COMMISSION OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW
STAFF REPORT
July 28, 2015 Meeting

6. CAR No. 15-091 (D. Kleyman) **603-603 ½ N. 21st Street**
Union Hill Old and Historic District

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

Staff Contact: **K. Chen**

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

The proposed building will be situated between two historic houses that front N. 21st Street. The structure will be a total of 30' in height, from street grade. It will have side yard setbacks of 3', and front yard setback of 11'-6".

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' side yard setback reflects the typical pattern along the block. The proposed 11'-6" front yard setback reflects the front yard setbacks of the adjacent buildings, however, the building will be sited parallel to the side property lines creating a canted orientation to the street. Because of the irregular angle of the streets, the lots in this block are irregular and the lot lines are not perpendicular to the street. Thus, several of the houses are not set parallel to the street.

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

The new house will face 21st Street, the most prominent street bordering the site. As previously mentioned, the building is canted to 21st Street in order to maximize the buildable area of the lots which are relatively shallow.

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 somewhat typical of two-story Italianate buildings located in and previously approved for new construction in the Union Hill Old and Historic District. The 4-bay massing is not typically found in the Union Hill district and the Italianate cornice and shed roof line are atypical in this block which is dominated by gable roofs and box cornices. The proposed structure will have a front porch and a rear inset porch located in the southeast corner of the structure which will not be visible from the public right-of-way.

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 building's 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 30' in height (from street grade) which is approximately equal to the historic, two-story house to the south and significantly higher than the historic, one-story house to the north. The grade along the street varies with some of the houses set on high foundations or on embankments with retaining walls. The proposed house and the adjacent properties are set on an embankment behind a retaining wall with the proposed first floor line of the new house and the adjacent houses being approximately 6' above street grade.

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 is higher than the adjacent two-story dwelling at 605 N. 21st Street, which has a gable roof line and box cornice, and is substantially taller than the one-story, gable roofed house to the north.

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 smooth fiber cement siding with a 7" reveal, parged CMU foundation, brick porch piers with wood lattice panels, tongue-and-groove porch flooring, painted Richmond rail, fiber cement fascia boards with Fypon corbels, black EPDM porch roof, membrane main roof, round front porch columns with "Tuscan" base and cap, 6-panel fiberglass front door with a 2-light transom

above, rear fiberglass patio doors, and 2-over-2 MW Jefferson 300-series double-hung windows with simulated-divided-lights.

The parged retaining wall and steps at the front of the property will be removed and a new brick retaining wall and steps constructed. The majority of the retaining walls on the block have a parged finish. There is a substantial brick retaining wall across the street at 604 N. 21st Street.

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 *HardiePlank* finished in "Harris Cream," which is similar to "Classic Yellow" found on the CAR paint color palette. The applicant is proposing white for all trim, doors and windows.

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 smooth fiber cement siding, fiberglass doors, and cellular PVC windows.

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.

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Staff recommends approval of the project with conditions. The proposed infill project appears generally to be in keeping with the Standards for New Construction outlined in the *Guidelines*. While the form of the proposed structure is similar to the Italianate-style house that is traditionally found and has been approved numerous times for infill construction in the broader Union Hill District, the four-bay configuration is atypical in both historic and new prototypes. Further, the Italianate-style is not compatible with the historic context of the immediate block which is dominated by Vernacular Greek Revival forms with gable roofs. Staff takes issue with the proposed transom windows located on the sides of the structure which are not an historic design. Staff feels that the lack of full windows on the side elevations represents a missed opportunity and is an unusual feature compared to similar but historic houses. Staff also finds that the porch column

centered on the window is inconsistent with historic precedence and a result of the atypical four-bay design.

Staff recommends that approval of the project be conditioned on the following:

- That the transom windows on the sides of the structure be replaced with windows that match the proposed 2/2 sash windows,
- That all windows are true divided or simulated divided light windows, and
- That the column centered on the window be removed.

It is the assessment of staff that the application, with the conditions above, 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.