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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: 3220 Nebraska Avenue, NW

APPLICATION-IN-BRIEF

Applicant: Tanya Hill (Authorized Agent)
Location: The residential property is located on Nebraska Avenue NW between Foxhall Road NW and Indian Lane NW. It is located in an R-1-A zoning district. Nebraska Avenue NW is one of the District's premier wide, tree-lined streets and includes natural grading. In addition, there is a wooded area across the street from the site. 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 5' high retaining wall with 4 piers on a residential property on Nebraska Ave NW. Each pier is 2' high and 2' wide. The material of the wall and piers are stone-faced with bluestone cap. The length of the retaining wall is 41'. The proposed retaining wall extends the residential property by privatizing the public space.

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.

Policy PROS-4.3.5: Residential Yards

Recognize value of residential yards as a component of the city's open space system and discourage increased coverage of such areas by buildings and imperious surfaces.

KEY ISSUES

A 5' high and 41' long retaining wall is proposed for the site. The existing public space regulations limit the height of fences and walls to 42". In addition, 4 piers are proposed that are 2' high and 2' wide. The retaining wall and piers are stone-faced with bluestone caps.

The proposed retaining wall and piers will privatize this public space and they are out of character with the surrounding neighborhood. Nebraska Avenue is a wide, tree-lined street with natural topography. Other residences in the area have preserved the natural topography of the street and have installed walls or fences that are smaller and at a more appropriate scale.

OP is concerned about the extent of public space that would be contained within the proposed retaining wall. Public space is a defining feature of the District, and the proposed location of the retaining wall would negatively alter the open feel of the streetscape and natural topography. In addition, the proposed site for the retaining wall contains several mature trees, which would have to be removed. The District's urban tree canopy is part a critical environmental infrastructure that should be preserved and maintained.

As an alternative, the applicant could explore the placement of the retaining wall on private property closer to their residence. In addition, the applicant does not provide any justification as to why a retaining wall that is built to the 42" allowed is not adequate to meet their goal.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATION

The 5' high retaining wall is out of character with the treatment of public space along this prominent and wide avenue. The applicant has not made clear why a 42" retaining wall that complies with the District regulations is inadequate. In addition, if a retaining wall of a smaller, more appropriate scale is placed in public space then should be sited so as to minimize any impact to existing mature trees.

The Office of Planning recommends that this application be denied.