

Docket Item # 6
BAR CASE# 2006-0093

BAR Meeting
May 10, 2006

ISSUE: Concept Approval for New Charles Houston Recreation Center

APPLICANT: Department of General Services

LOCATION: 901 Wythe Street

ZONE: POS

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Staff is recommending approval of the concept with the following conditions and concerns:

- 1) Main Entrance: The main entrance to the building should be refined so as to enhance its appearance as a more prominent feature. Suggestions to enhance this important element would be to explore projecting the entrance bay from the remainder wall faces on the Wythe Street elevation or incorporating a portico-type element to emphasize its importance as the entry feature.
- 2) Civic building: The new building should be a community landmark building for the Parker-Gray neighborhood, just as the existing building and the prior Parker-Gray School were. As a civic building, it is essential that high quality materials and detailing are used which reflect the importance of the building for the community. The applicant should explore and restudy architectural refinements for the corner elements at North Patrick Street and Alfred Streets at their intersection with Wythe Street that would clearly communicate the civic nature of the building, such as a tower or cupola element.
- 3) Window rhythm: As currently shown, the windows do not demonstrate a consistent rhythm within the elevations. The windows within the loggia/connecting elements should be consistent, while the windows within the larger pod sections should demonstrate the hierarchy of uses. Windows should be used to create variety through the use of multiple rhythms.
- 4) Details/Materials: In the next phase of the review, the applicant should make efforts to incorporate some relief to the exterior of the building. As currently proposed, the building appears rather flat and lacks relief. Also, the use of high quality materials is essential. With the use of steep pitched gable roofs as a dominant visual feature of the building, the choice of quality roofing materials is imperative.

(Insert sketch here)

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The applicant is requesting concept approval of a new Charles Houston Recreation Center at the same location of the existing center, occupying the block bordered by Wythe Street, North Alfred Street, Madison Street, and North Patrick Street in the Parker-Gray Historic District. The existing Charles Houston Center is proposed to be demolished.

Design Approach: The applicant has approached this project with the design scheme of form following function, with the exterior expression relating to the interior uses. Since this building will be used as a community recreation center with a variety of uses, the applicant has worked with the perception that the building is a series of pods, connected together to form a village of uses. At the same time, the applicant recognizes that the Charles Houston Center is a civic building and will be a community landmark building for the Parker-Gray Neighborhood. Parker-Gray is primarily a low-scale residential neighborhood. The applicant's design attempts to respect the low-scale context of the district and historic forms, while still designing a civic building for multiple uses. The site plan pushed the building out to the edge of three of the street frontages to create street walls and tucked parking behind the building off Madison Street.

Community Direction: As a project of the City, several factors were predetermined and approved by the City Council prior to the design phase, including limiting the building to one-story and ensuring the capacity to accommodate specific uses and user groups. The applicant met with the community and user groups to receive input as the design developed. In addition, the applicant met with other city agencies, including Planning and Zoning Staff, to discuss the evolution of the site plan and the overall design of the project.

Staff is recommending approval of the concept with the following conditions and concerns:

- 1) Main Entrance: The main entrance to the building should be refined so as to enhance its appearance as a more prominent feature. Suggestions to enhance this important element would be to explore projecting the entrance bay from the remainder wall faces on the Wythe Street elevation or incorporating a portico-type element to emphasize its importance as the entry feature of this major civic building.
- 2) Civic building: The new building should be a community landmark building for the Parker-Gray neighborhood, just as the existing building and the prior Parker-Gray School were. As a civic building, it is essential that high quality materials and detailing are used which reflect the importance of the building for the community. The applicant should explore and restudy architectural refinements for the corner elements at North Patrick and Alfred Streets at their intersection with Wythe Street that would clearly communicate the civic nature of the building, such as a tower or cupola element.

3) Window rhythm: As currently shown, the windows do not demonstrate a consistent rhythm within the elevations. The windows within the loggia/connecting elements should be consistent, while the windows within the larger pod sections should demonstrate the hierarchy of uses. Windows should be used to create variety through the use of multiple rhythms.

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II. ISSUE:

NOTE: Docket Item # 5 must be approved before this item can be considered.

The applicant is requesting approval of a concept design for construction of a new Charles Houston Center to replace the existing center which was constructed in 1976. As proposed, the project consists of building pods connected by loggia sections, which relate to the applicant's desire to create a building that is a village of recreational and community serving uses.



Figure 1 - Proposed site plan

The proposed site plan of the project will change the current site layout on the site. The building will be u-shaped encircling a pool, with the primary entrance to the facility being from Wythe Street. Parking will be located off Madison Street and accessed from Madison and North Alfred Street. The building will maintain a street wall presence along North Patrick Street, formed most significantly by the gymnasium. On North Alfred Street, a porch area for the senior citizen users of the facility will provide pedestrian activity. Landscape issues, including plaza areas, planters, and sidewalks will be reviewed during the site plan review phase of the project.

As proposed, the materials for the exterior include red brick, standing seam metal roofing, and metal frame windows and doors. Final decisions on materials will be presented to the Board in final design and material review. Staff reminds the applicant that high quality materials are expected for this important civic building in the Parker-Gray neighborhood.

Description of Elevations:

A. Wythe Street:



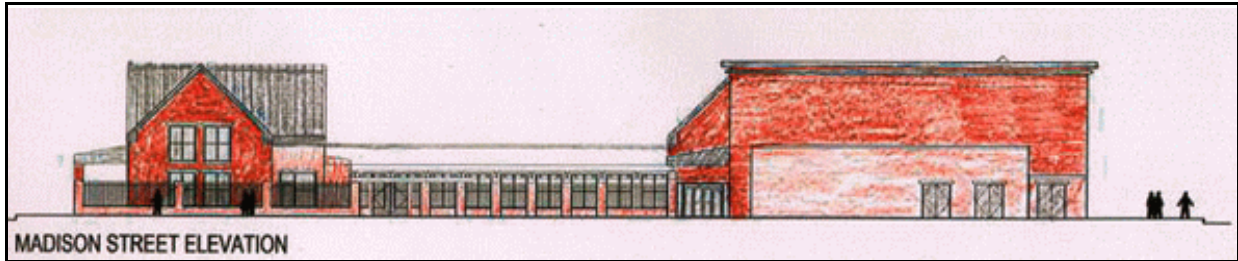
The Wythe Street elevation contains the primary entrance into the facility, located within a gabled section of the building, with large expanses of windows and a canopy. A somewhat larger section of this pod also has a gabled roof with six windows in rows of three. The windows appear to be two-over-two. The two gabled sections are connected by a loggia section with a series of four windows. This primary pod is connected by a flat-roof section with eight windows to another pod with a gabled roof. Four sections of windows are shown on this elevation with smaller transom like windows over larger two-over-two windows. The last section contains a door in place of a window. The senior porch facing North Alfred Street is visible from this elevation.

B. North Alfred Street:



At the corner, the North Alfred Street elevation begins with a gabled roof section that contains a grouping of four windows. A small section containing a door connects to a larger pod area that has a side gabled roof with a projecting porch area that has a shed roof. The porch area contains two doors and three windows. It is unclear what the design and material of the porch supports are. Another loggia section of four windows connects the porched section with another pod that also has a side-gabled roof and a grouping of four windows, with transom-like window components. This elevation ends with a walled area containing gates to the pool area.

C. Madison Street:



The Madison Street elevation serves as the “rear” elevation, with access to the new parking lot. The end gabled elevation of the last pod area facing North Alfred Street is visible and contains a grouping of four windows, in two rows. As the area containing the pool and service functions for the facility, this elevation is characterized by the wall containing the pool area. Moving towards North Patrick Street, the elevation has primarily blank walls of the gymnasium section of the building and three exit doors.

D. North Patrick Street:



The North Patrick Street elevation is comprised of the gymnasium, a loggia connector, and the end of the first pod fronting Wythe Street. The flat-roof gymnasium is comprised of six bays, with two stacked sections of windows. The interior bays of windows are sectioned into fours. The outer bays have entrances with a window above. This loggia connector, rather than flat roofed as the others, has what appears to be standing seam metal roof to screen the HVAC equipment. Other mechanical units are set within gable roofs.

III. HISTORY:

See docket item # 5 for discussion.

IV. ANALYSIS:

In a concept review, the Board is looking to see if the proposed scale, mass, height, use of solids and voids (fenestration pattern), projections, and recesses are appropriate and visually compatible with the historic context of the Parker-Gray District, while meeting the standards and guidelines.

The second phase of review will examine final architectural details and materials, as well as any modifications that may be needed to be met as a condition of the concept approval as well as Planning Commission and City Council approvals.

General Design Comments:

1. Height: The building will be one-story in height, as determined by the City Council when approving the new construction. The one-story height is compatible with the low-scale character of the Parker-Gray Neighborhood.

2. Civic Building: The Charles Houston Recreation Center serves as a community landmark building for the Parker-Gray Neighborhood. As a civic building, it merits the use of high quality materials and design to reflect its importance in the neighborhood. Staff encourages the applicant to keep this in mind as the design is refined for final design review.

3. Style/Form: The proposal uses design cues from the neighborhood. The project uses both pitched and flat roof forms in the scheme. Both roof types are found in the Parker-Gray neighborhood. Elements of the architecture of the building reflect both the vernacular residential structures of the late 19th-century and early 20th-century and the early 20th-century industrial buildings found in the neighborhood. The gable roof form is unusually prevalent in this section of the historic district. Nearby examples include the house at 716 North Patrick Street, the church at 634 North Patrick Street, the Watson Reading Room, and the African-American Heritage Museum, both located on Wythe Street, and the Samuel Madden Homes.

Guidelines:

The following elements are discussed in the Guidelines for New construction:

Style: No single architectural style is mandated. However, there is a strong preference on the part of the Boards for buildings which reflect the traditional architectural styles found in the historic districts. Designs generally should complement and reflect the architectural heritage of the city. For example, abstraction of historic design elements is preferred to a building design which introduces elements that have no historic basis in the districts. Additionally, direct copying of buildings is discouraged.

The Parker-Gray District is characterized by mostly vernacular styles of the late 19th-century and early 20th-century, with simple facades and detailing. Both pitched gable roofs and flat roofs are found in the neighborhood. Also found on the edges of the district are more industrial building of the early and mid- 20th-century. The neighborhood has a low-scale character.

The proposed new building uses both flat and gabled roof forms. The gabled roofs are steeper pitched than most of the roofs found in the neighborhood. Using the design approach of a “village of uses”, the building has larger segments or pods, with mostly gabled roofs, with the exception of the gym, connected by flat roof loggia. The gym is reflective of the industrial buildings found in the neighborhood, while the remaining pods have characteristics of the late 19th-century vernacular styles.

Massing: Building massing is the enclosed volume which constitutes a building’s exterior form. In the historic districts, new commercial construction should reflect the building massing prevailing along the blockface.

As discussed earlier, the applicant was constrained to a one-story building by the October 2005 decision of the City Council. The approach of using larger sized pods connected by mostly glass loggias mitigates the mass of the building.

Height: Building height should generally reflect the existing heights of building along the blockface of the proposed new construction.

The one-story height is appropriate. Nearby examples of one-story structures include the Watson Reading Room and the African-American Heritage Museum on Wythe Street and the structure located at 634 North Patrick Street.

Width: The width of commercial buildings varies widely along the principal commercial streets in the historic districts. In general, building width should reflect the prevailing pattern in the immediate vicinity of the proposed project.

The building’s width is broken-up by the use of the larger scaled pods connected by the loggia.

Siting: In general new commercial buildings should be sited so the front plane of the building reflects the prevailing front setback pattern along the blockface.

The proposed site plan is appropriate. By fronting the primary entrance on Wythe Street, the new building mimics the orientation of the former Parker-Gray School and focuses the project on the more active street. The building maintains a strong street wall presence on

North Patrick Street, which has heavy vehicular activity.

Fenestration: The fenestration pattern, that the relationship of solid to void, such as walls and windows, should be compatible with the historic fenestration patterns in the districts. Sufficient reveals around windows to express the thickness of materials is strongly encouraged.

The project needs refinement relating to this guideline.

Roof: The roof form should reflect the roof forms expressed along the blockface. In addition, roofing materials should reflect the traditional use of wood, metal, and slate in the historic districts.

The project uses both flat and gabled roofs, which are found in the neighborhood. The applicant should make every effort to use high quality roofing materials due to the dominance of the steep pitched gabled roofs as a design feature.

Architectural Detailing: Architectural detailing such as cornices, lintels, arches, and chimneys should express the traditional quality and quantity of architectural detailing found on historic structures throughout the districts.

In the second phase, when architectural details and materials are reviewed, the applicant should be mindful that high quality materials are expected for this civic/community landmark building. The applicant should also consider incorporating elements to break-up the flatness of the exterior walls.

Side and rear walls which face open areas should be designed with as much attention to detail as the primary facade. It is the general preference of the Boards that surface articulation be provided on otherwise unrelieved side walls to break-up apparent massing through such means as the articulation of false windows, pilasters, and changes in brick pattern.

The project needs further refinement in the second phase of review to address this guideline.

Directional expression: The orientation of a building to the street is important. The relationship of height and width of a proposed building should reflect the prevailing pattern along the blockface.

The project occupies an entire city block.

Building Orientation: The principal architectural facade should face the street. The front entrances of new commercial building should be open to the principal street frontage of the

building.

The project is oriented to have its primary entrance on Wythe Street, which is commendable so as to relate to the African-American Heritage Museum and the Watson Reading Room, both located across the street. The Parker-Gray School had also oriented its primary entrance to front Wythe Street.

V. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

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CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

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

Code Enforcement

- F-1 Maintain ambulance access to parking lot for swimming pool. Ambulance shall be able to enter and exit parking area without turning around.

- C-1 Prior to the issuance of a demolition permit or land disturbance permit, a rodent abatement plan shall be submitted to Code Enforcement that will outline the steps that will taken to prevent the spread of rodents from the construction site to the surrounding community and sewers.

- C-2 Roof drainage systems must be installed so as neither to impact upon, nor cause erosion/damage to adjacent property.

- C-3 A soils report must be submitted with the building permit application.

- C-4 New construction must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).

- C-5 Construction permits are required for this project. Plans shall accompany the permit application that fully detail the construction as well as layouts and schematics of the mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems.

- C-6 Required exits, parking, and accessibility for persons with disabilities must be provided to the building.

- C-7 Provide two Siamese connections located to the satisfaction of the Director of Code Enforcement.

- C-8 A separate tap is required for the building fire service connection.

- C-9 Prior to submission of the Final Site Plan #1, the developer shall provide a fire flow analysis by a certified licensed fire protection engineer to assure adequate water supply for the structure being considered.

- C-10 A fire prevention code permit is required for the proposed operation at the time of Certificate of Occupancy. An egress plan showing fixture location, aisles and exit doors shall be submitted for review with the permit application.

- C-11 Before a building permit can be issued on any proposed future alterations or demolition, a certification is required from the owner or owner's agent that the building has been inspected by a licensed asbestos inspector for the presence of asbestos.

Alexandria Archaeology:

- F-1 The G.M. Hopkins Insurance map from 1877 indicates that this property was part of a large estate owned by Henry Daingerfield. The main house and most of the other mapped structures were located on the block to the south. The 1850 tax records note that John Foster was probably the occupant of the house at the middle of the 19th century. In the early 20th century, the property was the site of one of the City's African American schools—Parker Gray. While it is likely that construction of the current structure on the property would have destroyed much of the evidence of earlier historic activities, there is a possibility that deep features may still be present.
- C-1 Call Alexandria Archaeology immediately (703-838-4399) if any buried structural remains (wall foundations, wells, privies, cisterns, etc.) or concentrations of artifacts are discovered during development. Work must cease in the area of the discovery until a City archaeologist comes to the site and records the finds.
- C-2 The above statement must appear in the General Notes of all site plans so that on-site contractors are aware of the requirement.

Historic Alexandria:

1. From the plans submitted, it does not seem like the main entrance of Wythe Street is emphasized enough as the principal facade of the complex.
2. The entrance to the main parking lot on Alfred Street near the corner of Madison might be problematic and cause traffic congestion near that corner. Perhaps re-locating the entrance to Madison Street would be preferable.
3. From a stylistic perspective, the overall design could be improved. It has a sprawling, undistinctive character of many other commercial/public complexes.
4. The gymnasium especially seems large and imposing; some surface articulation or design alteration is needed to relieve the wall mass.

On the positive side, the architects have tried to recognize that this complex is in a residential community, as shown in the horizontal design and landscaping plan of the center.