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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD  
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

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Landmark/District:	<b>Capitol Hill Historic District</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	<b>309 Massachusetts Avenue, NE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept
Meeting Date:	<b>December 16, 2010</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Case Number:	<b>11-077</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Amanda Molson and Steve Callcott</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

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Owner Daryl Owen seeks conceptual approval for basement entrance alterations at 309 Massachusetts Avenue, NE in the Capitol Hill Historic District.

**Property Description**

Currently zoned for commercial use but constructed in 1889 as a residential dwelling, 309 Massachusetts Avenue, NE is a two-story brick building with a canted bay that projects into the public space. The property features a raised basement, which is accessed via masonry stairs descending beneath the cast iron steps that lead to the main entry door. The grade of the front yard sits above sidewalk level by several feet and features a granite retaining wall at the entry. Currently, visitors to the building proceed up several steps just beyond the granite wall in order to reach the lead walk, and then eventually descend the basement stairs. Located approximately halfway up the walk is utility access for the gas service, which the applicant hopes to avoid relocating.

Although the front yard of the property to the east is largely undisturbed and the building's above-grade main entry intact, the property to the west was incompatibly altered at some point to include substantial excavation of the front yard, shortening of the main entry door into a window, removal of the original staircase, and the use of the basement door as the primary entrance.

**Proposal**

The applicant purchased the property earlier this year and plans to locate his office there. Interior renovations and window replacement are already underway. The current proposal seeks alterations to the building and to the front yard to enable handicapped accessibility to the basement.

A new, curved lead walk would be excavated from the sidewalk directly to the bay, with the basement front window opening modified to accommodate a new entry door. The existing basement areaway under the main steps would be filled in. The new lead walk would branch off to serve the primary entrance, featuring a new set of angled stairs located behind the existing utility location and a landing at the base of the existing cast iron steps. The new lead walk would be flanked by stone retaining walls, with a large planter situated near the new basement door.

## Evaluation

The Board's design guidelines for basement entrances provide direction in evaluating several elements of this plan:

- *Basement entrances should be discreet and visually subordinate to the main entrance, which generally requires that new basement doors are located below the primary entrance or in an otherwise inconspicuous location.*

The proposed conversion of a basement window in a bay into a door is almost never appropriate because it cannot be shielded from public view, results in excavation that disrupts the visual grounding of the bay, and becomes a primary focus of the façade. Here, this obtrusive alteration is exacerbated by the rerouted lead walk, which is no longer on axis with the main entry door and instead visually leads directly to the new basement door. The “branch” from the lead walk to the first floor entrance has become a secondary approach.

- *Basement entrances should respect existing topography and site characteristics. Basement entrances and areaways should be subordinate to and not dominate the setting of historic property unless significant alterations to the site or street have fundamentally changed the original condition.*

Whereas basement entrances should be designed to minimize disruption of existing topography, this plan proposes substantial excavation of the public space; the awkward junction of a new curved staircase, landing, and planter mid-yard; and shifting of the inconspicuously-placed basement areaway under the main steps to a much more noticeable position directly in front of the bay.

- *Basement windows and window wells should be compatible with the architectural character of the building and have minimal visual impact on the site. Alterations to basement window openings should be done in a manner that does not change the basic window pattern, apparent size, or relationship with upper story windows. Windows should remain smaller than and subordinate to upper story windows even if basement sills are lowered.*

The current basement door is largely shielded from view, with the small basement windows contributing to the overall composition of the façade and directing attention to the larger main floor windows and front door above. Lengthening the prominent front basement window would alter this hierarchy of fenestration and establish entrances to the building that are in visual competition with one another. Ultimately, the new basement entrance, which would be sited at the termination of the new lead walk and which would now sit at eye-level from the sidewalk, would become the more dominant of the two.

Fortunately, the canted angle of the bay and the above-grade first-floor entry allow handicapped access to a modified basement areaway under the primary stairs. The width from the edge of the bay to the corner of the cast iron stairs is approximately 52", providing the opportunity to remove a portion of the retaining wall alongside the existing basement steps and widen the access point to the basement area.

Because the first floor is sited above-grade and the basement raised, the basement areaway already enjoys comfortable head height and a depth of approximately 50" from the basement door to the retaining wall supporting the cast iron staircase above. The applicant wishes to achieve a 60" turning radius for a wheelchair in the basement areaway, as recommended by the Americans with Disabilities Act. However, the position of several undermounted, vertical support beams beneath the cast iron steps currently limits the potential depth of the areaway. These support beams are later alteration to the staircase, and the beams and the retaining wall on which they rest could be moved forward and the beams reconfigured to afford as much as an additional foot of depth in the areaway, thereby creating a turning radius of over 60."

The existing masonry opening for the basement door measures 34" wide. With two feet of wall space between the doorway and the bay, there is also ample space to further widen this opening by several inches while retaining the entry in this less conspicuous location beneath the primary stairs.

Siting the accessible entrance beneath the primary staircase would also limit the extent of excavation needed in the front yard, retain a primary lead walk that remains on axis with the front door, and accommodate a secondary, at-grade lead walk to the accessible basement entry. This could be achieved by lowering the existing lead walk to sidewalk grade from the granite wall to the utility site beneath the walkway. A parallel, at-grade walkway could be excavated alongside the existing, raised lead walk, providing accessibility for wheelchairs and motorized scooters to the basement entrance. Steps could be installed over the utility site to allow these connections to remain in-place, and a landing (with a safety railing along the left side) installed from the top of the new stairs to the base of the cast iron steps.

This less invasive, revised approach would satisfy both historic preservation and accessibility goals and would enable the existing topographical characteristics and green nature of the public space to be minimally disturbed.

### **Recommendation**

The HPO recommends that the Board find the current proposal incompatible and that the applicant be directed to explore a plan that retains the basement entrance under the primary stairs and preserves a direct, primary lead walk on axis with the main entry door.

Additionally, the applicant should be directed to restore the front basement window to its original dimensions. The window has already been lengthened without permits, work that is currently obscured by plywood sheathing.