

## **Applicant's Report:**

This request is for Special Use Permit for Virginia Union University to retain the illuminable "VUU" signage that has been affixed at the belfry louver level on all four sides of the Belgian Pavilion Vann Tower on the campus of Virginia Union University. The Special Use Permit is necessary due to the signage exceeding current zoning limitations.

The VUU logo (17'-0" x 17'-7 3/4") is made from aluminum framing, acrylic faces, and internally illuminated with white LED lighting connected to 120V 60W power supply. The logo signs are mounted to 4"x4" steel tubing that is mounted through the louvers to the existing steel "I" beams of the belfry framing. The mounting of the signage does not impact the cladding of the historic Vann Tower nor destroy the stability or functioning of the louvers or tower structure.

Rising from a historic environment of legal segregation and emancipation of slaves as an opportunity for education and advancement of people of color, Virginia Union University was founded in 1865 and is honored to be one of the first ten Historically Black Colleges and Universities founded in the nation. The Belgian Pavilion on the historic campus of Virginia Union University is a four-part complex constructed for the 1939 New York World's Fair to showcase technology and innovation. Due to Nazi invasion in Belgium, instead of having the building return to a University in Belgium, the Belgium government offered the building to any US college or university. After competing with 27 other universities, VUU was awarded the recipient of the Belgian Pavilion in 1941 and the University worked with the community to raise \$500,000 to relocate the building from New York to VUU. The Pavilion currently provides multiuse educational space, classrooms, performing arts center, visual arts center, and gymnasium facilities for the campus.

The Tower portion of the Belgian Pavilion was named after Robert Lee Vann, an alumnus of Virginia Union University who went on to be a newspaper publisher and editor who established the Pittsburgh Courier, to be one of five black attorneys in Pittsburgh in 1910, and to serve as Special Assistant to U.S. Attorney General Homer Cummings under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. According to the Pittsburgh Courier (1941), the Robert L. Vann Memorial Tower was "the largest memorial ever built for a Negro in America." The base section of the Vann Tower contains Belgian Congo relief sculptures with scenes of the Congo history, struggle, and rise to independence. Oscar Adams, an African-American, reporting on the cornerstone laying for the Belgian Pavilion noted that "the beautiful Belgian Pavilion...was the gift of a colonial empire to a Negro university, the gift of a Catholic country to a Baptist school, the symbol of human understanding and goodwill and the negation of racial prejudice of hatred and of violence."

Powered by this notable history and intensified by multiple layers of symbolic progressive change, the Belgian Pavilion Vann Tower is the premiere location to adorn at its top the illuminate "VUU" logo as a symbol of change and beacon of light.

- The size of the sign is deemed appropriate for its elevated position above the ground and for its purpose of being a beacon for a bright, limitless future and recognition of the rich African-American history of the campus, community, City, and State. Special Use Permit from City Zoning has been granted in the past for ground-level VUU signs at Virginia Union University and is being sought for this elevated level of recognition.
- As a flat wall sign, it is deemed not to obscure the unique historic architecture of the entire Belgian Building nor significantly impact the architectural detail of the louvers atop the tower. The limited mass of the sign letters on the belfry section of the tower leaves the majority of the louvers visible and intact, and the distinct louver pattern fully detectable.
- Internal illumination of the sign most effectively transmits the intensity of the historic positioning of the University during the times of darkness and is consistent with other internally illuminated signs currently installed on campus with Special Use Permit approval.

Virginia Union University is a landmark in Richmond City and a proud historic campus. The historic value of Virginia Union University to our community, City, State, and Nation justifies the prominence gleaned by the signage and its significance must not be undervalued or disallowed. VUU has been a significant part of Virginia's history for 155 years, from providing education to newly emancipated slaves who were previously denied that right, to presently continuing to provide affordable, quality education for those seeking a college degree. This project for the VUU logo to remain affixed to the Belgian Vann Tower has critical impact to VUU and to people of color feeling a sense of disillusionment and lack of acceptance. The VUU signage on the tower will provide a lasting bright-shining symbol of justice, hope, and equality. All points of the signage are potentially positive and the signage will **not**:

1. be detrimental to safety, health, morals and general welfare of the community;
2. tend to create congestion in streets, roads, alley and other public ways;
3. create hazards from fire, panic or other dangers;
4. tend to cause overcrowding of land and an undue concentration of population;
5. adversely affect or interfere with public or private schools, parks, playgrounds, water supplies, sewage disposal, transportation or other public requirements, conveniences and improvements; or
6. interfere with adequate light and air.

Support of this Application for Special Use Permit will provide clear, dramatic, long-lasting benefits to the Campus, Community, and City of Richmond.