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

Landmark/District: **Episcopal Home for Children** (x) Agenda
Address: **5901 Utah Avenue NW**

Meeting Date: **August 3, 2023** (x) Alteration
Case Number: **23-431** (x) Permit

The applicant, the Maret School, agent for property owner the Episcopal Center for Children, requests the Board’s review of a civil permit application to construct sports playing fields for Maret School pupils, elements of which would extend into the landmarked property.

The formerly named Episcopal Home for Children was designated a landmark by the Board in February 2021, as a rare survivor of a fully realized campus-type orphanage in Washington. The property contains three contributing buildings and one noncontributing building. The property owner sponsored the landmark nomination, proposing a boundary that did not include the rear of the property, a largely informal playground landscape. (The boundary map is on the next page; a thin blue line has been superimposed on the civil plans to indicate the location of the landmark’s eastern boundary.) The Board accepted the boundary, agreeing that:

[T]he eastern section of the lot lacks character-defining features other than green space itself, some mature trees, shrubs, a basketball court, a pool and a rail fence. Historic aerial photos do not indicate formal playing field elements in the past, only a single, probably multi-use court. The property’s most important landscape features are the quad between the buildings, with its ring of mature trees, and the front lawn and its driveways, all captured within the boundary.

It was anticipated that the excluded playground area would be offered to Maret School for play fields. As the plans developed, some elements extended across the landmark boundary, including a corner of a soccer field itself, portions of its perimeter fencing and retaining walls, some water-management features, a walk, a parking pad reached from the alley to the north, and the egress from a surface parking lot located close to Nebraska Avenue. Several months after the designation, the property owner created two assessment and taxation lots whose common boundary separates the areas to be used by the Maret School and the Episcopal Center. This boundary does not correspond to the eastern boundary of the landmark. (The A&T lot reserved to the use of the Episcopal Center is generally shaded in the civil plans.) The noncontributing one-story library/media center at the north corner of the landmark is to become the Maret fieldhouse.

The subject permit application consists of the civil drawings submitted. Because notes on those drawings make reference to landscape drawings, HPO requested those as supplemental information, especially for information about fences, for the Board’s consideration.



The fields would require grading and retaining walls, drainage systems, bioretention features, and fencing. Most of this occurs on the undesignated portion of the property, in addition to a parking lot there that has an exit via a driveway on the landmark property. In addition to the soccer and baseball fields, there would be an enclosed batting cage just beyond the landmark. That and the backstop to the baseball field require high fencing and netting. The dumpsters would be immediately beyond the landmark boundary, too.

Fencing

The principal issue on the landmark site is the installation of fences to separate the zone used by Maret from the Episcopal Center. As the proposed fencing only partly follows the landmark boundary, the fences cut into the designated area. While the Board may set a landmark boundary or allow a subdivision that divides the ownership of a landmark, it typically wishes to minimize the feeling of physical separation of parts within a landmarked parcel.

It is true that the sections of fence separating the two A&T lots would be four feet tall, only six inches taller than is ordinarily approved for front-yard fences. The sections dividing the property from neighbors would be six feet tall, one footer shorter than generally allowed. The metal fencing is characterized as “ornamental,” although it lacks much ornament; it is a tubular-metal

fencing with C-channel rails and bracket connections, a type discouraged in front yards, but acceptable at the rear of a landmark property. The landscape plans indicate planted borders on the fieldhouse side of the fence, but such plantings may be more appropriate and useful softening the view from the opposite side.

A gate or gates would be erected to admit a vehicle from the alley north of the property. The civil drawings show this as swing gates, presumably of chain link, while the landscape drawings portray it as sliding and similar to the design of the fence. The civil drawings also indicate that the length of the six-foot perimeter fence along the rear of 5931 Utah Avenue would be “opaque,” but it is not clear about how an open, metal fence is also to be solid. All such issues should be resolved; anything shown on the civil plans could be presumed approved by clearance of the permit. Thus, everything should be detailed prior to issuance.

One corner of the soccer field would cross the landmark boundary, and it would be surrounded by a six-foot-tall chain-link fence. A much taller feature would be the netting supported by aluminum poles, similar to those below, but in a black finish. The project team says that those within the landmark and behind home plate would be 30 feet tall, but some elsewhere would be 20 feet.



According to an order of the Board of Zoning Adjustment, “[t]he Applicant will not install lights at the athletic fields. Limited security lighting will be provided in the parking lot and the area around the field house. The low-wattage security lighting will be placed in various locations at the subject property, approximately 10 feet above grade and pointed at the ground.”

Paving

Inside the alley access to the fieldhouse, is an apparent parking pad that connects to walks around the fieldhouse, continuing to the fields themselves. These are innocuous, especially around a noncontributing building.

It appears that a small portion of the parking lot would extend into the landmark, the size of one parking space plus the portion of drive aisle that meets the driveway exit to Nebraska Avenue. This replaces other hardscape, the disused pool and multi-purpose court.

Other features

Below the retained corner of the soccer field would be a drainage swale within which would be plantings and low retaining walls.

Recommendation

HPO seeks the Board’s direction on the project, especially with regard to the proposed barriers. Fencing to separate the fieldhouse seems unnecessary, yet it is only four feet high and would surround a noncontributing building at the rear corner of the property, so the visual effects are limited. The poles with netting that bound the soccer field have a greater visual effect, but they, too, are on a rear corner of the property.

The Board must take an action within 90 days of the application’s submission, and the next hearing, in September, is beyond that deadline.