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GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF PLANNING



PUBLIC SPACE APPLICATION REVIEW

DATE: February 19, 2010
TO: Public Space Committee
FROM: Joshua Ghaffari, Citywide Planner
SUBJECT: 2211 49th Street, NW

APPLICATION-IN-BRIEF

Applicant: Sarah Mailhot (Authorized Agent)
Location: The property is located on 49th Street NW near the corner of W Street NW. It is located in a R-1-B zoning district. The surrounding neighborhood is residential in character. The majority of surrounding residences use the natural topography in a way that protects and preserves it and is in keeping with public space regulations.
Proposal: The applicant is requesting to install a retaining wall, driveway paving, curb cut, planter box, stoop and steps at a residence on 49th Street NW.

BACKGROUND

The Office of Planning received the public space application for review on December 30, 2009.

BASIS OF REPORT

The Office of Planning (OP) has reviewed the application, considered existing site conditions and completed research on the site to prepare this report. OP also referred to several policies in the Comprehensive Plan as part of completing this report:

Policy UD 1.2.1 Respecting Natural Features in Development

Respect and perpetuate the natural features of Washington's landscape. In low density wooded or hilly areas, new construction should preserve natural features rather than altering them to accommodate development.

Policy UD-2.2.1 Neighborhood Character and Identity

Strengthen the defining visual qualities of Washington's neighborhoods. This should be achieved in part by relating the scale of infill development, alterations, renovations and additions to existing neighborhood context.

Policy UD-2.2 Designing for Successful Neighborhoods

The sense of place in the Districts neighborhoods is a function of their cultural history, physical features and visual qualities. This is especially evident in both historic row house neighborhoods as well as single family neighborhoods where particular set backs, architectural styles, and building forms prevail. In neighborhoods of high architectural quality and strong identity, a greater emphasis on design compatibility and appropriate scale is needed.

KEY ISSUES

The applicant is proposing to undertake significant excavation work that will install an over-height retaining wall to allow for the requested curb cut and driveway to the garage. The installation of the retaining wall will detract from the visual cohesiveness of the block. In addition, the applicant does not provide any justification as to why an over-height retaining wall is needed in the public space adjacent to their residential property.

The District is making a concerted effort to limit new curb cuts in the city. Curb cuts require vehicles to cross the sidewalk, introducing more vehicle and pedestrian conflict points in public space. Curb cuts also remove curb space for on-street parking. In this case, the proposed curb cut reduces the amount of space for on-street parking available to the general public to provide off-street parking for one residence. They also take away from space set aside for street trees, an important part of the city's infrastructure that helps to improve the environment and makes public space more conducive to walking as an alternative mode of transportation. However, in situations where there are not alternatives to provide access to the site via an alley or because of unusual site conditions, the District has approved new curb cuts.

The proposed retaining wall ranges in height from 3' – 4'' to 9' – 4''. The existing public space regulations limit the height of fences and walls to 42''. The proposed retaining wall could be broken up into smaller sections in order to be less intrusive in the public space and better reflect the existing topography. The proposed planter box is 2' wide and 14' in length. The size of the proposed stoop and steps are excessive and should be reduced. This should be done to minimize the size of these elements to the greatest extent possible so that the existing topography of the site is more visible, and to provide more area for landscaping. This will also reduce the amount of impervious surface.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATION

The proposed over-height retaining wall is out of character with the surrounding neighborhoods and the same desired result may be able to be achieved with a series of 42'' retaining wall that comply with District regulations. Protecting the natural topography of the public space should be a priority, and the design of the steps and landings needed to access the front door of the home should reflect this. The applicant should explore alternatives for the placement, size and scale of the retaining wall as well as stoop and steps.

The Office of Planning recommends that this application be approved with conditions. The applicant's proposed retaining wall in public space should be limited to a maximum height of 42'' and adjacent paving should be reduced in scale. OP supports the proposed curb cut if there are no other options for providing access to the site.

