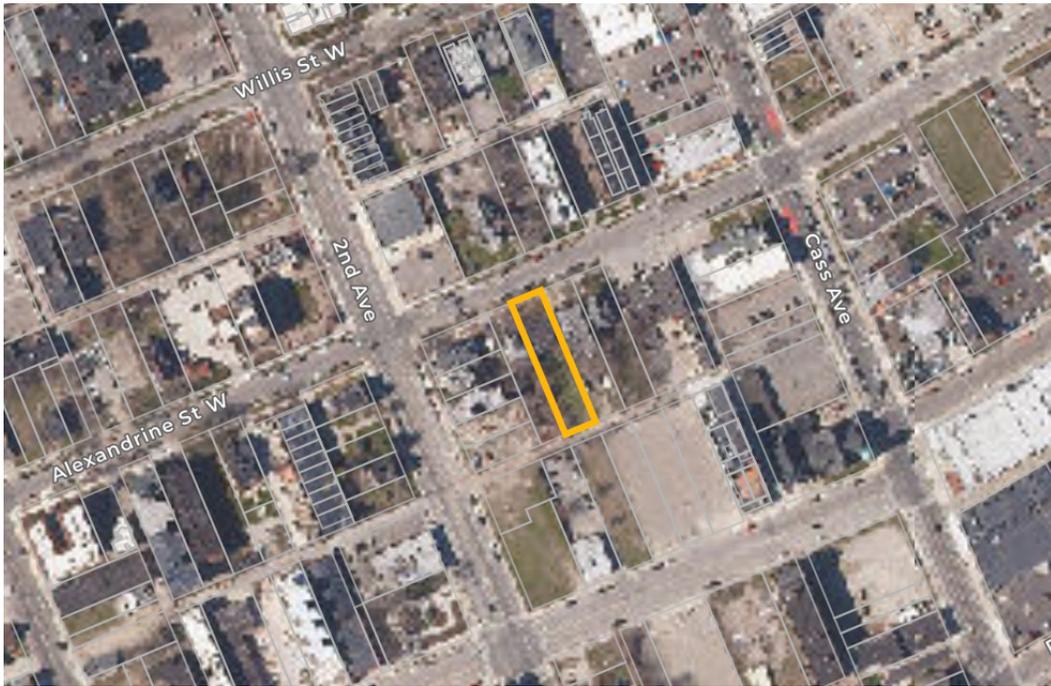
The project site is a recently vacant parcel on the south side of West Alexandrine, between Cass and 2nd Street.



View of 477 West Alexandrine, looking to the south, Staff photo, January 24, 2024.

An existing building on the site was demolished in or around 2018 pursuant to an emergency demolition order from BSEED. Mown grass and some shrubs/trees cover the site, along with an advertising sign.

At the July 2023 Regular Meeting of the Commission, the applicant was denied approval for construction of a surface parking lot. After discussions with staff, the applicant substantially revised the proposal to incorporate a new building at the front of the parcel, with surface parking behind. This proposal was subject to a staff recommendation to approve, with several substantial conditions. At the February 2024 Meeting, the Commission instead denied the proposal. The applicant is returning with additional revisions that seek to address the reasons for the recent denial.



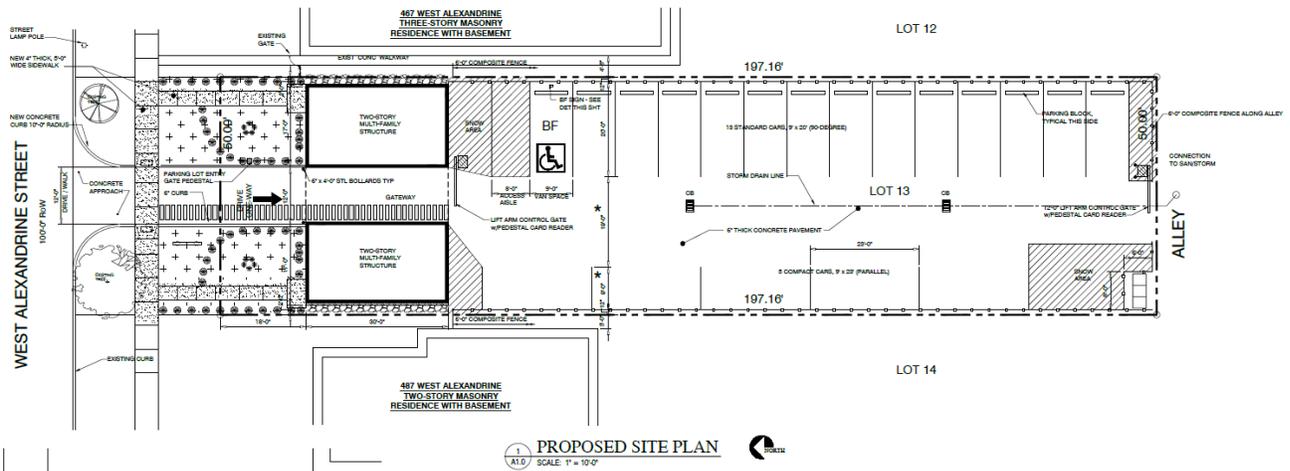
477 West Alexandrine outlined in yellow, per Detroit Parcel Viewer.



View to the west showing historical context of the block. Staff photo, January 24, 2024.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Per the submitted drawings, documents, and scope of work, the applicant is proposing to **construct a new 2 1/2-story building with rear parking lot** on this mid-block parcel. This is a revision from an application that was denied by the Commission at the February 2023 Meeting. Major revisions include the change of the previous stone façade to true brick, the revision of roof skylights to architectural dormers, and the addition of projecting porch canopies over the central entryway/doors. In a discussion subsequent to submission of the revised design, the applicant has also stated that the project will be built in a single phase/submitted under a single permit. Note also that the applicant, on March 6th, withdrew from consideration another revised application for a stone-clad building, in favor of the brick treatment. This application remains available on the website, as it includes portions (including the site plan) that apply equally to the brick-clad application.



Application submissions, including site plan (above), front elevation (below left), and side/rear elevations (below right). Note side/rear elevations are proposed to be metal panel. Images not to scale.





Rendering of revised project design provided by the applicant, with brick façade. Note the applicant has informed staff that they will revise the single-pane casement windows to 1/1 windows to add additional texture and articulation to the window openings, though such revision has not been submitted yet. The brick-clad design is the only application offered for the Commission's review at this time, per the applicant.

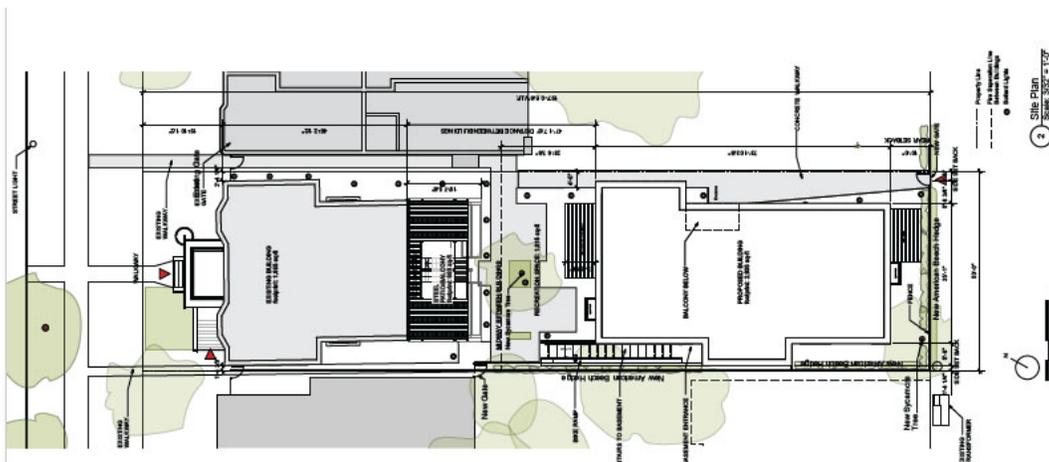
STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Willis-Selden Historic District was established in 2011.
- An historic multi-family apartment building (Bretton House) occupied this parcel until at least 2018, when it was ordered demolished by the Buildings Department per their authority for emergency work “immediately necessary for the protection of public health and safety” under Section 21-2-74 of the 2019 Detroit City Code. The property was owned by the current applicant at that time.



View of original historic building on the site, photo from 2004. Demolished 2018 as an emergency demolition. Staff notes that the proposed new building, subject of this application, has a similar scale, though a different design.

- The applicant originally appeared in front of this body four years prior to that demolition, in October 2014, with a proposal to rehabilitate the historic building. The existing structure was to be renovated to accommodate six residential units. The project included the restoration of the building’s facades and the historically correct replacement of the front porch roof with a balcony, as well as a new design for balconies and egress stairs in the rear of the building. The Commission approved the project as proposed.
- In 2016, two years prior to the demolition, the applicant returned to the Commission with a revised plan (shown below), which included a separate and contemporarily styled “Garden Apartments” structure to the rear (south) of the existing historic building, creating a dense parcel with multiple housing options. The Commission also approved this proposal.



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Aerial view of the existing Bretton House with new Garden Apartment Building

Rendering from application for this parcel as approved by the Commission in 2016, two years prior to the demolition of the historic Bretton House building.

- Several excerpted *Elements of Design* for the Willis-Selden Local Historic District, as codified in Section 21-2-217 of the 2019 Detroit City Code, have relevance to the current proposal, underlining added for emphasis:
 - ***(1) Height.*** *Single-family or small multi-unit residential structures range in height from 1½ to 2½ stories in height. ... Commercial and other building types typically range from one to two stories in height.*
 - ***(2) Proportion of buildings' front façades.*** *Front façades of single-family or small multi-unit residential structures are typically as tall as wide or slightly taller than wide. Front façades of apartment buildings are commonly as tall as wide or slightly taller than wide, with the exception of broader buildings at 3761 Second Avenue, commonly known as the Coronado Apartments, 711 West Alexandrine Avenue, 495-497 West Willis Avenue, and 477 West Alexandrine Avenue, which are significantly wider than tall. Front façades of single-story commercial buildings are significantly wider than tall, while multi-story commercial buildings and other non-residential buildings tend to be slightly wider than tall. Buildings often occupy most or all of deep lots, resulting in side elevations of buildings that are often substantially wider than tall.*
 - ***(3) Proportion of openings within the façades.*** *Openings typically amount to between 20 percent and 35 percent of the front façade. On apartment buildings, sash windows are sometimes arranged in groupings which, together, are square or wider than tall. A significant minority of buildings feature arched, mullioned, semi-circular, casement, or dormer windows appropriate to their respective architectural styles. Upper sashes and transoms are occasionally subdivided into smaller panes. Casement windows are usually subdivided into smaller panes. Door openings are typically slightly larger in scale than window openings. Primary entrance openings are usually centered on the façades of commercial and apartment buildings, but are usually off-center on the façades of smaller residential buildings.*
 - ***(4) Rhythm of solids to voids in front façades.*** *Despite a variety of building types, the overall impression is one of regular, repetitive openings arranged horizontally within façades. A*

- repetitive flow of storefront openings, where they exist, creates a rhythm along commercial frontage. Smaller residential buildings as well as the building at 3901 Cass Avenue, commonly known as Cass Avenue Methodist Church, display more varied, often asymmetrical, arrangements of openings, but the overall impression is still one of regular, repetitive openings.
- **(5) Rhythm of spacing of buildings on streets.** Rhythm of spacing on streets is generally determined by setbacks from side lot lines. The overall character of the district is one of densely clustered, yet visually distinct, structures separate by narrow setbacks. Commercial buildings frequently abut adjacent buildings, typically featured no setbacks from side lot lines, especially on Woodward Avenue where evenly spaced storefronts create a regular spacing of buildings. There is a general regularity in the widths of subdivision lots from one block to another, contributing to a regular rhythm of spacing of buildings on streets.
 - **(6) Rhythm of entrance and/or porch projections.** Porches on smaller residential buildings typically project while those on other types of buildings usually do not. On residential buildings only, entrances are often located several steps above grade to accommodate high basements. Doorways on smaller residential buildings are often set beneath gable-roofed or arched openings, while doorways on other buildings are typically centered on their façades. A regular rhythm of entrances is created by a row of similar commercial buildings along Woodward Avenue.
 - **(7) Relationship of materials.** A majority of buildings are faced with brick and feature stone or cast stone trim. Single-family residential buildings are generally faced with brick and feature wooden brackets, bay windows, vergeboards, timbering, porch supports, dentils, entablature, or other Classically-inspired elements, and other details depending upon style. A small number of single-family residential buildings feature wood clapboard siding. Stone or stone facing defines the foundations of buildings at 643-647 and 748 West Alexandrine Avenue, 481 Brainard Avenue, 3957 and 4107 Cass Avenue, and 500 West Willis Avenue, the lower levels of buildings at 4120 Cass Avenue, 3761 Second Avenue, 495-497 West Willis Avenue, and the entire primary façade of buildings at 624 and 627 West Alexandrine Avenue and 3977 Cass Avenue. The buildings at 3901 Cass Avenue, commonly known as Cass Avenue Methodist Church, 3900 and 3977 Second Avenue, and 4100 Third Avenue are composed primarily of stone. Sash windows are historically wood but, in many cases, have been replaced with windows of modern materials. Stone is used for window sills on a majority of buildings within the district. While roofs within the district are generally flat and not visible, pitched roofs typically feature visible slate or asphalt shingles. ...
 - **(8) Relationship of textures.** On a majority of buildings within the district, the major textural effect is that of brick with mortar joints juxtaposed with cast stone or limestone trim. Patterned brickwork is used to create subtle detail on commercial and apartment buildings, such as spandrels and rectangular panels, and more pronounced textural interest where it exists on the upper stories of buildings, such as at 461 West Alexandrine Avenue, and in an arcaded cornice on the building at 711 West Alexandrine Avenue. Where they exist, detailed wooden vergeboards, gables, brackets, and dormers create considerable textural interest on all single-family residential buildings in the district. Rough-cut stone with thick mortar joints creates considerable textural interest on buildings where it exists, while other buildings feature smooth stone with thin mortar joints. In general, asphalt-shingle roofs do not contribute to textural interest.
 - **(9) Relationship of colors.** Natural brick colors in shades of brown, red, and buff predominate on wall surfaces, while natural stone colors in shades of gray, red, and brown also exist. Although most roofs are flat and therefore not visible, sloped roofs typically feature gray asphalt, while some feature red or green clay tile or slate in contrasting colors of gray, red, or green. Wooden architectural details are frequently painted in bold colors, appropriate to the architectural style of the buildings, which contract markedly with brick facing. Brick apartment buildings are generally unpainted, with gray stone trim contracting with brown or buff brickwork. ...
 - **(10) Relationship of architectural details.** Buildings in the district exemplify a broad range of architectural styles, and their architectural details relate to their style. ... Buildings range from

vernacular to high style in appearance, with the level of architectural detail varying greatly from one building to the next.

- **(11) Relationship of roof shapes.** Most apartment buildings and all non-residential buildings have flat roofs that cannot be seen from the ground, ... Single-family residential buildings feature multiple roof shapes, with steps, intersecting gables, dormers, towers, and tall chimneys creating dramatic silhouettes. Flat-roofed apartment buildings often feature stepped or triangular parapet walls, occasionally with crenellation or balustrades, which add interest to the building's roofline.
- **(12) Walls of continuity.** Setbacks of residential buildings tend to vary slightly from one buildings to the next, but generally create a wall of continuity on all streets in the district, except where building demolition has created vacant lots. The continuous façades of commercial buildings, where they exist in rows, create significant walls of continuity in the district.
- **(13) Relationship of significant landscape features and surface treatments.** The overall impression is that east-west streetscapes are abundantly planted whereas north-south streetscapes are not. Typical treatment of individual residential properties is a shallow, flat front lawn in grass turf, subdivided by a straight concrete walk leading to the front entrance. Alleys provide access to the rear of a majority of lots in the district; a small number of these lots contain garages in the rear accessed via the alley. Trees, hedges, and other landscaping features are irregularly spaced. Trees in the front yards of buildings vary in size, age, and species....
- **(14) Relationship of open space to structures.** Front and side yards range from shallow to non-existent, while most smaller residential buildings feature rear yards. Other than public rights-of-way, large areas of open space exist only where they have been created by building demolition; sometimes these spaces serve as parking lots or are maintained as open lawns.
- **(15) Scale of façades and façade elements.** Single-family residential buildings are moderate to large in scale relative to typical buildings from the period in which they were constructed. ... Elements within the façades are generally small to medium in scale.
- **(16) Directional expression of front elevations.** Façades of single-family residential structures are generally vertical in directional expression due to tall window and door openings and peaked rooflines. Apartment buildings generally range from neutral to slightly vertical in directional expression, though a smaller number are horizontal in directional expression. Commercial buildings, especially single-story ones, are generally horizontal in directional expression due to broad storefront windows and, where they exist, horizontal cornices.
- **(17) Rhythm of building setbacks.** A degree of irregularity is introduced by varying setbacks of front façades; smaller residential buildings tend to be set back several feet from the public sidewalk, while larger apartment buildings and other buildings often occupy their entire lots. While setbacks may vary slightly from one building to the next, the overall impression is one of a consistent rhythm of building setbacks. Where building demolition has occurred, the original rhythmic progression of buildings has been disrupted.
- **(18) Relationship of lot coverages.** Lot coverage within the district are generally high, but vary based on building type. Single-family residential buildings and smaller apartment buildings often occupy between 20 percent and 40 percent of their lots, with much of the remaining space being devoted to rear yards. Other building types range from 50 percent to 100 percent lot coverage. Large buildings may have light courts or central courtyard spaces. Commercial buildings, in particular, often occupy a large percentage of their lots.
- **(19) Degree of complexity within the façades.** The façades within the district range from simple to complex, depending upon style. Overall, front façades tend to be simple in their massing and mostly regular in their fenestration, though a variety of window and door shapes, materials, architectural elements, and details of individual buildings increase the overall level of complexity of the district.
- **(20) Orientation, vistas, overviews.** Buildings generally face the streets and are entered from the front façades by a single or double doorway. ...
- **(21) Symmetric or asymmetric appearance.** The appearance of front façades in the district, for

the most part, is symmetrical. Single-family residential buildings tend to display a modest degree of asymmetry in massing and architectural detail.

- **(22) General environmental character.** *The general character of the district is that of a medium-density, mixed-use, urban neighborhood of small to large apartment buildings interspersed with other building types. The district maintains a sense of vitality as a result of its mixture of uses and the correspondingly diverse physical appearance of its buildings.*
- Elements 12, 14, and 17 clearly assess that the open spaces created by building demolition have diminished the historic character and represent “disruptions” in the historic “rhythm” and “regularity” of the district. The demolition of the former Bretton House building has been another such disruption. The current proposal seeks to infill this gap with new construction. As a concept, this is the correct approach.
- The particulars of this proposed building are somewhat unusual, notably the pass-through feature for vehicles that leads the applicant to characterize their proposal as a “gate house.” Historically, a gate house would have been an ancillary or related structure to a suburban main house or building situated somewhat beyond the entrance, often on a larger parcel of land, and usually of a comparable design. In this case, only a parking lot is found beyond. Staff would therefore not characterize this as a gate house. However, *as experienced from the street*, the lack of another new building beyond the “gate house” does not (in staff’s opinion) make the proposed typology incompatible or “demonstrably inappropriate” with respect to the Standards and Elements of Design. There are period examples of multi-family apartment buildings with vehicle drives passing through them, often in congested urban contexts, that are not gate houses but merely passages to reach an inner paved courtyard used for parking or loading.



Historic urban apartment buildings with “pass-through” vehicle entrances in New York City. At left, the Dakota Apartments on Central Park West, a city landmark; at right, a more modest 1910 building in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, perhaps more relevant to the Detroit context in Willis-Selden. Both are in high-density districts amidst other tall apartment buildings.



At right is 70 Vestry Street, which is immediately adjacent to the Tribeca North Historic District (NYC). Built in 2018 and featuring a vehicle pass-through, the building was designed by architect Robert A.M. Stern, whose post-modern work has been described as “new classical” and builds on traditional architectural contexts, often in city historic districts. From 1991-1998, Mr. Stern was the director of the historic preservation program at Columbia University, also in New York. At right is a large scale example at 4501 Woodward, adjacent to three Detroit historic districts and built in 2007.

- An alternate reading of the building is that of a carriage house situated on the main street, and not on the alley. There are multiple examples of “pass-throughs” for vehicles on carriage houses in Detroit of

similar general form and expression; in strictly residential districts (which Willis-Selden is not) these occur on predominantly on alleys or side streets. City-wide, including in commercial districts, some of these carriage-type houses with vehicular access were associated with residential homes, some with commercial concerns, some with municipal services (e.g., fire houses) and some (especially earlier ones servicing the carriage trade) might have been independent structures at the street. In the majority of cases these buildings share architectural character and materials with a main house, but are deferential.

- In this revised design, the applicant has added additional texture and projections to the front of the building, including porch overhangs and full dormers. These additional elements at the primary façade and roof substantially conform to the requirements of Elements 6, 11, and 18 for a traditionally styled building.
- Elements 7 and 8 (materials/textures) focus on the preponderance of brick in the district, offset with stone trim. While there are two notable examples of fully stone-clad buildings (that being the Campbell-Symington House at 650 West Alexandrine, and the apartment building across the street, both located west across 2nd Avenue from this block), both of these buildings are distinctive historic landmarks of exceptional individual character and importance. The Campbell-Symington House is even designated as its own individual historic district. A *typical building* in Willis-Selden, (such as a new infill building) in staff's opinion, and certainly a typologically "ancillary" building characterized as a mere gate house, should be expected to mix into the "general population" of the district. The newly revised design now features brick, which staff assesses as appropriate.
- Element 18 suggests that a multi-family building should occupy between 20-40% of their lot. Similarly, Element 15 suggests that a building of "moderate to large" scale is appropriate. The revised design has not changed the building size or lot coverage.
- In discussions with the applicant on Wednesday, March 6th, the applicant decided to revise their design to incorporate 1/1 windows instead of undivided casements. In staff's opinion, such a revision would introduce a satisfactory level of articulation and texture to the proposed windows. Alternately, the single-pane casements could have been subdivided with true or simulated divided lites.

ISSUES

- In the past, the Commission has approved buildings that "generally" conform to the Elements of Design, if only minor deficiencies are noted, and the overall character is deemed appropriate under the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. Staff notes the following areas of concern.
 - The building's scale and lot coverage is still somewhat small.
 - The site fence should be wood, metal, masonry, or other traditional material instead of vinyl.
- With minor conditions, including a revision to the site fence material and continued clarity around phasing, staff assesses that the proposal now "generally" conforms to the Elements of Design.
- The Commission has the authority to assess general conformance with the Elements, and allow occasional deficiencies that it decides are less critical to appropriateness. Such an analysis also aligns with the NPS Guideline concerning a project's "cumulative effect" regarding appropriateness under the Standards, as such:

A project meets the Standards when the overall effect of all work on the property is one of consistency with the property's historic character. The Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings are intended to assist in applying the Standards, but they are not codified as program requirements. Divided into "Recommended" and "Not Recommended" treatments, the Guidelines are designed to assist building owners in planning rehabilitation projects that meet the Standards. Each property exhibits a unique set of conditions; thus, the evaluation of any single aspect of the proposed work can only be made in the context of those conditions and all the other work that constitutes the project. In some cases, a single aspect of a project may not be consistent with recommendations found in the Guidelines, yet its impact on the character of the property as a whole is small enough that the overall project meets the Standards. In other cases, similar work, in combination with numerous other treatments not recommended by the Guidelines, can contribute to a project not meeting the Standards.

The amount of change to features and spaces that can be accommodated within the Standards will vary according to the roles they play in establishing the character of the property. The

Standards use language such as “distinctive feature” and “spaces that characterize a property,” suggesting that all features and spaces do not carry equal weight in determining the character of an historic property. This does not mean that features and spaces fit into absolute categories of either “character-defining” or not. Rather, the components of a property can be seen as falling into a continuum of importance.

- In staff’s opinion, the parking lot should remain visually subordinate to the building, concealed from view, and should not exist separately from the building. The lot should be constructed only after the building is completed.

RECOMMENDATION

Section 21-2-78, Determinations of Historic District Commission

Staff recommends that the proposal for a new multi-family building and parking lot should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the Willis-Selden Local Historic District’s Elements of Design, if revised according to the following conditions subject to staff review and approval:

- Windows will be standard vision glass, designed either as subdivided casement windows or 1/1 double-hung style windows in mulled sets.
- The site fence will be wood, metal, masonry, or other traditional material instead of PVC, in a design appropriate for the context.
- The parking lot will remain visually subordinate to the building, concealed from view, and shall not exist separately from the building. Permit application will only be approved by staff for a single project (including both the building and the parking lot) constructed in a single phase.