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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: **450-452 K Street, NW** ( ) Consent

Meeting Date: **March 24, 2011** (x) New construction  
Case Number: **11-143** ( ) Addition  
( ) Alterations  
Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée** (x) 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 concept to construct a thirteen-story residential building (with ground-floor retail, a second-story cyber café, and a green roof) on this T-shaped lot, now occupied by a parking lot. Parking and loading would occur off 30-foot-wide Prather’s Alley at rear.

The property is flanked by two- and three-story, red-brick, residential and commercial buildings dating between 1873 and 1906.

The height and bulk of the proposed building is obviously at variance with those of the historic buildings. It was acknowledged by the Board at the time of the designation of the historic district that the high-density commercial zoning made new construction of this height likely, and the availability of large, vacant lots encouraged large footprints.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, the Board’s intent was not to hold building sizes to those of the historic structures, but to use the existing buildings to lend character and texture to a largely new neighborhood and influence the scale and massing of the new construction. Creating a successful composition in a new building has been at least as important as any overt references to adjoining buildings.

One of the greatest challenges of the present project is the size and irregular shape of its lot. The rear “bar” of the building would be its widest part, at the “top” or “cross” of the T-shaped footprint. Although the adjacent small lots retain rear yards that would leave the historic buildings with some breathing space, the “wings” of the building would loom behind them. Thus, the design of the side walls and the north walls of the rear bar are very important.

Above the first floor, the building takes a modified C or H plan, with a shorter east-west front bar joined to the longer east-west rear bar by a perpendicular connection along the east property line, forming a large court in the center that opens to the west. This has a couple of functional advantages, including creating an outdoor space for the cyber café and, more important, getting sunlight to the north side of the rear bar of the building. The positive effect this has for the

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<sup>1</sup> The Downtown Development District overlay encourages residential uses by granting residential buildings more height.

historic district is that, from the west, the front and rear bars would be seen end on, with the center of the building well recessed. This massing reduces the apparent bulk of the building, creating the impression from many vantage points of a front building and a back one. One downside is that this condition is not repeated on the east side of the building, where the thirteen-story wall would run the entire depth of the adjacent historic lots and then wrap behind. From a strictly preservation point of view, an I-shaped plan might be preferable, but it would certainly alter the character and capacity of the proposed court.

If anything, the west end wall of the front bar may be too shallow; it is not even as deep as the modestly sized adjoining buildings. While this is not problematic in itself, it does suggest that that west wall need not be “sculpted” and complicated by the division of the three window bays into separate columns at different planes. A more straightforward approach, as on the east end, would be better.

The present project incorporates both traditional brick and the kind of steel-and-glass window-wall that one is accustomed to seeing in contemporary residential construction. The ratio of solid to void gives the building a better scale than it has sometimes had in earlier versions, but the façade retains something of a sense of two buildings. In part, this is because the tower over the entry does not repeat the rhythm of the smaller towers on the western two thirds of the façade and is separated by a full-height pier and a column of window-wall (the tower itself will need further development). In addition, the sense of a continuous base erodes on the eastern section of the building. There, it could use a little more solidity, especially at the second floor over the entrance canopy. The second-floor punched openings in the rest of the base would be improved by aligning with the openings below.

The interest in providing balconies is understandable, but they ought to be recessed or suspended between projecting portions of the building, as next to the entrance tower. Individual, open, steel balconies are an unfortunate intrusion out of character with the historic district. They tend to become a focal point in an otherwise relatively flat wall. Recessed balconies are more traditional and continue a building’s pattern of window and door openings. The projecting balconies should be eliminated.

Because of the way the building has been massed, it needs two variances. The first is for the mechanical penthouse, which cannot be set back from all sides of the building a distance equal to its height because the rear bar of the building, on which it would stand, is too narrow. In addition, it must be broken up into multiple structures to accommodate the elevator/stair core and the mechanical equipment.

The second variance is to avoid providing a rear yard. The C-2-C zone requires a rear yard of fifteen feet for the portion of the building more than twenty feet above grade. The present proposal has no such setback, because it would so narrow the rear bar of the building or the courtyard in front of it as to make the present layout impracticable. The rear of the building will ultimately be obscured from most public views by the construction of the proposed building behind at 443-459 I Street. But it is the relationship with that property that is the most compelling argument for observing the setback. The 443-459 building will be erected atop historic industrial buildings below, retaining much of them. The setback of *that* new construction is crucial to retain the sense of the original buildings, and creating some relationship

or relief on the opposite side of the alley is the most compelling historic reason to provide a setback. On the other hand, the 443-459 project sets back only the required fifteen feet from the rear face of the former carriage works/garage building there. The width of the alley between that project and the present one is 30 feet, sufficient to no more overwhelm the historic alley buildings than does the I Street project itself.

For its own sake, however, the composition of the long rear wall of this building could use additional relief. Narrow, vertical pavilions or towers divide the rear elevation into three parts, but the projections of these are very slight, and the projections and recesses on the rear are not very clearly depicted in the plans. The recesses within the towers themselves are a better way to provide balconies, but the fact that these drop two stories below the masonry body of the building is odd. These recesses do help visually separate the three sections of the rear elevation, but not from the vantage point of a pedestrian.

The applicant is conferring with the City Archaeologist regarding any necessary investigation of the property. As some Board members may recall, this historic district was designated not only for its standing structures but also for its archaeological potential, given the history of industrial uses and Civil War-era residential occupation of Prather's alley.

**Recommendation**

The staff recommends that the Board support the overall plan and materials and request further development to address the issues raised above.