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

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Landmark/District: **Mount Vernon Triangle Historic District** (x) Agenda  
Address: **450-462 K Street, NW** ( ) Consent

Meeting Date: **July 28, 2011** (x) New construction  
Case Number: **11-143** (x) Subdivision  
(x) Alterations  
(x) Demolition

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée** (x) Revised concept

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The applicant, Jemal’s K Street Lot LLC (Douglas Development Corporation) with Kettler and R2L Architects PLLC, requests the Board’s review of a revised concept to construct a thirteen-story residential building.

In May, the Board reviewed and approved in concept a proposal to build on the parking lot. Since that time, the applicant has acquired two lots west of the former project site and wishes to extend the building in that direction. These lots (879 and 881) contain two historic, three-story, brick buildings at 460 and 462 K Street, NW. Such a development would require a subdivision to consolidate the three lots. The subdivision is subject to Board review for its preservation implications.

The inclusion of lots 879 and 881 would obviously add new, potentially developable space to the project, both extending the ground-floor retail space and the residential above. The applicant apparently wished to control the air rights over the buildings to prevent obstructions to western views. But it is unlikely that the Board could arrive at a conclusion that constructing atop or in place of the buildings standing between the parking lot and the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> Street is a compatible outcome consistent with the purposes of the preservation law. Those buildings are one of the most intact and continuous pieces of the historic district, a district equivalent to about one square in size. It was precisely for the sake of such small-scale buildings that the historic district was designated, and it was thought that these buildings—particularly the clusters of corner buildings—would serve an important function retaining human-scale character, texture and depth in a neighborhood understood to be headed for dense, large development. At the time of designation the Board acknowledged expectations that the new buildings on the vacant lots would often be built to the height limit. But the historic buildings were to be retained, and large and small, new and old would simply have to coexist as compatibly as possible. There was outreach to the property owners at the time and explicit discussion of these notions, and the Board has reiterated them since during project reviews.

**Design**

The projection of the additional volume of the new building is inferior to the previous concept design in that the new western portion is something of an afterthought that—set back and not quite following the rhythm or pattern of materials of the rest of the façade—does not yet relate harmoniously to the whole. Although it is recessed relative to the front (north) wall plane and

rendered somewhat more recessively, it would nonetheless be a very prominent portion of the building.

The new construction seals off the broad, former western opening of the interior courtyard, leaving a narrower opening onto the alley and consequently an odd split of the back of the building. The applicant's concern that larger buildings could go up west of the formerly proposed courtyard is well founded, because there is a developable site behind a one-story commercial façade at 927-929 5<sup>th</sup> Street. Of course, that site is separated from the parking lot by the two historic properties recently purchased.

Relative to the previous concept, the shifting of the courtyard makes the building appear broader and more massive from the north and west, no longer having that shallow depth of the front bar that related better to the historic buildings. Dividing the rear elevation into two towers is not necessarily a bad thing, but the western "tower" is unusually narrow. This elevation will, of course, be ultimately obscured by larger buildings to the south, so this outlet of the courtyard is both of limited benefit and detriment.

The building façade's base still needs work. The tall, two-story openings need a more pronounced horizontal upper termination, and without window sills dropped into that element. The second story should read more like a mezzanine, balancing solid and void; it is not far off, but is injured by the fact that openings sit above a narrow spandrel which is itself over a transom or clerestory level of the storefront. Unfortunately, the brick corner piers next to the historic building at 460 K and the glassy main entrance tower have disappeared from the last concept; the masonry mass above needs that apparent support below, and the historic building should not directly abut a corner storefront system.

There will be other details to be developed. It is unclear, for instance, what is the function or material of the dark, rectangular objects beneath the windows on the east and west elevations.

### **Demolition**

Composition aside, the fundamental problem with the westward expansion of the proposed building is the substantial demolition of the two historic buildings recently acquired.

The following excerpts from the Mount Vernon Triangle Historic District nomination briefly describe the origins and history of the two buildings. As a historic neighborhood, Mount Vernon Triangle was characterized by a unique mix of residential, commercial and industrial buildings and uses.

Of particular note is the building at 460 K Street. Designed in a late Romanesque Revival style, this building was built in 1904 as a store and multi-family dwelling constructed by J.J. Bowles to house the workers in his dairy bottling plant located in Prather's Alley. Architect Julius Germuiller designed the building, articulating it with details such as round-arched windows, rusticated stone stringcourses, and carved imposts that were executed with quality craftsmanship. Bowles who lived next door at 458 K Street, now a vacant lot, clearly cared about the appearance of his block. In 1906, Bowles again hired Germuiller to design the flats at 462 K Street. Here, Germuiller stuck with his Romanesque Revival idiom, designing a three-story brick building featuring a robust, semi-circular projecting bay and rusticated stringcourses. The formstone first floor is a later alteration....

John J. Bowles Dairy Bottling Plant and Associated Buildings (460 and 462 K Street): The collection of buildings constructed by resident dairyman and entrepreneur John J. Bowles in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century along K Street and in Prather's Alley clearly illustrates this trend [toward industrial uses]. John J. Bowles, born in Amherst, Virginia in 1867, moved to Washington, D.C. with his father before the turn of the century. As early as the late 1890s, Bowles operated a dairy business, originally at 111 H Street, NW. Bowles also owned a dairy farm in Rockville, Maryland. Milk from his Jersey herd was brought into the city to be bottled and delivered to customers by a squadron of horse-drawn wagons. By 1904, Bowles had moved to Mount Vernon Triangle and began growing his already prosperous business. In November of 1904, Bowles began construction of a two-story brick dairy bottling plant on Prather's Alley in Mount Vernon Triangle. Since the mid-1880s, Prather's Alley contained a combination of residential, commercial and light-industrial buildings, including a bakery, a tinner's shop, numerous private stable buildings, and a number of alley dwellings, occupied by poor African Americans.

"Bowles' Jersey Dairy" bottling plant was designed by architect Julius Germuiller and contained 5,000 square feet of space. At the time of the building's completion, Bowles had moved to the neighborhood, living in the now-demolished house at 458 K Street that stood next door to and in front of his alley enterprise. One month after applying for the permit for the bottling plant, Bowles applied to build the current building at 460 K Street immediately in front of the plant. Also designed by Germuiller, it is a three-story brick building that was designed as lodging for Bowles' dairy workers. In 1910, the building housed twelve male employees, all Virginians, including two laborers, five drivers, a route manager, a bookkeeper, and the dairy engineer. Although the dairy suffered substantial loss by fire in 1911, Bowles maintained his business, remodeling the dairy several times thereafter. During this time, Bowles became a leader in Washington dairy industry affairs. In both 1907 and 1917, sharp increases in feed and labor costs prompted the Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers' Association to press for an increase on wholesale milk prices. In 1907, Bowles was appointed by his peers to serve on a committee of six Washington milk dealers that had been established to negotiate with the Association.

Bowles' success in the dairy industry enabled him to continue to build in Mount Vernon Triangle. In 1906, he demolished an existing frame house at 462 K Street—home of fifteen members of three African American families—and replaced it with the present three-story, three-unit, brick apartment building on the site, completed in January 1907. Despite its location in front of the bottling plant, Bowles' investment property was a luxurious building in comparison to its working-class neighbors, and appears to have had rising middle-class residents in its early years. In 1910, the building was home to three families, including that of Benjamin Sanham, a druggist; that of William Millburn, a café owner; and that of the John Patterson.

John Bowles continued to operate his dairy until 1925, when the buildings were sold to become a "milk bottle exchange." Here, milk bottles, which were expensive to manufacture, were washed out for re-use. Publicity for periodic drivers to recover the 20,000 milk bottles in Washington used each day, urged consumers to return them to the exchange in an early form of recycling.

The new, western portion of the proposed building would set back 30 feet from the front wall of 460 and 462 K Street, demolishing just a little less than half of each outright, although several more feet of the party wall between would be removed, suggesting that the framing pocketed into at least one side of that wall would go as well. The drawings indicate that the entire west wall of the ell of #462 would be gone, at least at the first floor, which means that the first- and second-floor framing pocketed into that wall would be removed as well.

The ground-floor plan on Sheet 08 gives an impression of what would remain of the first floor of each building; less than half of the length of the east side walls that remains after the demolition of the ells. While the first- and second-floor framing could theoretically be retained between the east and west walls (presumably supported by steel at the second floor), the floors do not now align with each other in elevation nor do they align with an at-grade retail space. This strongly suggests that the floor framing of at least #462 would have to be removed. Even if extraordinary measures were taken to retain it, oddly and inconveniently, within the combined retail space now, there would be the temptation to alter it in the future, and the prevention of such additional latter-day demolition would be difficult as a practical matter. The same holds true on the upper floors, which the plans depict as separate spaces, but also connected, without an indication of whether the floors are to remain at different levels or how the transition would be made. Any change to the floor heights would have visual effects on the exterior of the building, especially if there are consequent alterations to openings. The combination of the interiors with the remainder of the first-floor retail space also suggests the possibility of the sealing of the entrances on each building.

As each building is undoubtedly wood framed, there would surely be code issues about the frame construction meeting the fireproof construction of the new building around and above. In past projects, this has often necessitated removal of the original framing. It is also not unlikely that an owner would wish to reframe the roofs, as they would drain rearward to the face of the new building and are at different heights and slightly different pitches, making drainage from one to the other more difficult.

As evidenced by the actual depth of the historic buildings compared to their proposed apparent depth, it is clear that the amount of demolition and the setback of the new construction does not leave buildings that are convincingly complete. When considering projects built behind smaller, historic buildings—projects that necessitated *some* demolition—the Board’s rule of thumb for a convincing depth has been 40 feet. This should be considered a minimum for such row buildings, which are always considerably deeper than wide.

The proximity of the newly proposed section of the building only increases the degree to which it looms over the smaller structures, an unnatural condition as it is clearly stands immediately behind what is left of these buildings and is not merely next to them around a corner.

The staff recommends that the Board:

1. not conceptually approve the level of demolition proposed for the buildings at 460 and 462 K Street, because it constitutes demolition of the buildings in significant part and is not consistent with the purposes of the preservation law;
2. not conceptually approve the present design of the new construction; and
3. not recommend approval of a subdivision to combine the parking lot with the historic-building lots unless and until both the design of the new construction and the level of demolition are revised to be compatible with the historic buildings.