
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	Saint Elizabeths Hospital Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	801 through 1199 Sycamore Drive SE¹	
Meeting Date:	June 25, 2020	(x) New construction
Case Number:	20-346	(x) Subdivision
		(x) Concept

The applicant, Redbrick LMD, long-term lessee of the subject parcels, requests the Board's review of a concept to construct a 63-townhome project to contain a total of 88 dwelling units. The project is proposed for the south end of the city-owned East Campus, on two parcels bounded by Sycamore Drive, Alabama Avenue and a public alley. The site plan implies a proposed subdivision.

Bifurcated by the extended Malcolm X Avenue, the affected portion of the campus is vacant, but it faces, across Sycamore, the historic Continuing Treatment Quadrangle, recently rehabilitated by Redbrick for senior housing. Each of the new houses would stand three and a half stories tall, with an attic loft sometimes opening onto a rear roof deck and the first floor largely occupied by a garage accessed from a rear alley or court.

Among the proposal's strengths is the fact that the units have been grouped and composed to appear as fractions of larger buildings. This helps the integration of houses of two different widths. It also responds to the campus's context of larger residential and treatment buildings; the campus's few single-family residences were dispersed, detached staff cottages.

The campus master plan called for townhomes of roughly this size on these parcels, although they were fewer in number than depicted in the plan's illustrative sketches. To some degree, the greater number helps the site plan, because the back-to-back rows largely screen the interior circulation, parking, roof decks, and lesser cladding materials. On the western end of the site, this creates a new and interesting relationship to the existing alley along the campus boundary, with a row facing it, opening onto a space that is to be widened and refashioned as a street. But the narrower east end of the site accommodates parallel rows only if they are turned perpendicular to the streets, unfortunately leaving unprepossessing sides facing Alabama Avenue and Sycamore Lane and exposing the parking courts to view from the latter, with brick walls screening views of cars and paving from the avenue. The site plan indicates that this condition could be ameliorated by copious planting. More attention is due the vegetative screening of the parking, pulled back from Sycamore enough to not constitute a vision-clearance issue for cars or pedestrians. Similarly, these courts at the east end could be improved by a higher quality of paving than is necessary on the less-conspicuous alley created at the east end of the site. It is

¹ Street addresses have not yet been assigned, as the property has not been subdivided. The two subject parcels (10 and 14) are presently designated as three assessment and taxation lots—811, 812 and 823—in Square 5868S.

also recommended that the intersection where the parallel and perpendicular rows meet be further studied for how to provide a more graceful transition between the two.

The sidewalk material abutting the existing public alley is to be stamped concrete. It is acceptable in that location, but the public sidewalks elsewhere must remain consistent with the standard throughout the campus.

As for the buildings themselves, they need to relate better to the campus context, to avoid the trap of being generic rather than site-specific. The campus's masonry buildings are red brick. New townhouses will look distinct enough from the historic architecture that they need not have their own color scheme.

The MDO-clad bays and turrets should be eliminated. They do not contribute functionally or visually. The composition of the grouped houses would benefit from a pronounced corner element, however, and should borrow from their nearest neighbor, the CT Quad, by introducing quoins. At the average suburban tract, quoins might be Georgian pretense, but here they would reflect the immediate context, offering depth and texture to the buildings that MDO panels lack. Elimination of the flat-roofed turrets would also create space for additional dormers, if desired.

The brick should be carried around at least three sides of all the buildings. Even then, rear siding would be prominently visible on the houses turned perpendicular to Sycamore and Alabama. Turning the corner from a brick facade to lap siding is something of a stereotype of townhomes, but it is important in this context to convey a sense of solidity, conviction and consistency compatible with designs of the historic structures. The gaps between the closest buildings are substantial enough to see plainly that the façade material does not return. The siding must be specified, and as something other than vinyl. Fiber-cement would be sufficiently compatible, as the Board has determined in other historic districts.

It is recommended that the side gables be symmetrical. Rather than symmetry for its own sake (although there is little wrong with that), the aim is to reduce the pitch of the front roofs, which are much higher than the campus's hipped roofs and are to be clad in a distinctly different material, profile and color. It appears that the roof decks could be accommodated in any case, and only the stair in the alternative third-floor plan looks tight if it were not shifted rearward.

Entry canopies should probably be at or just above the lintels. Not illustrated are mechanical equipment, vents, solar panels, electric meters, etc., and the plans do not make much accommodation for some of these.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board support the concept, with the project to return to the Board for the review of design development and revisions to address adequately the above recommendations.