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

Landmark/District: **Saint Elizabeths Hospital Historic District** (x) Consent Calendar
Address: **2700 Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue SE**

Meeting Date: **September 23, 2021** (x) New construction
Case Number: **21-498** (x) Concept

The applicant, property owner the Government of the District of Columbia, requests the Board’s review of a concept to construct a five- or six-story hospital and an attached three-level 500-car parking garage topped by a roof of solar panels. There will be considerable site work, including additional circulation, surface parking, landscaping and bioretention, signs, etc.

The site is roughly at the center of the Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue frontage of the campus, the former location of the roughly seven- or eight-story Dorothea Dix Pavilion and now a temporary parking lot associated with the arena.¹ The complex would stand south of the new men’s shelter (which the Board approved in concept in January 2020) and displaces the old one. It will stand north of the “Maple Quadrangle” of historic treatment buildings.

Because of its location and ownership, the project is subject to review by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA), the Advisory Commission on Historic Preservation, and the National Capital Planning Commission. The CFA reviewed a first draft in July and “approved the general concept and requested the submission of a revised concept that responds to the following comments”:

The Commission members expressed support for the massing of the proposed hospital design, composed of a two-story base supporting a taller volume containing patient rooms, which they said conveys an appropriate sense of weight and solidity within the context of the historic site. They commended the humane emphasis on the patient experience in the design of the building, citing the expansive views for patients that will be provided by angled windows set within substantial articulated brick window enclosures. However, they commented that the lighter color of much of the two-story base would visually separate the two main parts of the building; they suggested using brick-colored panels on the base to unify the whole composition. They expressed a preference for the three-story option for the upper volume, observing that it appears more compact and grounded than the four-story option; they also expressed a strong preference for the alternative that would consolidate the rooftop mechanical enclosure into a single large rectangle across the eastern volume, with shallow step-backs, as a more efficient and less conspicuous solution.

¹ This was once intended to be the site of a large Federal Emergency Management Agency headquarters.

For the design of the site, the Commission members encouraged the creation of landscape areas that will provide respite for patients and form part of a continuous green corridor along this edge of the St. Elizabeths campus. However, they commented that the landscape design as presented is schematic and unresolved; they emphasized that the entire site needs to be developed as a public landscape with the same level of care and attention to detail as the design for the building— including the areas facing the men’s shelter on the north, Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue on the west, and the ravine on the east, with particular attention to screening the new building’s utilitarian areas and to protecting the natural habitat along the ravine.

The project has been revised through coordination in several multi-agency meetings, including further development of the landscape, leaving few obvious issues. It will go before the National Capital Planning Commission and will be reviewed by the CFA to the permit level.

A fair amount of thought has gone into the site plan. It is never ideal to have parking in front of a building, but it is certainly an improvement upon the current condition and on the large parking lot that had stood in front of the Dix building. The park-like landscaping more than mitigates the paving and helps screen it.

This is the second instance of a new above-ground parking garage *not* being wrapped by other uses, contrary to the campus master plan, yet here it is only three levels (plus a solar array for the roof) and partly sunk behind the rear-yard slope to Stickfoot Branch. On the other hand, this one, and a four-story portion of the hospital’s rear wing, is of gray precast, with no opportunity to wrap it in the future. Therefore, it is recommended that some kind of green screen be incorporated to obscure portions of the garage’s south and west elevations, as was done at the arena parking garage.

The hospital’s floor plan modulates its bulk, although the narrow north-south bar little obscure the mechanical enclosure atop it. As mentioned above, the Commission was skeptical of a sixth floor, and that is a topic upon which the Board should weigh in. The project is programmed for an eventual sixth floor anyway, subject to approval, for the purpose of future expansion. But increased demand for beds may necessitate the additional space sooner rather than later, and there would be efficiencies and more visual consistency in building it all in one go. HPO believes that the additional height only improves that proportion relative the building’s horizontal emphasis and high ground floor.

The varying heights and overall extent and character of the Maple Quadrangle allow it visually to stand up to the bulk of the hospital building. The nearer proximity of the north-south bar to the historic two-story stable (pages 8, 35 and 37) is not as felicitous. It is not clear what can be done about this. This is the site available for a hospital, and was once occupied by another large, modern building. Moving the building forward would have a greater impact on the campus as a whole, making it more prominent from the avenue, and presumably pulling the garage forward out of its sunken position.

It is a bit odd that the upper stories on the central pavilion of the west elevation appear unsupported; it is recommended that it have a brick pier behind the southern (right) corner of the canopy, similar to the pier at the main entrance in the south wing (see image on next page).

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board approve the concept, including a sixth floor, with the condition that the garage have some kind of green screen to obscure some of the south and west elevations.

