

---

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

---

Property Address:	<b>3900 Wisconsin Avenue, NW</b>	<b>X</b> Agenda
Landmark/District:	<b>Equitable Life Insurance Co.</b>	Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	<b>May 24, 2018</b>	<b>X</b> Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	<b>17-495</b>	<b>X</b> Alteration
		<b>X</b> New Construction
		Demolition

---

NASH-Roadside 3900 Wisconsin LLC, with plans prepared by SBA Architects, returns for on-going conceptual design review for building and site alterations and new construction at the former Equitable Life Insurance Company/Fannie Mae Building at 3900 Wisconsin Avenue.

**Property Description**

The building was built in 1956-58 and 1963 as the headquarters for the Equitable Life Insurance Company, designed by Washington architect Leon Chatelain, Jr. in an academic Georgian Revival style closely modeled after the Governor’s Palace in Williamsburg (itself a revival structure that was constructed in the 1930s to replicate the original 18<sup>th</sup> century building). The building’s design represents the last phase of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Colonial Revival movement two decades after the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg inspired the style’s widespread popularity across the country and particularly in the Washington region.

The building was designated a landmark in November 2017. The large rear addition and parking garage dating from 1978 were determined non-contributing, and the rear half of the property and a sliver of land to the north were excluded from the landmark boundaries.

**Project Background**

As was presented to the Board in an informational presentation in July 2017 and again in the concept application in November, the site has been sold and the new owner has been working with its project team, District agencies, and the community on a master plan for the site’s redevelopment for residential and retail use. The large property would be broken down through the introduction of a pedestrian-oriented street network, burying the parking and loading below ground with access through a central entrance/exit at the southern end of the Wisconsin Avenue frontage, and developing a series of smaller, architecturally-distinctive buildings that would allow the existing building and its front open space to remain the central element in the development’s composition.

In November, the Board found the concept to be compatible with the character of the landmark and asked that the project return for final review. Among the Board’s comments were recommendations that the design for Building 3 (the double “stacked tray” buildings) be quieter and simpler in design, that Building 4 (the landscape pavilion) be pulled further back from Wisconsin Avenue, and that the front landscape retain the circular drive.

### **Revised Proposal**

The landmark building is now proposed for conversion to residential use rather than a hotel, which has resulted in several proposed alterations. These include adding four dormers on the roof's end pavilions that would replicate the form and detailing of the existing dormers, elongation of every third window to door openings on the courtyard elevations, and installation of small flush-mounted grills to allow for fresh air intake. The rear elevation of the 1962 central wing, which was destroyed by the attachment to the 1978 wing, would be reconstructed with brick and door openings to match the other two elevations of this wing.

The projecting elements on Building 3 have been simplified as encouraged by the Board, and would be used only on the first four floors facing the back of the landmark to create a more compatible relationship of scale and mass between the new construction and the historic building. The skin of smooth and perforated metal panels has been chosen to relate to the color of the existing building's slate roof, and the courtyard gardens have been developed to evoke formal geometric 18<sup>th</sup> century gardens in a more contemporary vocabulary.

Building 4, formerly envisioned for a use related to the hotel, is now proposed as a retail pavilion to help enliven the front park. It has been reduced in size and pulled back both from Wisconsin Avenue and from the landmark building, and its edges rounded to present a more organic form. The roof is no longer envisioned as an occupied space, eliminating the need for railings around its perimeter. The front landscape has been revised to retain both legs of the circular drive, with the stones on the north leg laid to allow ground cover to grow between and serving as a pedestrian walk into the site. Some of the more formal aspects of the previous concept for the landscape have been eliminated.

### **Evaluation**

The revisions improve the compatibility and design qualities of the proposal and are responsive to the Board's direction. The alterations to the existing building are compatible in vocabulary and composition with its Colonial Revival character. The redesign of Building 3 grounds the projecting tray elements to quiet and simplify that mass, as requested by the Board, while better relating those elements to the scale of the existing building. The decrease in size, increase in setbacks, and softening of the geometry of Building 4 improves its relationship to the site and the landscape plan. The retention of both legs of the circular drive retains this important organizational element of the original landscape while simultaneously reinventing it as a green pedestrian pathway.

### **Recommendation**

*The HPO recommends that the Board find the revised concept to be compatible with the character of the landmark and that final approval be delegated to staff.*