

**COMMISSION OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW
STAFF REPORT
August 25, Meeting**

16. CAR No. 15-110 (City P&R)

**216 (206) West Clay Street
Jackson Ward Old and Historic District**

Project Description:

Renovations to Abner Clay Park

Staff Contact:

K. Chen

The proposed project is a substantial reworking of the grounds of Abner Clay Park and the Adult Career Development Center (originally the Armstrong High School Building and more recently the home of Benjamin Graves Middle School). Richmond's urban renewal program of the 1950-1970 era created this large open space. Once warehouses lined Brook Road and residential units were situated on Adams, Clay, and Leigh Streets. After clearing the original buildings, the City constructed Abner Clay Park, then a small neighborhood park at Brook Road and Clay Street. The park was named after the Jackson Ward neighborhood activist, Abner Clay. Richmond public schools converted most of the cleared area into playing fields and parking for Graves Middle School. After the closing of the Middle School, the playing fields became a part of the park, while the parking lots flanking the school and green space along Adams Street remained school board property.

At present Abner Clay Park has a relatively small number of trees: situated around its perimeter, in a mixed bosque at the northwest corner of the park, and in the plaza area at the southern edge of the park. The park contains a plaza, playground, and gazebo at the southern corner. Most of the park consists of grassed open space at a lower grade than the western and southern sides. In addition to a large playing field, it contains two tennis courts, a basketball court, and a playground for small children.

The proposed improvements were presented for conceptual review at the August 27, 2013, Commission meeting. Substantial improvements will take place at the northern and southern corners of the park and along the east side. These areas will be laid out as heavily landscaped spaces with plazas, a pavilion and pergola, a basketball court, and playground with splash pad. A series of new paths will enhance circulation in the new landscaped areas. The improvements also cover the school property around the Adult Career Development Center. The large parking lots on both sides of the center will be landscaped and a large open space on Adams Street converted into fenced park areas for large and small dogs.

The Commission's *Design Review Guidelines* are oriented to modest site improvements associated with building renovations. Nonetheless, there are several sections of the guidelines that are pertinent to the final review of this project. The City Old and Historic District code includes Section 930.7 (e)

Standards for Site Improvements. Consistent with that section, the Commission has adopted additional guidelines for site improvements as a part of the *Guidelines*, the following statements being pertinent to the Abner Clay project:

When designing streetscape elements for locations within a City Old and Historic District, particular attention should be paid to the pedestrian scale and character of the District (page 66).

...it is particularly important that these elements support and reinforce, rather than detract from, the overall historic character of the district. (page 66)

Landscape design should enhance the streetscape and contribute a strong aesthetic along street frontages. Appropriate landscaping should buffer the visual severity of surface parking lots from view (page 66)

Landscape plans should select plant materials based on their:

- a) suitability to the site and urban surroundings,*
- b) appropriateness to the local climate, soils and light conditions,*
- c) ability to provide a sense of scale and seasonal interest (page 66)*

Parking lots should be broken up as much as possible with interior landscaped islands and should be well screened from the public right-of-way and adjacent properties. Appropriate screening may include landscaping, walls, fences or berms. If a vegetative screen is chosen, the type(s) and numbers of shrubs and trees used should ensure a high density screen between parking lot and street. (page 67)

Mature trees contribute to the character of Old and Historic Districts, provide visual interest, reduce the negative impacts of parking areas and ease the effects of temperature and wind conditions. Every effort should be made to preserve and maintain them. (page 67)

It is the assessment of staff that all of these criteria appear to be met by the proposed design. At present, the mostly unfinished character of Abner Clay Park and the Career Development Center areas makes it a gap in the urban fabric of the Jackson Ward neighborhood. The overall structure of the landscape improvements will enhance the adjacent large landmark buildings: Ebenezer Baptist Church, the Leigh Street Armory, and the old Armstrong High School Building. The revised design will create distinct entrances to and routes through the park. It will landscape and soften the extensive surface parking around the old Armstrong building. In general, it will create a well-designed public amenity in the Jackson Ward neighborhood.

As the project is proposed for publicly owned land, the applicant is not seeking a Certificate of Appropriateness under the City's Zoning Code but rather a recommendation on public improvements to the Planning Commission. Staff will prepare a report with the Commission of Architectural Review's recommendation and comments. **Staff is recommending that the Commission forward a recommendation of approval for the proposed improvements to Abner Clay Park.**