



CITY OF RICHMOND

PLANNING COMMISSION

June 4, 2013

To the Honorable Council of the  
City of Richmond, Virginia

At its meeting of June 3, 2013, the Planning Commission voted (7-0) to APPROVE WITH CONDITIONS the following:

**Final Location, Character and Extent Review:**  
**Temporary modular classrooms for the Patrick Henry School, 3411 Semmes Avenue**  
*Council District 5*

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**Summary & Recommendation:**

The Patrick Henry Charter School is located at 3411 Semmes Avenue, on the north side of the convergence of Forest Hill Avenue and Semmes Avenue. Portions of what are considered school grounds (the playground, gardens, and parking area to the rear of the building) are on the southern tip of the parcel comprising Forest Hill Park. Both the school and the park are located within the R-5 (Single-family Residential) zoning district.

The 46,410 square foot school building with two floors above ground and a partially elevated basement dates to 1921 and is located in the Woodland Heights National Register Historic District. The building originally served as a public elementary school until 2007 when it was closed after failing to comply with Federal disability laws.

This is a request to install three temporary modular classrooms on the Patrick Henry School site. The charter school opened in the current building in January 2012; prior to that they were located in the basement of the Woodland Heights Baptist Church while Phase 1 renovation of the old school building was underway. Renovation of the school is being phased as funding is available and as the student body increases in size. The school currently has 200 students; however, they have accepted 260 students for the next year and anticipate a maximum of 360 students by the start of the 2015-2016 school year. Phase 2 of the school renovation is slated to begin this summer. Per an operating agreement with Richmond Public Schools, the charter school cannot use any portion of the building that is not ADA compliant.

One of the classrooms, 24' in depth and 60' long, would be installed behind the school on a portion of the parking lot that overlooks a steep hill that descends into Forest Hill Park. This classroom would cover six parking spaces, but the school currently provides more parking spaces than is required by the Zoning Ordinance. The other two modular classrooms, each 34' in depth and 24' wide, would be mounted side by side and located to the west of the school building on a portion of the existing paved playground.

All modular classrooms are clad in hardi-panel, contain windows and a door, and are conditioned. When placed on-site, the lower portion of the modular classroom will be skirted in hardi-panel down to the grade to account for changes in topography and to prevent students from getting underneath. All of the modular units would be served by ADA compliant ramps and stairs. The applicant indicates that the stairs could be composed of either pressure-treated lumber or metal. The classrooms will not have restroom facilities, so when needed the students would have to

return to the main building. These units will only be used by 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, who will continue to use the main building for lunch, art & music classes, library, etc.

Per the applicant's report, the goal is to retain the modular units as classrooms until Phase 3 of the renovations of the main school building are complete in December of 2015.

The subject property is located within the Old South Planning District, as defined by the citywide Master Plan. The Plan recommends Public and Open Space uses for this property, a designation that includes publicly owned and operated parks, recreation areas and open spaces (page 135).

Due to the proposed location of the classrooms and the topography of the site, the modular units will be minimally visible from the street frontage and not at all visible from Forest Hill Park. The Urban Design Committee would like to see some small planters located at the front corners and visible side corners (i.e. all but those facing the park) of the classrooms to soften the edges. These planters should contain upright evergreen foliage to provide year-round interest.

The Urban Design Guidelines present very strong language against the use of modular classrooms at City schools, affirming a 1995 motion by the Planning Commission stating that "all future modular unit requests, including renewals of currently approved units, will not be considered unless they are submitted with a cost analysis which compares the cost of the modular unit(s) to the cost of constructing an addition or a new school in lieu of the modular unit(s)".

Despite this strong language, the Committee finds that the situation which led to the Planning Commission motion and the current situation at Patrick Henry School are not equivalent. In 1995, the Planning Commission was dealing with multiple requests from Richmond Public Schools for modular classrooms that were the result of population trends and redistricting leading to overcrowded schools. In this singular situation at Patrick Henry School, only a portion of the building is currently being used and renovations are required before the remainder of the building can house the expected increase in students. Furthermore, those renovations are required to be completed by December 15, 2015 per an agreement with the Richmond School Board.

While not supportive of the use of modular classrooms, the Committee finds this to be a unique situation which calls for flexibility in the application of the guidelines. In addition, the Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities, on whose property the classrooms will be installed, is supportive of the request. The Committee is comfortable with the approval of the request provided that the modular classrooms are removed by December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015 at the end of the Phase 3 renovations, and further provided that any extension in this deadline, if needed, be considered by the Planning Commission. At its meeting of June 3, 2013, the Planning Commission concurred with the Urban Design Committee recommendations and voted (7-0) to approve the proposal with the following conditions:

- That the Certificate of Occupancy for the modular classrooms contains an expiration date of December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015.
- That if the modular classrooms are needed beyond the December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015 expiration date, the applicant must obtain an extension from the Planning Commission.
- That the applicant installs small planters, located at the front corners and visible side corners (i.e. all but those facing the park) of the classrooms to soften the edges. These planters should contain upright evergreen foliage to provide year-round interest.
- That metal ramps be used to access the modular classrooms instead of pressure-treated lumber.

Very Truly Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lory Markham". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "L" and "M".

Lory Markham  
Secretary, City Planning Commission

Cc: Jeff Eastman, Secretary to the Urban Design Committee  
Larry Miller, Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities