

Docket Item #12
BAR CASE# 2004-0261

BAR Meeting
February 2, 2005

ISSUE: Signs and alterations
APPLICANT: Commerce Bank, by George Gordon
LOCATION: 119 South Washington Street
ZONE: CD/Commercial

BOARD ACTION, DECEMBER 15, 2004: Deferred at the request of the applicant.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends approval of the signage and new doors as submitted and denial of the alterations to the glass in the main entranceway and to the ground level windows.

UPDATE: The application was scheduled for the December 15, 2004 hearing but the applicant deferred prior to the hearing in order to revise the application, in part to respond to Staff comments.

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness for the installation of signage and alterations to the building located at the northwest corner of Prince and South Washington Streets. The long-time tenant, Pier 1 Imports, will be replaced by Commerce Bank.

Signage

The applicant proposes to remove the blue canvas awnings which served as signage for Pier 1 Imports on the Washington Street side of the building and replace them with a total of three signs composed of black letters reading, "Commerce Bank" and including the Commerce Bank logo, a stylized red letter "C". The channel letters will be halo lit while the "C" will be internally illuminated. There will be a sign located on either end of the Washington Street facade, centered above the paired windows. These signs will total 12 square feet. Another sign, identical to those on Washington Street but larger will be located on the Prince Street facade. The sign will be mounted above the ground level windows near the corner with Washington Street where a pin mounted Pier 1 Imports sign currently exists. The new sign will total 18 square feet. The existing rectangular bronze plaque beside the door on Prince Street will be replaced with a 6 square foot bronze plaque reading "Commerce Bank" and carrying the "C" logo.

Alterations to building

Washington Street entrance - The applicant proposes to refurbish the metal and glass entrance surround on Washington Street. The internal lighting will be replaced and the metal surfaces will be refurbished. To increase visibility into the entrance vestibule, the applicant proposes to replace the existing frosted glass with clear glass and to replace the frosted panels with clear squiggles with clear panels with frosted squiggles. The existing wood and glass double door with brass handles will be replaced with new glass double doors with brass hardware.

Washington Street show windows - The applicant proposes to replace the existing paired windows on the ground level at the south and north ends of the Washington Street facade with large show windows. The existing windows are each 35 square foot each and are separated by a masonry pier. The new windows will be 107 square feet. They will have black metal frames and a vertical and horizontal division relating them to the configuration of the existing windows.

Prince Street entrance - The applicant proposes to replace the existing wood and glass double doors with brass handles with new glass double doors with brass hardware.

Prince Street show windows - The applicant proposes to replace an existing single window in the

easternmost bay with a new window identical to those proposed for the Washington Street facade.

II. HISTORY:

As discussed in docket item #11, the three story masonry building at the northwest corner of the prominent Prince and South Washington Street intersection was designed by Frank D. Chase, a Chicago-based architect, for the Virginia Public Service Company and completed in 1930. It is Alexandria's grandest Art Deco office building, exhibiting many characteristics of the style such as the contrast between smooth planar expanses with areas of concentrated ornamentation. The verticality of the punched openings contrast with the overall horizontal form of the building and the Washington Street entrance and is given special emphasis through its concentration of ornamentation and vertical orientation. In 1988 and 1989, the Board approved signage and awnings for Pier 1 Imports (BAR Case #99-78, 6/27/1988 and 4/5/1989). The exterior of the building retains a high level of integrity.

III. ANALYSIS:

The proposed signage and alterations comply with the zoning ordinance requirements.

First, Staff wishes to commend the applicant for removing the existing awning/signs which obscure the attractive show windows and for proposing to refurbish the columnar light fixtures on either side of the main entrance. A refurbished and lighted entrance will restore the building to its intended prominence and will itself draw attention to the tenant.

Signage

The proposed signage is an improvement over the original submission which the Board did not hear. It is more respectful of the architectural features of the building. Although the design of the signage is not particularly sympathetic to the Art Deco design of the building, through its placement and relatively small size, it does respect the composition of the building and avoids obscuring or competing with architectural features. Staff notes that the *Design Guidelines* recommend that, in general, "only one sign per business is appropriate" (Signs - page 3). In this case, however, Staff believes the strongly symmetrical nature and the length of the Washington Street facade (over 94 feet long) call for two equal sized signs on either side of the center axis. The fact that the building is located on a corner makes the additional signage on Prince Street acceptable. Staff does not believe the amount of signs proposed is excessive. Staff has no objection to the plaque sign proposed for the Prince Street doorway.

Washington and Prince Street doors

Staff believes the proposed replacement doors are acceptable. Their simple clean lines are appropriate to the Art Deco style of the building.

Washington Street entranceway alterations

Again, Staff commends the applicant for refurbishing the entranceway elements but recommends against the proposed use of clear glass and reversing of the squiggle patterned glass to increase the clear and reduce the frosted portions. As far as is known, the entranceway remains as designed and Staff believes any such alteration to this important feature would be unfortunate.

No doubt the frosted glass was intended to work in concert with the colored lights in the surround.

Washington and Prince Street window alterations

In the opinion of Staff, the proposed alterations to the building are unacceptable. The elimination of the paired windows and enlargement of windows to create three new large show windows is a significant alteration of the original, carefully composed design. The carefully balanced horizontal and vertical elements of these two highly prominent facades will be irretrievably altered. Staff has discussed several alternative designs for enlarging these windows with the applicant and is unable to support any of the proposed alternatives. Staff believes the ground level openings on both the Washington and Prince Street facades must remain unaltered.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends approval of the signage and new doors as submitted and denial of the alterations to the glass in the entrance surround and to the ground level windows.

CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

Legend: C - code requirement R - recommendation S - suggestion F- finding

Code Enforcement:

- C-1 New construction must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-2 Alterations to the existing structure must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-3 Construction permits are required for this project.
- C-4 Required exits and accessibility within the building for persons with disabilities must comply with USBC Chapter 11.

Office of Historic Alexandria:

“No comment.”