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

Landmark/District: **Anacostia Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **1409 V Street SE**

Meeting Date: **September 24, 2015** (x) Additions
Case Number: **15-577** (x) Subdivision

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

The applicant, FDP Acquisitions (FD Stonewater LLC), agent for the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Washington, the property owner, requests the Board's review of a concept to construct wings flanking the former Saint Theresa's school and additional site work. The expanded building would become a charter elementary school.

The three-story brick school was designed by Julius Wenig and erected by the Cassidy Company in 1909. A school for all its working life, it has been vacant for several years.

The east wing would serve as a gymnasium. The west wing would be a three-story classroom wing and shelter some parking.

The project would subdivide the present lot, so as to separate out the two-story house at 1401 V Street, built as a convent in 1950. The drawings suggest that the subdivision would detach a portion of the convent lot for the sake of enlarging the school site.

The two large wings would be constructed on what is now largely paved parking and playground space, occupying most of the lot, but retaining a small rear yard and putting a play area in the front yard. There would be a service drive off the ten-foot-wide alley at rear and a curb cut for access to a parking area at the west end of the property's frontage.

The project would retain nearly the entire historic school, with less demolition than shown in October. At that hearing, the Board unanimously supported the subdivision and the general outlines of the project, i.e., flanking wings, but did not approve the concept, requesting revisions suggested in the staff report and recognizing that much greater detail (including rear elevations and proposed rooftop mechanical) will be necessary before the concept can be approved. The Board was particularly concerned about the size and massing of the wings, their height equal to the historic school, and the imposing nature of the whole as it faces surrounding homes. It was suggested that the applicant need not attempt a wholly symmetrical composition but could step down, especially on the west end of the site, to take advantage of the lower grade both to lower the overall height and provide a more natural main entrance at grade. The Board encouraged changes in the height and/or plane of the hyphens as they relate to the school's existing stair towers. The Board discouraged creating a berm on that end of the site and requested more study of the program, of the historic evolution of the site, and of the proposal to strip the paint from the historic building.

Evaluation

As a response, the layout has been revised dramatically, intended now to house a conventional elementary school program. The east parking garage was eliminated and the west wing has been sunk to about the present sidewalk grade. The east wing is now the equivalent of two stories but would accommodate a gym (the school's old gym/cafeteria/auditorium would remain a cafeteria). Both wings are lower than the main block and have been set back behind the school's side stair additions, making the original school stand out. The shrinking of the wings also provides more room at the rear of the property for service and recreation, although we do not yet have the details on how those spaces would be treated. These are all positive developments.

The changes do raise several issues, however:

- The parking garage is no longer underground nor wholly beneath the building. A parking lot would be located on the former playground space, partly behind the present (but reconstructed) berm and continuing under the front portion of the new classroom wing. An open lot and garage bays, even screened by a berm, are far from ideal, but it could be argued that a parking lot is no worse than the present paved playground or the parking lot on the east.
- The proposed ADA access to the building is via a long ramp cut through the berm at the east end of the property, neither very visible nor convenient. It also requires the construction of long retaining walls and might feel unsafe, lacking good sightlines. While such an entrance may serve the separate use of the gym for after-hours public functions, it does not appear optimal for the school in general. An entrance straight from the street, similar to that proposed in October for a main entrance, would be more successful, but it could be of a more modest size if the main entrance remains open. The pedestrian entrance shown from the parking lot to the new classroom wing suggests one such approach; there might even be another such entrance on the opposite end of the main block. While there is value to keeping the historic entrance functional, it is difficult to imagine that no occupants of the building will seek alternatives to the front stairs.
- With the setback of the wings, the principal recreation space is now proposed to be in front of the gym, which has a certain logic. But the enclosure of that space is far from ideal as, unlike the rest of the front yard, this area would be bounded by an eight-foot-tall fence.

The particulars of the architectural design raise some concerns as well:

- According to the architect, the applicant does not intend to strip the paint from the brick school. Despite the setback of the wings, their brightly colored panels are likely to stand out relative to a fairly blank main block. Using brick as the primary wall material would be a more compatible approach, as all the purpose-built institutional and commercial buildings in the historic district were constructed of masonry.
- Depending on the option selected or how it is ultimately detailed, the window openings in the wings appear overscaled relative to those of the historic school.
- The classroom wing is wider or longer than the school itself, considerably more so than the school's central pavilion. And the recess of the wing's basement level emphasizes the structure's horizontality, an effect that is only slightly relieved by continuing that recess vertically where the wing meets the old school. The wing could use some device to break up its façade and introduce some balancing verticality, but the recess of the basement level fights that.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board support the size and location of the wings, but that it request that the applicant refine the project to address the issues discussed above.