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

Landmark/District: Spingarn High School	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address: 2550 Benning Road, NW	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
Meeting Date: January 26, 2023	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
H.P.A. Numbers: 23-108	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
	<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition

The District of Columbia Department of General Services (DGS) and Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) along with Bell Architects and VMDO Architects are proposing to adapt portions of Spingarn High School for use as a job training facility that will be known as the DC Infrastructure Academy (DCIA). The Joel Elias Spingarn High School is a historic landmark that falls within the boundaries of the Young, Brown, Phelps, and Spingarn Educational Campus and Kingman Park Historic Districts.

Spingarn High School

Spingarn High School was constructed in 1951-1952 to relieve overcrowding and was the first new senior high school built for African American students in the school district in thirty-six years. Based upon a design developed by municipal architect Nathan C. Wyeth, Spingarn is the last post-war school in the District of Columbia to be constructed in the Colonial Revival Style. This style was selected so that Spingarn would relate to the three 1930's schools located immediately to the north along 26th Street, namely, Charles Young Elementary School, Seth L. Phelps Vocational School, and Hugh M. Browne Junior High School. Spingarn was designated a landmark in 2012. In 2015, the significance of Spingarn and its neighboring schools was jointly recognized by designation of the Young, Brown, Phelps, and Spingarn Educational Campus Historic District. The broader African American heritage of the surrounding neighborhoods was subsequently recognized by designation of the Kingman Park Historic District in 2017. The historic Langston Golf Course Historic District the Landmark Langston Terrace Dwellings are located immediately east and west of Spingarn High School, respectively.

Proposal

The majority of the proposed work, including alteration, rehabilitation and new construction, will occur in approximately one third of the school's northern wing, the original boiler room and, to a lesser degree, the southern wing. Most work will occur on the ground, first and second floors while the third floor and other spaces not currently needed for the DCIA program, including the gymnasium and auditorium, will be stabilized for future improvements planned by DCIA and other tenants. Site improvements are also proposed on all sides of the historic school.

Evaluation

Spingarn has sat vacant for nearly a decade and was repeatedly vandalized over that time, so the building is in poor condition and the proposed project is sorely needed to reverse damage and prevent further deterioration. The broad scope includes general repairs, repointing, exterior cleaning, replacement of non-original windows, transoms, doors and the roof and similar improvements. All work is to be based upon historic drawings and designed to be appropriate for the historic building but since many details have yet to be developed, ongoing historic preservation review will be needed to ensure the improvements are consistent with the approaches and materials previously approved for other school rehabilitation projects.

In addition to the general scope, several more substantial improvements are proposed. One of the most notable is the creation of a new accessible school entry at the terrace along 26th Street. The proposed concept will require removing three central “blind” panels from the existing retaining wall, incorporating a slight recess to provide a covered vestibule, installing a contemporary glazed storefront entry just beyond, and creating a new entry lobby in the underutilized space below the entry plaza and the area historically used as the school’s ROTC rifle range. Although this approach will require alteration of some limited interior fabric, the preservation benefits will outweigh the disadvantages. For example, the new entry will help to preserve the integrity of the school’s open landscape by eliminating the need for extensive ramps that would otherwise be required to provide access from the street level up to the main entry doors. Since the retaining wall panels are already slightly recessed, the proposed approach also fits in well within the school’s original design by requiring the removal of only a relatively small amount of brick in areas that are already clearly defined by the panels. This approach will also result in a new entry that, for the most part, will only be visible when viewed head on. Finally, the new entry will allow the existing asymmetrical 1990s ramp on the front of the school to be removed and the historic flagpole, stairs, railings and other original entry plaza features to be preserved in-tact rather than modified for ADA purposes.

Another more substantial improvement involves converting the original boiler house on the northwest side of the school into an “autolab” where students will be taught how to perform vehicle maintenance. This adaptation will also alter historic conditions by requiring demolition of a partial wall, the roof and mezzanines, the insertion of a new floor and the construction of a taller replacement roof. However, the boiler house is a relatively modest utilitarian structure that was not designed for occupation and its location behind the main building ensures the new work will not be visible from the front of the school. The only modification that will be visible from the immediately surrounding area is the new sloped roof. This taller new feature will incorporate translucent panels to provide much-needed natural light in the auto repair area and will read as a contemporary, compatible adaptation of the original structure.

On the ground floor of the southern wing a new building services space with an overhead door will be introduced to house trash, recycling and related functions for the DCIA and future tenants. This will require converting two original windows into a single wide door. The adjacent historic greenhouse will be stabilized by repairing the steel frame and making the floor below watertight to create an exterior terrace. These changes are appropriate for the building but the greenhouse should be fully restored whenever feasible.

Although Spingarn's interiors are not designated, interior alterations are subject to review in accordance with Section 9b of the DC Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act. Ongoing consultation will be required to evaluate the effects of the project on historically significant interior fabric but preservation of the school's double loaded corridors and terrazzo floors is proposed and most significant alterations are limited to within the classroom spaces so significant adverse effects are not anticipated.

Site improvements include a training yard, the expansion of on-site parking and the introduction of various stormwater management features. The training yard will be minimally visible because it will be located behind the school, set into the existing slope, fenced in, and landscaped. The expanded parking, however, raises preservation concerns because it will diminish the character-defining landscape setting of Spingarn and the surrounding historic district.

Existing parking at Spingarn is primarily limited to the northwest corner of the site and a few spaces in the southeast corner that may be associated with the carbarn. Although the existing parking lot in the northwest corner is not visible from 26th Street, cars can be seen when they are parked there. Extending the lot further east so that it aligns with Spingarn's eastern elevation, as proposed, will make parked cars significantly more visible and may even result in a visible parking lot. Landscaping could potentially be used to help reduce visibility but plantings would have to be quite tall to hide the cars and introducing more large plantings would be inappropriate because they would interrupt the open, minimalistic landscape character of the historic district. The cumulative visual effects of additional parking lots and parked cars on both the north and south sides of the building would exacerbate the problem. For these reasons, additional parking should be eliminated from the scope of work.

If it can be demonstrated that additional parking is essential, the amount of parking should be reduced to the absolute minimum and the parking spaces should be relocated and redesigned to be as minimally visible as possible. Depressing the parking lot into the ground, incorporating berms and similar approaches should be evaluated and utilized as much as possible to preserve the open setting. To offset the negative visual impacts, a landscape plan should also be developed for the entire historic district and used to guide design of future improvements at Spingarn, the other schools and the carbarn. Ideally, all property owners in the historic district including DCPS, DDOT, DGS DPR and the privately owned Two Rivers Charter School should work together to prepare such a plan.

The various stormwater management features proposed for the site should also be considered within the context of a landscape plan, if possible. If not, further consultation should be required to determine exactly what is proposed and the most appropriate locations within the historic context.

Recommendations

For the reasons outlined above, HPO recommends that the Board:

1. *Find the proposed DC Infrastructure Academy concept compatible with the historic contexts of the Spingarn Landmark and the Young, Brown, Phelps and Spingarn Educational Campus and Kingman Park Historic Districts except as noted below;*
2. *Recommend the elimination of additional parking from the proposed scope of work or, if it can be demonstrated that some additional parking is essential, the significant reduction and redesign of parking;*
3. *Support and encourage the development of landscape plan for the Young, Brown, Phelps and Spingarn Educational Campus Historic District that could be used to guide future site improvements by all property owners in the historic district; and*
4. *Delegate all remaining design review to HPO.*

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