

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

Property Address:	2319 High Street SE	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Anacostia Historic District		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	September 28, 2017	X	Permit Review
H.P.A. Number:	17-502		New Construction
Staff Reviewers:	Anne Brockett, Imania Price	X	Alteration

On behalf of owner Patricia McCullum, Solar City seeks permit review to install 32 solar panels on the roof of this contributing house in the Anacostia Historic District. The freestanding frame house was constructed in 1914-15 by Warren Tolson and features an oblong form with unarticulated sides under a hipped roof. A full-width front porch ornaments the façade and punched windows run along the side walls. The house faces southeast and is flanked by an older frame residence to the west and an alley and the rear yards of properties fronting on Valley Place SE to the east.

Project Description

The applicant seeks to add 32 solar panels and associated mounting hardware on the long northeast and southwest roofs. No panels are proposed for the front or rear hipped roofs. The panels would be arranged in two rows per side with the converter box located on the rear wall. The panels would be mounted on hardware drilled directly into the roof rafters through the asphalt roof shingles. The maximum height of the assembly above the roof surface is approximately 5 inches.

Because of the adjacent alley and rear yards, the entire northeast roof is visible from multiple vantage points. The southwest roof is close to the abutting property and, although visible, is significantly less exposed.

Evaluation

Since 2009, HPO has approved over 580 rooftop solar installations across the city’s historic districts and on landmarked buildings. In each case, the approval was conditioned upon the Board’s standard that the system not be visible from the street and that the installation not alter the appearance of primary roof forms. In the few instances where panels were installed at variance with approved plans and were visible upon installation, the HPO has worked with owners and, if necessary, taken enforcement action to rectify the condition. These installations have worked well in the District’s numerous rowhouse neighborhoods, but can be more difficult on single family homes or buildings with articulated roof forms.

Regulations, Guidelines, and Draft Guidelines

One of the purposes of the Act is “to assure that alterations of existing structures are compatible with the character of the historic district.” The Board’s adopted Guidelines *Roofs on Historic Buildings* states that “Altering roof shapes, materials, elements and details will affect their design. Thus, any alterations must be undertaken with extreme care to ensure that the character of the roof is retained.” The guidelines go on to specifically address solar panels by stating that “on a flat roof, solar panels should be located so they are not visible from the public street. If located on a sloping roof building, they should only be installed on rear slopes that are not visible from a public street.” The guidelines similarly restrict antennas, satellite dishes, and skylights to non-visible portions of the roof.

In addition, the draft *Anacostia Historic District Design Guidelines* identifies Anacostia as “a working-class neighborhood, whose character was reflected in the modesty of its buildings and simplicity of their architectural ornamentation. The simple and vernacular character of these buildings should be retained and preserved. Where replacement materials are required, excessively ostentatious, expensive, or synthetic options should be avoided.” In addressing roof alterations specifically, it states that “roof

appurtenances, such as skylights, antennae, satellite dishes, mechanical equipment, and solar or photovoltaic panels, may be appropriate on buildings with flat or nearly flat roofs where these features can be located so that they are not visible from street views. Such appurtenances should not result in the removal, damage, or alteration of character-defining roof features, including turrets, cornices, decorative chimneys, porches, or distinctive roof shapes. Considerations for judging these should include not only immediate views but also more distant oblique views.”

The draft guideline *Preservation and Design Considerations for Roof Alterations on Historic Property* specifically addresses solar equipment, citing the following design principles:

- Solar panels should be installed so that they are not visible from the street.
- Solar panel installations should not visually or physically alter the roofline or character-defining roof features, such as dormers, cresting, and chimneys.
- Solar panels on flat roofs should be set back sufficiently so as not to be seen above the primary elevation or alter the roof profile.
- Photovoltaic shingles are not appropriate on primary elevations as a substitute for historic slate or tile but may be acceptable on secondary elevations.

Precedent Reviews

The Board has reviewed one case for visible solar panels on a freestanding house, at 3215 Newark Street NW in the Cleveland Park Historic District. Here, the Board determined that the proposed front-facing and side-facing solar panels on this foursquare house would be too prominently visible, and that their dark color and highly reflective finish would create such contrast with the existing roof as to result in an incompatible visual intrusion on the street. The design was subsequently revised to remove the panels from the front roof, arrange them symmetrically on the side roofs, and pull them away from the roof edges. In addition, the applicants voluntarily replaced their roof with darker shingles to lessen the visual contrast with solar panels; proposed a black, matte finish, frameless panel with no shiny metal elements; and used a mounting system that lowered the profile of the whole assembly to a maximum of 4” above the roof.

This amended proposal was approved by the Board because it did not affect the front elevation, would not be visible from directly in front of the house, its visibility would be limited to a relatively narrow site line, and the installation was determined not to detract from the character of the historic district as a whole.

Recommendation

The panels proposed on the highly visible northeast roof at 2319 High Street SE would create a visual intrusion to the house and an intact historic streetscape. The panels are highly reflective and visually distracting from the form and finish of the house’s roof and are not consistent with the Board’s guidelines or previous reviews. However, the panels facing southwest, if pushed behind the existing brick chimney, would meet the standards established during the Board’s review of 3215 Newark Street NW. This roof is close to a similarly tall building and visibility from the street is limited. In addition, solar panels on the rear roof, while perhaps having slight visibility from Chester Street, would be far enough removed from the street as to not significantly impact the character of the historic district. Additionally, panels could be placed on the existing rear porch roof or on a rear-yard structure such as a garage, gazebo, or trellis.

Any solar panels approved here should be as subtle as possible in color and arrangement, without reflective metal patterns or framing.

The HPO recommends that the Board approve a permit for the placement of solar panels flush on the southwest roof behind the chimney, on the rear roof of the house and its rear porch, or on other non-visible portions of the property, as necessary to achieve solar efficiency, as consistent with the purposes of the preservation act.