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

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Landmark/District:	<b>Washington Heights Historic District/Marie Reed</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	<b>2201 18<sup>th</sup> Street, NW</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	<b>September 24, 2020</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
H.P.A. Numbers:	<b>20-477</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Alteration
		<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition

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The District of Columbia Department of General Services (DGS), Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), and District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), along with Studio Laan Architects are seeking conceptual design review for proposed new signage at the Marie Reed Community Learning Center/Elementary School and the adjacent Aquatics and Recreation Center. DCPS is also requesting a waiver from Chapter 25, Section 2505.3 of HPRB’s Sign Standards which characterizes electronic signs as “...typically not appropriate for historic buildings and districts” because the school signage proposes to incorporate an electronic component for school messaging.

**Washington Heights Historic District**

The Washington Heights Historic District is primarily significant for its collection of nineteenth and early-twentieth century rowhouses and apartment and commercial buildings. The district’s period of significance begins in 1891 and extends through 1950. Marie Reed School and Recreation Center are partially located within the boundaries of the Washington Heights Historic District but neither contribute to the historic district’s significance because both facilities were constructed in 1977.

**Proposal**

There is currently no set standard for signage at DCPS or DPR facilities. This lack of consistency makes it difficult to distinguish District facilities from private ones and has resulted in a variety of sign types, many of which would be out of character with historic buildings and historic districts. Although electronic signage is also generally considered out of character with historic contexts, the need to disseminate and regularly update information via schools’ primary signs can be problematic when having to do so manually. To address these concerns, DGS and DCPS worked with HPO and staff from the Commission of Fine Arts to develop a prototype sign that could establish a consistent and easily recognizable “brand” for DC facilities; be customized to relate directly to the character of the school regardless of age or architectural style; and incorporate a strictly regulated electronic component to facilitate updates to school messages in a manner that is respectful of historic contexts. DPR developed a similar prototype for its facilities but is not proposing an electronic component for its signage.

The DCPS prototype sign consists of a simple base constructed of materials that match those of the relevant school. A rectangular, anodized aluminum (or similar material) sign featuring the school's name and address, the DCPS logo, and a digital messaging screen is attached to the base. The electronic component will adhere to a comprehensive set of rules known as the DCPS Digital Exterior Signage Guidelines (Guidelines) which ensure LED lettering will consist of a single color (i.e. white or amber) and be displayed on a black background. The Guidelines also restrict the size of the digital screen to 2' x 3' and limit the lines of text to four. Messages must be completely static, consist of standard keyboard characters only, and must not change more than twice within a 24-hour period. The brightness level of the text will be capped at 350 nits and dimmed to 10% of the daytime brightness after sunset. Finally, the entire LED messaging component must be turned off between 10:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m.

The Marie Reed sign proposes a base constructed of a buff brick that matches the school walls and a clear anodized aluminum sign that matches the school's window mullions. Etched lettering of charcoal gray will be used for the school name and address. Existing light standards in the school plaza will provide light for the sign. No supplemental light fixtures of any sort are proposed.

The DPR prototype is similar in design and detailing to the DCPS prototype, but the DPR version features slightly different proportions and does not include a digital component. Otherwise, the Marie Reed Aquatics and Recreation Center sign will match the school sign in terms of materials, color and lighting.

## **Evaluation**

HPO finds both Marie Reed signs appropriate because they relate well to the architectural character of their respective facilities and because their simple and straightforward design is compatible with the surrounding historic context. The same is true for the electronic component of the school sign because it too is simply designed and involves none of the characteristics of typical digital signs that make them objectionable and incompatible with a historic setting (e.g. intense colors, flashing messages, moving graphics, overly bright images, etc.). Through application of the Guidelines, the electronic element also provides a compatible and effective means for DCPS to efficiently disseminate information directly on the school site.

Although DCPS is not proposing electronic signage at any location other than Marie Reed at this time, the proposed site on the periphery of the Washington Heights Historic District will provide an opportunity to evaluate how well the digital component functions and how it will be perceived within a historic context over time. With a goal of applying the prototype throughout the school system in mind, DCPS is requesting comments from the Board regarding the potential suitability of the prototype sign and its electronic component for application throughout the District of Columbia, with the exception of National Historic Landmark Historic Districts.

## **Recommendation**

*HPO recommends that the Board:*

1. *Comment favorably on the prototype signage for DCPS and DPR facilities and the DCPS Digital Exterior Signage Guidelines and/or offer suggestions for any ways they could be improved;*

2. *Find the DCPS Marie Reed sign and its digital component compatible with Washington Heights Historic District and determine that it warrants a waiver from Chapter 25, Section 2505.3 of HPRB's Sign Standards conditioned upon strict adherence to the DCPS Digital Exterior Signage Guidelines;*
3. *Find the proposed DPR Marie Reed sign compatible with the Washington Heights Historic District; and*
4. *Offer comments regarding the potential applicability of the prototype DCPS and DPR signage, including the digital component of the school sign, in other historic districts and adjacent to historic landmarks throughout the District of Columbia, except for National Historic Landmark Historic Districts.*

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