



## CITY OF RICHMOND

### Department of Planning & Development Review *Staff Report*

**Ord. No. 2026-074:** To authorize the special use of the property known as 101 Cowardin Avenue for the purpose of a multifamily dwelling containing up to 120 dwelling units, upon certain terms and conditions, and to repeal Ord. No. 85-316-86-1, adopted Jan. 13, 1986, and all amendatory ordinances thereto.

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**To:** City Planning Commission  
**From:** Land Use Administration  
**Date:** April 21, 2026

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#### **PETITIONER**

Erik Smith

#### **LOCATION**

101 Cowardin Avenue

#### **PURPOSE**

The applicant is requesting a Special Use Permit to authorize the construction of a multifamily residential building in the R-63 Multifamily Urban Residential District. The proposed development does not comply with several applicable standards in the City of Richmond Code (2020), as amended, including requirements permitted accessory uses, minimum lot area and width, usable open space, vehicle parking and circulation areas, building height, and building façade fenestration. A special use permit is required to authorize this request.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Staff finds that the proposed use, a new 5-story multifamily building with off-street parking, to be well aligned with the goals for the Neighborhood Mixed-Use land use category within the master plan. Characteristics found within the proposal that align with Neighborhood Mixed-Use include expansion of a unified street wall, appropriate setbacks, maintaining the existing street grid, building orientation, and rear parking.

Staff also finds that the request is supported by Objectives 15.1a and 15.1f, which call for an increase in "...the number of Richmonders living in a development pattern that encourages density and reduces dependency on single-occupancy vehicles" and increases the "...use of mass and active transportation options," respectively. The proposed is directly located on a designated GRTC "high frequency" route and one block from the recently chosen route for an additional bus rapid transit (Pulse) system expansion. (p. 185)

Staff further finds that the proposal increases the market for future and current walkable destinations. The City's Walk Score Map scores this area as between 70 to 89, "Very walkable". This proposal's use, location, public right-of-way improvements, and proximity to the mix of uses along Cowardin Avenue and Hull Street, support this score. (p. 139)

Staff finds that the proposed use is located on Cowardin Avenue, a designated Major Mixed-Use Street. Design elements of Major Mixed-Use Streets found within the proposed plan include sidewalk improvements, building orientation, rear parking, and additional street trees.

Staff finds that, due to all findings summarized above, the proposed ordinance conditions substantially satisfy the safeguards established in the City Charter concerning the granting of Special Use Permits.

Therefore, staff recommends approval of the requests for Special Use Permit and repeal of Ord. No. 85-316-86-1

## **FINDINGS OF FACT**

### **Site Description**

The property is located in the Manchester neighborhood on Cowardin Avenue and Bainbridge Street. The property is currently a 67,518 sq. ft. (1.5 acre) parcel of land, improved with a commercial building constructed, according to City records, in 2005.

### **Proposed Use**

The proposed use is a 5-story, multifamily residential building. The proposed density of the project is 120 units upon 1.5 acres or approximately 80 units per acre.

### **Master Plan**

The City's master plan designates a future land use for the subject property as Neighborhood Mixed-Use, which is defined as "Existing or new highly walkable urban neighborhoods that are predominantly residential with a small, but critical, percentage of parcels providing retail, office, personal service, and institutional uses."

**Development Style:** These areas feature a variety of building types that are close to one another and create a unified street wall. The building size, density, and zoning districts for these areas vary depending on historical densities and neighborhood characteristics. Future development should generally complement existing context. Setbacks, plazas, and parks create a sense of place and community gathering areas. New developments on larger parcels continue or introduce a gridded street pattern to increase connectivity within the neighborhood and to adjacent neighborhoods. In historic neighborhoods, small-scale commercial uses exist today or should be allowed to reestablish. In new neighborhoods, small commercial buildings should be introduced.

**Ground Floor:** Regardless of use, buildings should engage the street with features such as street-oriented façades with windows and door openings along street frontages. Appropriate setbacks, open space, front porches, elevated ground floors, and other features that provide a sense of privacy should be provided for residential uses.

**Mobility:** Pedestrian, bicycle, and transit access are prioritized and accommodated. Bike parking is provided. New driveways are prohibited on Priority and Principal Street frontages. Vehicular access to parcels should use alleys wherever possible. Parking areas should be located to the rear of street-facing buildings.

**Intensity:** Building heights are generally two to four stories. Buildings taller than four stories may be found along major streets. Parcels are generally between 1,500 and 5,000 sq. ft.

**Primary Uses:** Single-family houses, accessory dwelling units, duplexes, small multi-family buildings (typically 3-10 units), and open space.

**Secondary Uses:** Large multi-family buildings (10+units), retail/office/personal service, institutional, cultural, and government.

The property is also fronting a designated Great Street and Major Mixed-Use Street. Major Mixed-Use Streets are intended to:

- Carry high volumes of vehicles, pedestrians, and bicycles, through commercial and mixed-use areas
- Prioritize use and density-scaled sidewalks and crosswalks
- Require form elements, such as buildings to the street with parking in the rear, as well as building windows and entrances on the street
- Incorporate streetscape features, such as trees, benches, and trash receptacles
- Ideal locations for transit routes and transit stops
- Prioritize the curbside for walking, bicycling, transit, and short-term parking access and loading for local shops and restaurants (p. 72)

### **Zoning and Ordinance Conditions**

The current zoning for this parcel is R-63 Multifamily Urban Residential. The proposed use does not conform to the following sections of the Zoning Ordinance:

#### Sec. 30-419.4 Permitted Accessory Uses and Structures

*The plan calls for a screened, accessory structure for utility use along Bainbridge Street, which is not a listed accessory use.*

#### Sec. 30-419.5 Lot Area and Width

Multifamily dwellings shall be located on lots of not less than 4,000 square feet in total area and not less than 1,000 square feet in area for each dwelling unit.

*The plan calls for 120 units of varying square feet.*

#### Sec. 30-419.7 Usable Open Space

Usable open space of not less than 30 percent of the area of the lot shall be provided for multifamily dwellings

*The plan calls for relief from the 30 percent open space requirement.*

#### Sec. 30-419.9(b) Driveways from Streets

No driveway intersecting a street which constitutes the principal street frontage of a lot shall be permitted when other street frontage or alley access is available to serve such lot.

*The plan calls for an entrance from Bainbridge Street.*

#### Sec. 30-419.10(3) Additional Height on Corner Lots

Additional height not to exceed a total height of four stories shall be permitted on a corner lot, provided that along the principal street frontage of the corner lot...

*The plan calls for five stories.*

#### Sec. 30-419.11 Building Façade Fenestration

*The plan calls for relief from façade and fenestration requirements within the R-63 and to instead use those required within the B-5 Central Business District.*

If approved, the special use permit would impose conditions on the property, including:

- The Special Use of the Property shall be as a multifamily dwelling containing up to 120 dwelling units, substantially as shown on the Plans.
- The height of the Special Use shall not exceed five stories.
- All site improvements, including landscaping, shall be substantially as shown on the Plans.
- All mechanical equipment serving the Property shall be located or screened so as not to be visible from any adjoining public right-of-way.
- Prior to the issuance of any building permit for the Special Use, the Owner shall convey to the City, as either a public access easement or dedication of right-of-way, that portion of the Property shown and labeled on the Plans as “The Applicant Will Provide a Public Easement or Dedication to Provide 5’ (Five) Minimum Allocation for Future Public Sidewalk Expansion,” which conveyance shall be by deed of special or general warranty that is approved as to form by the City Attorney and acceptable to the Director of the Department of Public Works as to terms. The Chief Administrative Officer or the designee thereof is hereby authorized to execute such deed for the acceptance of such easement or dedication.
- Facilities for the collection of refuse shall be provided in accordance with the requirements of the Director of Public Works. Such facilities shall be located or screened so as not to be visible from adjacent properties and public streets.
- The Owner shall make improvements within the right-of-way substantially as shown on the Plans, including without limitation, the installation of new sidewalk along Cowardin Avenue and the installation of street trees in the vacant existing trees wells along Cowardin Avenue and Bainbridge Street, which improvements may be completed in one or more phases as approved by the Director of Public Works.

### **Surrounding Area**

The area is a mix of commercial and residential uses with a range of residential densities and types to the east along Bainbridge Street and more commercial uses along Cowardin Avenue. The property is one block from the Hull Street corridor.

### **Neighborhood Participation**

Staff notified local residents and the Manchester Alliance of the proposed Special Use Permit. To this date, one letter of opposition has been received.

**Staff Contact:** Jonathan Brown, Principal Planner, Land Use Administration, 804-646-5734