COMMISSION OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW
STAFF REPORT
September 22, 2015 Meeting

11. CAR No. 15-052 (C. Jefferson) **2405 E. Clay Street**
Church Hill North Old and Historic District

Project Description: **Construct new single-family house**

Staff Contact: **J. Hill**

The applicant requests approval to construct a single-family house on a vacant lot in the Church Hill North Old and Historic District. The proposed building is an Italianate-influenced structure with a front porch and a rear deck.

The new building will be situated between an existing historic house and several vacant parcels. The structure will be a total of 27'-2.5" in height. It will have side yard setbacks of 3'-6" and a front yard setback of 8'-4" to the façade of the house. The house features a full-width front porch 14' x 5'.

Please note: The Commission deferred an earlier application at the April 28, 2015 meeting, requesting additional information and clarification. The applicant has addressed the request for alterations to the front elevation to improve the proportions by reducing the distance between the top of the windows and the cornice by using an alternate roof form and modifying the rearmost window on the right-hand (west) elevation to be more compatible with windows in the district.

- All windows visible from the public right-of-way are 2-over-2 PVC-clad and will need to feature either true-divided lites or simulated divided lites as indicated in the OHD Guidelines (page 66).

- The porch features turned columns (painted fiberglass) and tongue-and-groove decking.

- The use of a mansard-style roof has significantly reduced the space between the 2nd floor window headers and the cornice.

- The doors intended for use appear in the specifications, and are not accurately represented in the elevations provided.

The applicant is seeking final approval for the design. Commission staff reviewed the project through the lens of the "Standards for New Construction: Residential" on pages 44 and 45 of the *Richmond Old and Historic District Handbook and Design Review Guidelines* and the resulting comments follow.

Staff Findings based on Commission of Architectural Review Guidelines

STANDARDS FOR NEW CONSTRUCTION

All new residential and commercial construction, whether in the form of additions or entire buildings, should be compatible with the historic features that characterize their setting and context. To protect the context of the surrounding historic district, new construction should reference the materials, features, size, scale, proportions, and massing of the existing historic building or buildings in its setting. However, compatibility does not mean duplicating the existing buildings or environment. In order to avoid creating a false sense of history, new construction should also be discernible from the old. Perhaps the best way to think about a compatible new building (or addition) is that it should be a good neighbor; one that enhances the character of the existing district and respects its historic context, rather than being an exact (and misleading) reproduction of another building.

SITING

1. *Additions should be subordinate in size to their main buildings and as inconspicuous as possible. Locating additions at the rear of on the least visible side of a building is preferred.*

This standard is not applicable.

2. *New residential infill construction should respect the prevailing front and side yard setback patterns of the surrounding block. The minimum setbacks evident in most districts reinforce the traditional street wall. In cases where the adjoining buildings have different setbacks, the setback for the new building should be based on the historical pattern for the block.*

The proposed 3'-6" side-yard setbacks reflect the typical pattern along the block. The proposed 8'-4" front-yard setback would mostly align the structure with that of the existing, adjacent structure located at 2403 E. Clay Street, which has a front yard setback of 6'-11". Staff recommend that the front yard setbacks match more closely, but the discrepancy may be due to the required distance needed for the front porch steps.

3. *New buildings should face the most prominent street bordering the site.*

The new house will face East Clay Street, the most prominent street bordering the site.

FORM

1. *New construction should use a building form compatible with that found elsewhere in the historic district. Building form refers to the specific combination of massing, size, symmetry, proportions, projections, and roof*

shapes that lend identity to a building. Form is greatly influenced by the architectural style of a given structure.

The current, revised form of the proposed building is typical of two-story residential buildings located in the Church Hill North Old and Historic District and is seen across the street from this parcel. The selection of the mansard roof style for the attic resolves the previous problem of a blank portion of the façade above the second-floor windows that was not typical of historic houses in the district. The proposed new design is much more compatible with the appearance of historic buildings in the immediate vicinity of the district.

2. *New residential construction should maintain the existing human scale of nearby historic residential construction in the district.*

The proposed building maintains the existing human scale of the neighborhood.

3. *New residential construction and additions should incorporate human-scale elements such as cornices, porches and front steps into their design. In Richmond, porches were historically an integral part of residential design and provide much of the street-level architectural character of Richmond's historic districts.*

The proposed buildings design calls for a front porch which lends human-scale elements to the building's street-level character.

HEIGHT, WIDTH, PROPORTION & MASSING

1. *New construction should respect the typical height of surrounding residential buildings.*

The proposed building will be a total of 27'-2.5" in height, somewhat shorter than the adjacent house, the height of which is given as 31'.

2. *New construction should respect the vertical orientation typical of other residential properties in surrounding historic districts. New designs that call for wide massing should look to the project's local district for precedent. For example, full-block-long row house compositions are rare in Richmond. New residential buildings that occupy more than one third of a block face should still employ bays as an organizational device, but the new building should read as a single piece of architecture.*

The proposed building design respects the typical vertical orientation of two-story residences in the district.

3. *The cornice height should be compatible with that of adjacent historic buildings.*

The roofline and cornice height of the proposed structure will be somewhat shorter than the adjacent house, as indicated in the context illustration provided.

MATERIALS & COLORS

1. *Additions should not obscure or destroy original architectural elements.*

This standard is not applicable.

2. *Materials used in new residential construction should be visually compatible with original materials used throughout the district.*

The applicant proposes fiber cement siding, TPO membrane porch and main roofs, Richmond rail, painted fiberglass, turned porch columns, brick-clad masonry porch piers, lattice below the front porch, PVC-clad 2-over-2 windows, and pre-manufactured corbels, dental molding and frames. Staff recommends that the windows feature true or simulated divided lites as indicated in the OHD Guidelines (page 66) and that the lattice be vertical/horizontal wood lattice rather than vinyl diagonal-patterned lattice.

3. *Paint colors for new additions should complement the historically appropriate colors used on the primary structure. Paint colors used should be similar to the historically appropriate colors already found in the district.*

The applicant has proposed painting the porch columns and railings white. If the applicant is not prepared to propose the remaining paint colors for the proposed structure at the meeting, staff can coordinate administrative review and approval at a later date with colors selected from the approved color palette (pages 60-61).

4. *Vinyl, asphalt, and aluminum siding are not permitted for use in City Old and Historic Districts. Other synthetic siding materials with a smooth, untextured finish may be allowed in limited cases, but approval by the Commission is always required.*

The proposed building design calls for fiber-cement siding. Staff recommends the use of smooth fiber-cement siding without a raised wood-grain pattern.

5. *Rooftop mechanical equipment should be located as discretely as possible to limit visibility. In addition, appropriate screening should be provided to conceal equipment from view. When rooftop railings are required for seating areas or for safe access to mechanical equipment, the railings should be as unobtrusive as possible, in order to minimize their appearance and visual impact on the surrounding district.*

This standard is not applicable. Any exterior mechanical equipment should be located at the rear of the property and screened from public view.

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Staff recommends approval of the project. The proposed infill project appears generally to be in keeping with the Standards for New Construction outlined in the *Guidelines*. Staff notes improvements to the façade design which now reflects the design of typical dwellings found in the district. Staff does recommend, however, that the applicant install cement-fiber siding with a smooth finish, windows with true or simulated divided lites, and that the lattice under the porch be orthogonal (rather than diagonal) wood lattice.

It is the assessment of staff that with the acceptance of these recommendations as conditions, the application is consistent with the Standards for New Construction outlined in Section 114.930.7(c) of the City Code, and with the *Richmond Old and Historic Districts Handbook and Design Review Guidelines*, specifically the pages cited above, adopted by the Commission for review of Certificates of Appropriateness under the same section of code.