



To: Planning Commission
From: Commission of Architectural Review
Date: September 21, 2015
RE: **Final Location, Character and Extent Review of renovations to Abner Clay Park, 216 W. Clay Street**

I. APPLICANT

Heywood Harrison, Dept. of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities

II. LOCATION

Abner Clay Park, 216 W. Clay Street

Property Owner(s):

City of Richmond

III. PURPOSE

The application is for final location, character and extent review of renovations to Abner Clay Park.

IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION

The Richmond Old and Historic Districts Handbook and Design Review Guidelines encourages landscape and streetscape that support well-designed public spaces. The Commission of Architectural Review (CAR) finds that the mostly unfinished character of Abner Clay Park and the Career Development Center areas makes it a gap in the urban fabric of the Jackson Ward neighborhood. The CAR finds that the overall structure of the proposed landscape improvements will enhance the adjacent large landmark buildings: Ebenezer Baptist Church, the Leigh Street Armory, and the old Armstrong High School Building. The CAR further finds that the design will create distinct entrances to and routes through the park. Lastly, that CAR finds that it will create a well-designed public amenity in the Jackson Ward neighborhood that will serve to soften the extensive surface parking around the old Armstrong building.

The CAR has determined that the application is consistent with the Standards for Site Improvements in Section 114-930.7(e) of the City Code, as well as with the Richmond Old and Historic Districts Handbook and Design Review Guidelines, specifically pages 66-67, adopted by the Commission for review of Certificates of Appropriateness under the same section of the code. **Therefore, the Commission of Architectural Review recommends that the Planning Commission grant final approval, with the following condition:**

- That there is strict adherence to the specified sizes for the trees included in the planting plan.

Staff Contact:

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V. FINDINGS OF FACT

a. Site Description and Surrounding Context

Abner Clay Park is bound by W. Clay Street to the south, Brook Road to the west, W. Leigh Street to the north, and the Adult Career Development Center building and residential properties to the east. The 4.36 acre park contains tennis courts, a playground, open space, a pavilion and a parking lot. Richmond's urban renewal program of the 1950-1970 era created this large open space. Once warehouses lined Brook Road and residential units were situated on Adams, Clay, and Leigh Streets. After clearing the original buildings, the City constructed Abner Clay Park, then a small neighborhood park at Brook Road and Clay Street. The park was named after the Jackson Ward neighborhood activist, Abner Clay. Richmond public schools converted most of the cleared area into playing fields and parking for Graves Middle School. After the closing of the Middle School, the playing fields became a part of the park, while the parking lots flanking the school and green space along Adams Street remained school board property.

The park property is zoned R-6 (Single family attached residential) and is located in the Jackson Ward Old & Historic District. The surrounding properties are primarily single-family attached and detached residences in a dense development pattern, also located in the R-6 zone, though there is a small grouping of neighborhood-serving businesses at the corner of Brook Road and W. Clay Street.

b. Scope of Review

The project is subject to location, character, and extent review as improvements to a park in accordance with Section 17.07 of the Richmond City Charter.

c. CAR Review History

The CAR reviewed conceptual plans for the park renovation in August 2013.

d. Project Description

The proposed project is a substantial reworking of the grounds of Abner Clay Park and the Adult Career Development Center (originally the Armstrong High School Building and more recently the home of Benjamin Graves Middle School). At present Abner Clay Park has a relatively small number of trees: situated around its perimeter, in a mixed bosque at the northwest corner of the park, and in the plaza area at the southern edge of the park. The park contains a plaza, playground, and gazebo at the southern corner. Most of the park consists of grassed open space at a lower grade than the western and southern sides. In addition to a large playing field, it contains two tennis courts, a basketball court, and a playground for small children.

Substantial improvements will take place at the northern and southern corners of the park and along the east side. These areas will be laid out as heavily landscaped spaces with plazas, a pavilion and pergola, a basketball court, and playground with splash pad. A series of new paths will enhance circulation in the new landscaped areas. The improvements also cover the school property around the Adult Career Development Center. The large parking lots on both sides of the center will be landscaped and a large open space on Adams Street converted into fenced park areas for large and small dogs.

e. Master Plan

The park property is located in the Broad Street and Jackson Ward study area, as defined by the Downtown Master Plan, which designates the property as a civic area. The Plan recommends improving Abner Clay Park for the residents of Jackson Ward, and notes that it “is one of Downtown Richmond’s few locations for active, organized recreation. The Plan states that the park “can be improved by adding additional shade trees within the park and along its perimeter” to “enclose the park, making it feel safer, more inviting, and provide relief from the summer heat” (page 4.10).

f. Commission of Architectural Design Review Guidelines

The Commission’s Design Review Guidelines are oriented to modest site improvements associated with building renovations. Nonetheless, there are several sections of the guidelines that are pertinent to the final review of this project. The City Old and Historic District code includes Section 930.7 (e) Standards for Site Improvements. Consistent with that section, the Commission has adopted additional guidelines for site improvements as a part of the Guidelines, the following statements being pertinent to the Abner Clay project:

When designing streetscape elements for locations within a City Old and Historic District, particular attention should be paid to the pedestrian scale and character of the District (page 66).

...it is particularly important that these elements support and reinforce, rather than detract from, the overall historic character of the district. (page 66)

Landscape design should enhance the streetscape and contribute a strong aesthetic along street frontages. Appropriate landscaping should buffer the visual severity of surface parking lots from view (page 66)

Landscape plans should select plant materials based on their:

a) suitability to the site and urban surroundings,

b) appropriateness to the local climate, soils and light conditions,

c) ability to provide a sense of scale and seasonal interest (page 66)

Parking lots should be broken up as much as possible with interior landscaped islands and should be well screened from the public right-of-way and adjacent properties. Appropriate screening may include landscaping, walls, fences or berms. If a vegetative screen is chosen, the type(s) and numbers or shrubs and trees used should ensure a high density screen between parking lot and street. (page 67)

Mature trees contribute to the character of Old and Historic Districts, provide visual interest, reduce the negative impacts of parking areas and ease the effects of temperature and wind conditions. Every effort should be made to preserve and maintain them. (page 67)

VII. ATTACHMENTS

- a. Vicinity Map**
- b. Application**
- c. Plans**