

MINUTES

HARRISBURG ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW BOARD REGULAR MEETING

April 1, 2024

**THE MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. CITY GOVERNMENT CENTER
CITY COUNCIL CHAMBERS**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Trina Gribble, Chair
Bruce Henry, Deputy Codes Administrator/Vice Chair
Camille Bennett
Kent Hurst

MEMBERS ABSENT: April Rucker

STAFF PRESENT: Geoffrey Knight, Planning Director
Don Styer, Assistant City Solicitor

OTHERS PRESENT: See Sign-In Sheet

CALL TO ORDER: 6:10 PM

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Mrs. Gribble asked whether anyone had revisions to the minutes from the March HARB meeting. Mr. Hurst noted that he had submitted minor edits to the meeting minutes to the Board and Planning Bureau staff via email the previous week. She asked whether there were any other changes from other Board members; there were none. Mr. Hurst moved, and Ms. Bennett seconded the motion, to Approve the minutes from the March 4, 2024 meetings with the corrections noted by Mr. Hurst in his email to Planning Bureau staff. The motion was adopted by a unanimous vote (4-0).

OLD BUSINESS: N/A

NEW BUSINESS:

- 1. 410 North 3rd Street, filed by Trina Gribble with McKissick Associates, for in-kind replacement of the existing masonry façade on the front elevation, with the exception that the curved brick window surrounds will be replaced with precast brick surrounds designed to imitate the existing window surrounds, and in-kind replacement of the existing casement windows on the front, side, and rear elevations.**

The case was represented by Vern McKissick with McKissick Associates Architects (the project architect), 317 North Front Street, Harrisburg, PA 17101 (aka “the Applicant”). Mrs. Gribble noted that her firm was the project architect and Applicant and stated that she was recusing herself from the discussion and vote. As the Vice Chair, Mr. Henry took on the responsibilities as Acting Chair for this case.

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Mr. Knight gave a synopsis of the case report recommending the request be Approved.

Mrs. Henry asked the Applicant whether he had anything to add to the case report or questions regarding the conditions in it. The Applicant noted that the revised project design incorporated comments from the previous review of the case [in September 2023]. He stated that the new proposal addressed issues regarding water intrusion, which was the primary cause of the brick façade deterioration and failure. The Applicant stated that the revised design would meet the goal of retaining the current appearance of the building's architectural elements while addressing the outstanding structural concerns.

Mr. Hurst noted that the proposed window surrounds would be cast stone asked whether they would be installed as four separate components or a single surround. The Applicant stated that the surrounds would be comprised of four separate pieces. Mr. Hurst asked whether they would be imprinted with a brick pattern; the Applicant stated that they would be scored and colored to replicate the existing brick appearance.

Mr. Hurst asked whether the existing sills around all of the casement windows would be replaced as part of the removal and cleaning process; the Applicant confirmed that they would.

Mr. Henry asked Ms. Bennett whether she had additional comments or questions about the project; she stated that she did not.

Mr. Henry noted that he had reviewed the project documentation and had no questions.

Mr. Hurst moved, and Ms. Bennett seconded the motion, to Approve. The motion was adopted by a unanimous vote (3-0).

- 2. 340 Verbeke Street, filed by Josh Kesler with the Millworks, to make alterations to the northern elevation of the property including replacement of two existing garage doors with large, divided lite window openings; removal of double doors, transom, window, and a portion of the brick façade and replacement with a large, divided lite window opening featuring an access door, and construction of a second-floor pedestrian bridge connecting the building to the structure to the north (which is located out of the Municipal Historic District and will also feature accompanying façade changes).**

The case was represented by Josh Kesler with Historic Holdings LLC (the property owner), 121 South Street, Harrisburg, PA 17101; and Richard Gribble & Miranda O'Dell with By Design Consultants (the project architect), 1950 Market Street, Camp Hill, PA 17110 (aka "the Applicants"). Mrs. Gribble noted that her husband's firm was the project architect and Applicant and stated that she was recusing herself from the discussion and vote. As the Vice Chair, Mr. Henry took on the responsibilities as Acting Chair for this case.

Mr. Knight gave a synopsis of the case report recommending the request be Approved with the following conditions:

1. The Applicant will need to submit an Easement application and receive approval from the City for the proposed pedestrian bridge over the Sayford Street public right-of-way.

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Mrs. Henry asked the Applicant whether he had anything to add to the case report or questions regarding the conditions in it. The Applicants stated that the Planning Bureau had done a good job of summarizing the project.

Mr. Henry asked whether any of the other Board members had comments or questions about the project.

Ms. Bennett stated that she had no questions or comments.

Mr. Hurst noted that while the property to the north was not subject to the historic district regulations, he felt it was important that the project approached the buildings with similar care and respect for their integrity and appearance since they were being physically and functionally reconnected. He noted that the Applicants' work in the past demonstrated an understanding and appreciation for the city's historic districts and encouraged them to extend that same approach to the building to the north. The Applicants confirmed that they intended on approaching the northern building with the same attention to detail as they did for the Millworks building.

Mr. Henry asked whether there were any comments or questions from the public; there were none.

Ms. Bennett moved, and Mr. Hurst seconded the motion, to Approve with Staff Conditions. The motion was adopted by a unanimous vote (3-0).

3. 1511 & 1515 North Front Street, filed by Dan Bierzonski with E.I. Associates, to demolish the existing structure on-site and building an accessory surface parking lot for the property to the north.

The case was represented by Bruce Christman with E.I. Associates (the property owner), 2001 North Front Street, Harrisburg, PA 17102; Sean Fitzsimmons with Landmark Commercial Realty (the property realtor), 425 North 21st Street, Camp Hill, PA 17011; and William Pompeii with K&W Engineers (the project engineer), 2201 North Front Street, Harrisburg, PA 17110 (aka "the Applicants").

Mr. Knight gave a synopsis of the case report recommending the request be Denied.

Mrs. Gribble asked the Applicants whether they had anything to add to the case report. The Applicants stated that they did not agree with the Planning Bureau's recommendation and noted that the building had been vacant for several years. They stated that it was not economically feasible to secure a tenant for the property, and that the owner of the building felt that demolishing one for parking was a better solution than demolishing both. They stated that a lack of parking was expressed by potential tenants and that there was no enough parking on-site per the Zoning Code. The Applicants stated that the owner had a potential community-based health care provider who was interested in the space, but wanted additional parking. The Applicants also stated that the project would "green" and "enhance" the space and "soften" the appearance while retaining what was already there.

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The Applicants also stated that the second floor of the building on the subject property was too low to lease the space, and that they've had challenges leasing the space because of that. The realtor stated that the property had been vacant since the former business on-site ("Youth Advocate") left two years ago, which occupied both buildings. They stated they had received interest in 1515 North Front Street but not the subject property, which they stated was due to the configuration of the building, and claimed it would cost more to renovate the space than the building was worth. The Applicants reiterated that the potential tenants had stated that extra parking was imperative to their operations. They stated that the potential tenant had between twelve to fifteen employees, but also noted that most of their clients rode the bus to their facilities. They reiterated their justification that the Applicant needed the parking to occupy the building at 1515 North Front Street.

The project engineer stated that the parking would be reconfigured and reiterated that some landscape screening would be provided on-site to match other parking lots along Front Street and "soften" the parking lot. The Applicants stated that a bike rack would also be provided because some of the clients of the proposed business would be bicycling to the facility.

Mrs. Gribble asked the Applicants to confirm whether there would be any net gain in off-street parking, noting that they had indicated the intention was to provide additional parking, but the Planning Bureau's case report stated that there would be no net increase in spaces, and reviewed the changes in parking configuration indicated in the submitted site plans. The Applicants stated that the revised parking lot would have nineteen spaces; they noted that the property to the east, where three spaces that would be lost as part of the project was also owned by the Applicant and that those spaces were not included in their calculations.

Mr. Knight noted that the Applicants' testimony did not justify an increased need for parking, particularly given that they stated the facility's clientele would ride buses or bikes, and stated that if any additional parking was, in fact, required, the Applicant could provide that at the property to the east since they owned it. He stated that the Applicants' proposal was a solution in search of a problem.

Mr. Knight noted that without a strong justification, demolition should never be approved since the loss of an historic building was permanent; even if the Applicants' designed a new building at some point in the future, it would not have the same contributory effect as the existing structure. He further elaborated that doing so for the purposes of expanding a parking lot which provided no net increase in parking was precluded by the City's historic district regulations specifically and by good urban planning principles more generally.

Mrs. Gribble stated that she had concerns about the proposal, noting that the Board's purview was the preservation of historic districts, the buildings within them, and the fabric and context of the streetscape. She stated that while the building may have less value to the period of significance of the district, there was no justification for the loss of historic structures for off-street parking. She noted the subject property was constructed as a pair with the building to the north, which the Applicant intended on retaining and stated that the integrity of the streetscape was a higher priority than demolishing buildings for the sake of parking. Mrs. Gribble noted that while there were other factors involved in the project, the Board's mandate was the preservation of the built environment.

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She concurred with the fourth reason in the Planning Bureau's case report regarding the adverse impacts on the streetscape.

Mrs. Gribble stated that while she appreciated the project would soften the appearance of the parking lot from Front Street, it did not justify the loss of a building. She stated that if demolition was absolutely necessary, she would prefer to see the construction of a new building as opposed to the expansion of a parking lot.

Mrs. Gribble asked whether any of the other Board members had comments or questions about the project.

Ms. Bennett stated she agreed with Mrs. Gribble that replacement of the structure with a new building would be preferable to demolition for the purposes of parking.

Mr. Henry stated that he had no comments.

Mr. Hurst concurred with the Mrs. Gribble and the Planning Bureau that losing building massing had adverse planning impacts beyond historic preservation, noting that removing building massing which enclosed streets contributed to higher speeds and more dangerous driving. He stated that removing buildings thus had to have strong justifications, and the Applicants' proposal for additional parking did not meet that standard. Mr. Hurst stated that he would be supportive of the proposal if the intention was to redesign or reuse the existing structure or to construct a new, appropriately-designed building on-site. He stated that he felt the project required a more creative approach from the Applicants.

Mr. Hurst referenced the Applicants' testimony that the second floor of the subject property was unsuitable for occupancy, but noted that there might be alternative proposals such as rehabilitating the structure as a single-story building with vaulted ceilings. He expressed his belief that the building could be repurposed for uses other than office space. The Applicants stated that while they understood the Board's concerns, it was economically unfeasible to bring the building back into reusable condition. They also stated that while most of the clients would arrive via bus or bike, some of them may drive as well, and thus the parking was necessary. They inferred that the only way to retain the building at 1515 North Front Street was to demolish its pair to the south, and stated that there was an "extreme need" for home health care businesses.

Mr. Hurst asked the Applicants how they would proceed if the Board denied their proposal. The realtor stated that they would mothball the building for a long time and that they would lose the prospective tenant because they could not operate under the current conditions. The realtor again stated that it was financially infeasible to rehabilitate the building, and claimed that it made no sense to make any sort of investment in the building. The realtor reiterated that if the demolition was not approved, he felt the buildings would sit vacant for a long time.

Mr. Hurst noted that there would only be a marginal increase in off-street parking at best, and asked if the Applicants had considered other reuse of the subject property such as a park that would be more suitable to the Front Street aesthetic. He reiterated his position that parking was not an appropriate reuse for the property, and that good urban planning prioritized the development of

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property for housing or businesses over off-street parking to encourage multimodal communities. Mr. Hurst stated that the demolition of buildings, particularly those in historic districts, for off-street parking represented the wrong approach to development.

Mrs. Gribble stated that she was concerned about the precedent that the Board would set if they were to grant approval, noting that a two-year vacancy during which there was no tenant did not establish a compelling argument for demolition. She noted that losing structures based on a two-year vacancy would be detrimental to the built environment elsewhere in the historic districts which were also temporarily vacant.

Mr. Hurst stated that it might be the case that a parking lot could function as a temporary solution, noting that such an approach was sometimes employed in other communities, such as when a developer was attempting to consolidate lots over time towards the construction of a new building, although he noted that end goal of the current project was surface parking.

Mr. Knight noted that during the last demolition proposal approved by the Board for 512 & 514 North 2nd Street, in which a new building was intended to replace the demolished structures, the Bureau had specifically included a condition that off-street parking not be permitted on a temporary basis, because once properties were developed as surface parking, they very rarely were redeveloped with new projects. He noted that the block on which the subject property was located was a primary example of that, as much of the historic fabric had been demolished for surface parking which was never redeveloped. Mr. Knight noted that the subject properties were high-value land along the riverfront which should be developed so as to capture that value.

Mr. Knight referenced the Applicants' statements that the unsuitability of the existing structure left them no choice but to demolish the building, and noted that the property directly to the south at 1501 North Front Street provided an example of how to modernize a building for current occupancy and tenant requirements, a project which the Board reviewed over several months. He noted that that building had less architectural value than the subject property, but that the Board had deliberation for a while in their consideration of how to encourage compatible redevelopment of the site. Mr. Knight suggested the Board consider that as a test case for how outdated structures can be modified for current needs in an historically-appropriate manner.

Finally, Mr. Knight reiterated that the project would result in a no net increase of parking among the Applicants' properties, and that if prospective tenants needed additional parking beyond what existed on-site, the Applicant could provide three spaces on their adjacent property in lieu of removing them for the driveway connection. He stated the Applicants' demolition proposal did not provide viable justifications and was thus unwarranted.

Mrs. Gribble asked whether the project required review and approval from the Planning Commission. Mr. Knight stated that it would likely not require zoning relief approval; he noted that accessory parking was not permitted as the primary use of a property, but that because the Applicants were intending on consolidating the lots, the parking would be accessory to the principal use of the proposed business at 1515 North Front Street.

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The Applicants stated that they were adding parking to the site as the property currently had nineteen spaces and would have 22 spaces after the demolition and expansion of the lot. They stated that they could add more spaces instead of providing plant screening. The Applicants reiterated that if they were not permitted to demolish the structure and expand the parking lots, the Applicant planned on leaving the structures unoccupied and abandoned “for an extremely long time.”

Mr. Hurst asked whether the Applicants had performed any studies regarding alternative uses of the subject properties beyond an office building and surface parking. The realtor stated that he could not speak for the property owner but that he had tried to market the property extensively for office use. The Applicants stated that the owners had examined the feasibility of different alternatives but that they did not have any documentation about those studies. They reiterated that the owner wanted to get someone into the building at 1515 North Front Street and that they felt the proposed “home health care” business would give back to the community; the claimed the prospective tenant needed the parking to finalize the contract with the property owner.

The Applicants stated that they were trying to make the properties viable in some way, and that if demolishing one of the structures enabled the other property to be actively occupied, then they felt it justified the proposal. The realtor stated that a few months prior, the property owner’s intention was to let the buildings sit vacant, and they only reconsidered that position because they found a health clinic willing to occupy the space. They claimed that both buildings required “an extreme amount of work” to be viable for tenants. The Applicants stated that they were hesitant to knock both buildings down and construct a new building on-site.

Mr. Hurst stated that their arguments had more merits outside of the consideration of historic preservation, but that the Board’s purview was related to the preservation of the built environment.

Ms. Bennett moved, and Mr. Hurst seconded the motion, to Deny. The motion was adopted by a unanimous vote (4-0).

OTHER BUSINESS:

1. Broad Street Market Letter

Mrs. Gribble note that the Board had discussed the possibility of drafting and approving a letter to City Council regarding the Broad Street Market rehabilitation and how the Board could support efforts towards its reconstruction. She noted that she had developed the letter over the weekend and handed out hard copies to the Board members for their review.

Ms. Bennett asked whether the Board was anticipating a presentation on the rehabilitation proposal sometime soon; Mrs. Gribble noted that the letter was intended to express the Board’s encouragement for expeditiously stabilizing and securing the building, noting that the building had been left open since the fire which had exacerbated deterioration from the elements. She noted that the letter sought to have City Council move the forward. Mr. Hurst stated that he felt the inaction amounted to demolition by neglect. Mrs. Gribble noted that the winter had fortunately been mild, but that she felt the existing brick was still structurally sound but that its stability was in danger of deteriorating if the building was left exposed to the elements for longer. She stated that she did not

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want the building to be demolished before a comprehensive analysis of the building could be performed to determine what could be salvaged and reused.

Mrs. Styer confirmed that the Board could send recommendations and letters to City Council, and noted that the Board would need to approve a motion with a majority of three affirmative votes.

Ms. Bennett noted that the City needed to coordinate with the insurance company regardless of how they moved forward on the restoration project; Mrs. Gribble concurred and noted that the letter did not address exactly how the project was to proceed, but was intended to encourage stabilization of the building and offer the Board's assistance given its focus on historic preservation issues. She also noted that an RFP soliciting proposals from construction management firms had been issued by the City and stated that she felt it was important that the chosen company engaged with architects, engineers, and contractors who were experienced in historic preservation.

Mr. Hurst stated that the intention was not to micromanage City Council's deliberations, but to inform them that HARB was aware of the issues and paying attention to the status of the rehabilitation, impress upon them how important the restoration is to not only the vendors but the entire city, and remind them of how important and serious an issue the reconstruction was and how deserving it was of their attention. He stated that if the structure collapse, the City would look foolish and negligent.

Mr. Henry noted that as the Deputy Codes Administrator, he had been somewhat involved in the issue since the fire, and confirmed that there were both insurance considerations and issues regarding contracting rules and regulations which applied to third-class cities within the state. He confirmed that the building should be secured to ensure its long-term structural stability, and stated that it was his understanding that it was the intention of the City to rebuild in an historically appropriate manner. Mr. Henry agreed that the issue required some urgency. Mr. Hurst stated that he felt the letter conveyed that message in a fairly minimalist manner. Mr. Henry stated that he had been informing the relevant parties that they should use architects and engineers with experience in historic preservation.

Mr. Knight stated that there were several important points to be made in the letter: that the process should not be rushed to make up for whatever delays have occurred to this point; that various alternatives should be thoroughly considered and discussed before a final decision is made; and that the project does not have to be a brick-by-brick rebuild of the former structure but should utilize historically-appropriate design and materials. He noted that there was a way to reconstruct the building with modern materials in an historically-compatible way. Mr. Hurst stated that the primary purpose was to express the Board's sentiments on the issue and not be prescriptive.

Mr. Styer outlined the Board's options for the letter, noting that they could choose to vote on the letter as-is; decide to redo the draft and discuss individual components within it; or table the issue to the following month's meeting.

Mrs. Gribble suggested they read through the letter to see whether all of the Board members agreed with the sentiments expressed within it. She suggested that the Board consider having HHA and PHMC support the letter as co-signees.

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Mrs. Gribble read through the draft of the letter; at the end, she asked the other Board members whether they felt they should all sign it or just have her sign it as the Board Chair. Mr. Styer stated that it might be more impactful if there were more signatories and stated that as long as it passed a vote, all of the members were able to sign it. Mrs. Gribble reviewed the letter again and noted a few places where edits would help clarify the language.

Mrs. Gribble asked the other Board members if they would be comfortable cosigning the letter. Mr. Henry asked the Law Bureau staff if he should abstain considering he was the Deputy Codes Administrator. Mr. Styer stated that he was functioning as a Board member and not a City employee and that he would be signing in that capacity. Mr. Knight noted that Mr. Henry had previously indicated that he had advocated in his professional capacity for the approach the Board encouraged through their letter, and thus his signing the letter would not contradict any previous feelings on the issue.

Mrs. Gribble reiterated that the letter would not preclude or oppose an approach that sought to introduce modern systems, building code requirements, or energy efficiency measures into a rebuilt structure, and that there were ways to do so in accordance with federal standards and best practices. Mr. Styer stated that he felt the letter's tone was one of encouragement.

Mr. Hurst moved for the Board to adopt the draft letter as a statement of its sentiments, with the edits noted by Mrs. Gribble during the discussion; Ms. Bennett seconded the motion. The motion was adopted by a unanimous vote (4-0).

Mrs. Gribble asked whether all of the Board members should sign the letter. Mr. Hurst suggested that she sign the letter as the Board Chair on behalf of the Board members. Mr. Styer noted that one of the members [Ms. Rucker] was not presented and recommended that the Board solicit her opinion on the draft letter before signing it on behalf of all members. Mr. Knight noted that there was an upcoming City Council Legislative Session at which the letter could be read into record.

Mr. Styer noted that the manner in which the letter was presented to City Council was up to the Board; Mrs. Gribble asked the Board how they felt that should be handled. Mr. Styer suggested that the Board could engage the chair of the committee which would receive the letter and see how they would prefer it be handled. Mr. Hurst asked which committee received HARB documentation and which councilmember was its chair. Mr. Knight confirmed that Councilwoman Davis was in charge of the Building & Housing Committee. Mrs. Gribble asked whether the Board had to vote on that decision; Mr. Styer recommended they take a vote.

Mrs. Gribble moved for the Board to contact Councilwoman Davis to confirm how she would like the letter presented to City Council at the next available meeting; Mr. Henry seconded the motion. The motion was adopted by a unanimous vote (4-0).

ADJOURNMENT: 7:14 PM

Ms. Bennett moved, and Mr. Hurst seconded the motion, to adjourn. The motion was adopted by a unanimous vote (4-0).