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

Landmark/District:	Capitol Hill Historic District	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	720 L Street, SE	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept
Meeting Date:	April 25, 2013	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Case Number:	13-267	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Amanda Molson	<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

Owners Mark Brody and Alan Gaunoux, with plans prepared by Gerald Clark, request concept approval for site alterations and new construction at 720 L Street, SE in the Capitol Hill Historic District.

Property Description

720 L Street, SE is a vacant parcel located at the corner of 8th and L Streets, SE. It is presently used as a parking lot and is enclosed by both wood and chain link fences. On L Street, the site is abutted to the west by a driveway providing access to another property, followed by two brick apartment buildings located at 716 and 718 L. On 8th Street, a small walkway separates the vacant lot from two nineteenth century buildings. The parking lot is located directly across the street from the Navy Yard Car Barn, a local landmark, and smaller rowhouses front the remainder of L Street and 7th Street in the square.

The lower portion of 8th Street (from the freeway overpass south to the Navy Yard) was included in the boundaries of the Capitol Hill Historic District via a more recent extension. The extension area includes several vacant lots, including one on the east side of 8th Street and one in the 800 block of L Street, SE. Although development activity in the area has been slow in recent years, a number of new projects are currently in discussion.

Background Information

In March of 2011, the Board approved a different concept proposal for this site (HPA #11-145), submitted by the same owners. Unlike the current proposal, that project featured a quite contemporary building prominently sited at the corner of 8th and L Streets and extending northward along 8th. Though outdoor seating was planned for a courtyard area off L Street and for a roof deck on top of the corner building, the project was less one of “use” of the existing lot and more one of new construction. HPO provided final approval of the permit application and plans, which remain under review by DCRA. The owners have reevaluated their finances and are now presenting a scaled-back version of their previous plan. They have indicated that either project would be “temporary” in nature, standing for ten years or so while development in the area continues to pick up speed.

Proposal

The new proposal, like the former, features a seasonal beer garden. In the new scheme, a one-story stucco building (17' deep, 70' wide, and 13' tall) would be located along the northern edge of the property. The building would house restrooms and storage. A roof structure, open on the sides and supported by beams, would project 10' in front of the building in order to provide cover for a bar area. The bulk of the site would be paved with flagstone edged by grass, all providing open seating. A separate paved area, leading from the portion of the neighboring curb cut to the face of the new building, would provide space for a visiting food truck and trash collection and pickup. A new metal fence measuring 6'-6" in height would surround the site, though the existing chain link fence along the alley would be retained. String lights would provide overhead illumination, with anchoring points at a central pole and along the fence.

Evaluation

The Board's guidelines for new construction do not provide recommendations for "temporary" buildings. The lifespan of a project such as this is dependent on the intentions of any future owners, the success of the business, and the impact of forthcoming projects in the surrounding area. Even a building intended to survive five or ten years should respect the character of the historic district, as it sets a precedent for future new construction projects and will certainly guide the tone for the development of surrounding parcels.

Since the Board's last review, the proposal has been substantially scaled back. The new plan is largely an open-air "use" of the existing lot, with a smaller service building rather than the indoor restaurant space previously proposed. Because the existing parking lot is visually disadvantageous to the character of the historic district and because the Board has provided some flexibility in the design of new construction, HPO has concentrated review on upgrading the quality of materials and design currently used on the site in order to improve the streetscape.

The replacement of the existing chain link fence with an ornamental metal fence is a welcome improvement. Upgrading the paving from the existing asphalt to flagstone surrounded by grass is also an enhancement. The applicants are encouraged to use the perimeter planting area to grow vines and other plants in an effort to soften the visual impact of the metal fence and to provide a more pleasant experience for patrons. The string lights proposed as illumination are commensurate with the character of traditional outdoor beer gardens, and the applicants should work with staff on any additional exterior illumination that may be needed against the building or in the bar area.

The more challenging part of the proposal from a preservation perspective is the service building, which is very simple in design and which features long expanses of uninterrupted masonry walls. HPO discouraged the applicants from proposing trailers, shipping containers, or portable toilets at this site, none of which would convey any sense of permanency (whether suggested or actual). Though not distinguished in design, the building's simple massing and stucco parging are not incompatible with the character of the historic district; it's set back from the street face and modest height would also result in it having a minor impact on the character of the street and the historic district. Because the service building provides bathrooms and storage, it is largely devoid of windows. HPO suggests that trellises be added to support plant

life, particularly along the 8th Street elevation, which would help to break down the severity of the walls.

Several details of the plan require further study as construction documents are developed. First, it remains unclear why the chain link fence alongside the alley cannot also be replaced, and doing so would improve views to and from the seating area. Second, signage has not yet been developed and should be coordinated with staff. Third, notes in the plans state that the existing grade (which slopes downhill from north to south) will be leveled, but there is no information on height or materials for the inevitable retaining wall that will be needed. Fourth, the site plan and floor plan show “electrical panels” just inside the fence along L Street, but there is no information about the possible visual impact. Further details are also needed on the ramp, stairs, and any dumpster enclosure against the new building.

Though not directly a preservation issue, the applicants should also plan ahead for site maintenance in the off-season and in bad weather so that the open area does not become an unkempt burden on the commercial corridor. Careful thought should be given to the secure storage of tables and chairs, any additional shading devices that may be needed on hot or rainy days, and the regular maintenance of green areas in the public space along L Street and within the site itself.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board approve the concept as consistent with the purposes of the preservation act and delegate final approval to staff with the following conditions:

- *The applicants shall work with staff on final details for trellises, fencing, signage, retaining walls, ramps and stairs, and any dumpster enclosure.*
- *Concept approval shall not be construed as approval for any necessary zoning relief.*