



December 21, 2020

Mark Olinger, Director
Department of Planning & Development Review
900 East Broad Street, Suite 511
Richmond, VA 23219
mark.olinger@richmondgov.com

Re: 5005 Riverside Drive SUP Application

Dear Mr. Olinger,

Please accept this letter as the Applicant's Report with the Special Use Permit application for a short-term rental in an accessory structure at 5005 Dorchester Road. With this application we are petitioning City Council for a SUP to allow for the continued use of the Trailside Treehouse as an overnight accommodation for tourists to Richmond. The Trailside Treehouse was designed by an architect, built by professional homebuilders and is located on our 4.67 acre property on Riverside Drive. Its location is adjacent to the James River Park System and is uniquely situated to show off the best parts of Richmond's amazing James River and the natural beauty surrounding it, right in the heart of the City.

Recognizing how valuable this ecosystem is to the lives of Richmonders and their visitors, in 2014, we granted the City of Richmond a recreational easement for the James River Park Trail System that traverses our property over about half a mile. During the easement process, we received letters of thanks and support from outdoor enthusiasts from around the state telling us that they travel from hours away to use our city's trail system for running and mountain biking. We asked, "Where do you stay when you come to town?" These adventurers told us they would pack up and head home because there was no value to them in staying in a generic hotel just to sleep.

My family realized we had an opportunity to provide a cool outdoor experience that is aligned with our city's outdoor adventure spirit. In 2017, with the support of our city councilperson, we launched the treehouse as a glamping accommodation. We opened our treehouse after observing how other cities on the east coast were able to increase their "coolness" profile amongst the outdoor community by creating unique glamping opportunities. We saw the need to offer an alternative overnight destination for outdoor enthusiasts who were starting to look more closely at traveling to Richmond for our outdoor recreational activities and potentially as a place to live.

Since our launch in September 2017, we have hosted thousands of adventurers from around the world. Many of these tourists come to Richmond solely to enjoy the experience of staying in an "authentic treehouse." Our "in-season" runs from Memorial Day to Labor Day, during which time it has been completely booked every day.

The Trailside Treehouse is attractive to our guests partly because it offers guests an alternative glamping experience adjacent to a nationally recognized trail system and park. Every other treehouse destination

in the country is more of a tiny house in the trees—complete with running water and all the amenities of home. Ours, by contrast, is more rustic and appeals to the child within every adult—and the sense of magic within every child. Keeping the treehouse rustic is critical to our mission of creating a magic and unique space that welcomes guests to “return to childhood.”

In order for the Treehouse can remain truly off the grid, the basement of our home is set aside for guests and includes a full bathroom, kitchenette, and lounge space for guests to relax indoors during their stays. They have a private entrance from the outside.

Safety

The treehouse is situated on top of concrete pilings, which are buried two feet into the ground. We are fully insured and responsible hosts who have more than 375 5-star reviews on Airbnb and an unprecedented overall rating of 4.9.

We have had the fire department visit the treehouse to give us feedback and offer suggestions for making it safer; they had no suggestions for improvement. The captain of the fire house said, “This looks safe. I’d absolutely love to stay here with my family.”

The treehouse was designed by architect Henry Tenser and built by homebuilders, TenserHaus Construction. We routinely trim trees near the treehouse and on the property for safety.

Existing Zoning

The properties are currently located in the R-3 Single-Family zoning district, which permits the proposed short-term rental use as long as it is located within the home. The reason the proposal requires a special use permit is because the short-term rental unit is in an accessory structure. We intend to comply with all of the other recently adopted regulations around short-term rentals within the City.

City’s Land Use Plan Recommendations

The recently adopted Richmond 300 Plan designates this property as “Residential”, which includes accessory dwelling units as a recommended use. The plan also acknowledges the importance of visitors and tourism to the City of Richmond’s economic health noting that the historic sites, unique neighborhoods, and the James River make the city a destination for tourists. To accommodate these visitors, additional lodging is needed in the city, and short-term rentals provide the opportunity to develop transient lodging within existing housing stock in desirable neighborhoods. Goal 12 of the Plan states, “Develop tourism and attractions to further elevate Richmond’s image and to continue to delight existing and future residents, employees, and visitors.” The Trailside Treehouse is the perfect example of the delightful experience called for by the plan.

Neighborhood Communication

Our house and the treehouse are both off-road and not visible from Riverside Drive. We offer off-street parking in our driveway. There are only a handful neighbors who have properties adjacent to our secluded property and who might possibly hear noise from the treehouse, such as kids shrieking with glee.

We have communicated with the adjacent property owners about the project and have received and enclosed letter of support from the Westover Hills Neighborhood Association along with several letters of support from individual neighbors.

City Charter Conditions

We trust that you will agree with us that this proposed Special Use Permits meets the City Charter criteria for the granting of SUPs as the project will not

- (i) be detrimental to the safety, health, morals and general welfare of the community involved;
- (ii) tend to create congestion in streets, roads, alleys and other public ways and places in the area involved;
- (iii) create hazards from fire, panic or other dangers;
- (iv) tend to be overcrowding of land and cause an undue concentration of population;
- (v) adversely affect or interfere with public or private schools, parks, playgrounds, water supplies, sewage disposal, transportation or other public requirements, conveniences and improvements; or
- (vi) interfere with adequate light and air.

In closing, I think it is important to point out that Josh and I are native Richmonders who grew up only blocks from where we now live and operate the treehouse and our parents still live in our childhood homes; we have been invested in our community for decades. We love being Richmond cheerleaders and ambassadors.

I have been invited to be Richmond's Airbnb Ambassador, which is a position bestowed upon hosts with a proven track record of providing exceptional hospitality and enthusiasm for hosting travelers.

Airbnb has recognized us as one of the Top 10 Places to Stay in Virginia and we have been recognized by national travel blogs as a top travel destination. Having the Trailside Treehouse in Richmond elevates Richmond's reputation as a "cool," destination city.

Thank you for your consideration of this Special Use Permit application. Please feel free to contact me at shawbelt@gmail.com or (804) 855-7989 if you have any questions or require additional materials to process the application.

Sincerely,

Carrie Rogers

Enclosure: application form, existing survey, plans

cc: Matthew Ebinger, Secretary to the City Planning Commission
The Honorable Kristen Larson, 5th District Council Representative