COMMISSION OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW
STAFF REPORT
April 28, 2015 Meeting

12. 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: **W. Palmquist**

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 28'-10.5" in height. It will have side yard setbacks of 3'-5" and a front yard setback of 8'-4".

Please note: The applicant provided updated plans, which addressed several of staff's concerns, before the deadline for the April CAR meeting. The older set of plans were accidentally uploaded to Legistar for public distribution instead. Therefore, both sets of plans are included for reference. The staff report is based on the updated set of plans. Changes between the two sets of plans are detailed below:

- All windows are 2-over-1 where they were originally 6-over-6 on the sides and the rear.
- The porch columns are square columns where they were originally proposed to be tapered columns.
- The space between the 2nd floor ceiling and the peak of the roof was reduced by approximately 1'.

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'-5" 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 would prefer that the front yard setbacks matched 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 E. 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 form of the proposed building is typical of two-story Italianate buildings located in the Union Hill Old and Historic District. However, staff takes issue with the design of the façade which shows an excessive amount of siding between the 2nd floor window heads and the roof cornice. Historic, Italianate houses in the

immediate area have some space between the 2nd floor window heads and the roof cornice. Some historic houses in the area utilize false mansard roofs. The proposed new construction design has much more space than is typical, resulting in a blank portion of façade.

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 design.

HEIGHT, WIDTH, PROPORTION & MASSING

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

The proposed building will be a total of 28'-10.5" in height which would match the height of the existing, adjacent structure as demonstrated by the façade rendering provided by the applicant. The building height is also consistent with other structures found along the block.

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 cornice height of the proposed structure aligns with that of the adjacent building.

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, square porch columns, masonry porch piers, lattice below the front porch, PVC-clad 2-over-1 windows, and pre-manufactured corbels, dental molding and frames. Staff recommends that the proposed cornice brackets be spaced to frame each window, not spaced equidistantly across the cornice as is currently proposed.

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 not proposed paint colors for the proposed structures, but is encouraged to work with CAR staff to seek administrative approval for compatible colors chosen from the CAR paint color palette.

3. *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 with no faux grain.

4. *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.

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Staff does not recommend approval of the project. While the proposed infill project appears generally to be in keeping with the Standards for New Construction outlined in the *Guidelines*, staff does not recommend approval due to the façade design which does not reflect the design of a typical Italianate house found in the district. Due to the excessive space between the 2nd floor

window heads and the roof cornice, the proposed design does not appear to be compatible to other houses in the area and within the larger district. Staff would recommend that the applicant return to the Commission with a new façade design that is more closely based off that of historic Italianate homes found nearby, or a design that utilizes a deeper cornice to help conceal that blank space. The applicant should base the proportions of a proposed cornice off of historic houses, but is encouraged to provide a more contemporary design that does not exactly mimic that of historic houses.

It is the assessment of staff that the application is not 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.