



CITY OF RICHMOND

Department of Planning & Development Review *Staff Report*

Ord. No. 2014-153: To authorize the special use of the property known as 122 West Leigh Street for the purpose of authorizing a private museum use, upon certain terms and conditions.

To: City Planning Commission
From: Land Use Administration
Date: September 2, 2014

PETITIONER

Stacey Burrs
1895 Group Inc.
00 East Clay Street
Richmond, VA 23219

LOCATION

122 West Leigh Street

PURPOSE

To authorize the special use of the property known as 122 West Leigh Street for the purpose of authorizing a private museum use in the R-6 residential district, upon certain terms and conditions.

SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION

The applicant is proposing to renovate the former Leigh Street Armory for the purpose of moving the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia's full operation into the structure. The museum also plans to offer exhibit and reception space for rent to the public for special events. This proposed use, if privately operated, is not allowed in the underlying R-6 Single-Family Attached Residential zoning district. The applicant is therefore requesting a special use permit to approve the proposed use and to reduce the parking requirement.

The City Planning Commission recommended and City Council has approved the sale/transfer of the property to the applicant per ordinance 2013-164-150. The subject property is located at the northeast corner of West Leigh and St. Peter Streets in the Jackson Ward Old and Historic District. The proposed improvements and design of the addition were approved by the Commission of Architectural review on September 24, 2013.

The City of Richmond's Downtown Master Plan identified the project site and surrounding area as a "General Urban Area" (3.19). The Downtown Plan identifies Historic Jackson Ward as an example of the general urban condition and indicates that it is characterized by a mix of building types ranging from single-family homes to rowhouses to mixed-use, main street buildings and sites. The Plan also encourages the "adaptive re-use of historic and architecturally significant buildings to ensure preservation and retention of essential elements of community character." The City Master Plan establishes a specific set of guiding principles for Historic Preservation that suggests that "it is in the City's best interest to nurture its historic sites, structures,

neighborhoods and heritage parks that contribute to Richmond's unique character as the capital of the Commonwealth" (p113).

Staff finds that the proposed location of the Black History Museum will increase its visibility and convenience of access by local visitors and tourist. The new facility will be located along a major downtown connector route that may be easily accessed by public transportation or from the interstate. There will also be ample parking available in close proximity to the venue. One of the Seven foundations of the Downtown Master Plan suggests that development should "celebrate and promote Richmond's history with an aggressive coordinated system of historic trails, museums and interpretive sites...by making it more accessible to the public" (3.32). The museum will be located amidst a collection of public and institutional uses, which include historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, the former Armstrong High School, the Maggie Walker House and Abner Clay Park. The proposed development will also encourage "increased pedestrian activity by encouraging neighborhood supported...cultural centers in the district" (4.1) as the neighbors from the immediate community and other sections of town visit the facility and other parts of downtown.

Staff also finds that the proposed scale and height of the addition compliments the existing structure and is consistent with the Downtown Plan's recommendations which suggest that "new construction should take its cue from neighboring historic structure buildings" The plan also suggests that "new infill construction reinforce its urban character and relate to the scale and character of the adjacent buildings" (3.16) and should "respect the material and architectural vocabulary of nearby historic structures (3.17).

The applicant proposes to provide 6 parking spaces, while normal zoning would require 44 spaces for a private museum use of this size. The applicant submitted a parking study that consists of an area map that identifies 40 on-street parking spaces within 300 feet and 55 spaces within 500 feet of the project site. The study included several photos taken during the proposed hours of operation, which confirm limited public usage of the spaces. The applicant projects that daily visitation will vary throughout the hours of operation, resulting in an average of 15 visitors per hour which will generate demand of 5-10 parking spaces. The applicant anticipates consistent visitation from surrounding school districts and therefore will pursue a dedicated loading zone for buses on West Leigh Street. Staff has conducted several site visits and confirms the applicant's assertions and finds that there is an abundance of on-street parking spaces available to accommodate the projected average daily demand.

Staff finds that the proposed use is consistent with the recommendations in the Downtown Plan and meets the City Charter conditions relative to granting special use permits. Therefore, staff recommends approval of the proposed special use permit.

FINDINGS OF FACT

Site Description

The subject property consists of a 0.241 acre parcel in the City's Jackson Ward Neighborhood at the intersection of West Leigh and St. Peters Street. The Historic Leigh Street Armory is currently vacant and occupies approximately half of the site. A portion of

the original structure, which contained a full gymnasium, was demolished leaving a large concrete slab at the rear of the property.

Proposed Use of the Property

The applicant is proposing to renovate the Historic Leigh Street Armory and transition the Black History Museum from its current location at 00 Clay Street into the new facility. Both facilities are located in the Historic Jackson Ward neighborhood. The development will include the renovation of the existing three level, 9,059 square feet structure and will include a 3,118 square feet three level addition at the rear of the existing building.

The construction of the addition will require the complete demolition of the concrete slab foundation located just behind the existing structure. The addition will become the main entrance to the museum on St. Peter Street leading to the vestibule and lobby area and will also house a kitchen and storage space on the lower level. The museum will contain over 4,000 square feet of exhibit space in the new museum comprised of 3 galleries on the first level and 1 gallery on the second level.

The museum will contain 4 large galleries on the first and second levels, and administrative staff offices. Six parking spaces will be provided for museum staff at the rear of the museum, accessible from the public alley.

Master Plan

The project site and surrounding area are characterized as a “General Urban Area” (3.19) in the City’s Downtown Plan. Because of Historic Jackson Ward’s mix of building types ranging from single-family homes to rowhouses to mixed-use, main street buildings and sites the Downtown Plan identifies it as an example of the general urban condition. The Plan also encourages the “adaptive re-use of historic and architecturally significant buildings to ensure preservation and retention of essential elements of community character.” A specific set of guiding principles has been established for Historic Preservation by the City Master Plan that suggests that “it is in the City’s best interest to nurture its historic sites, structures, neighborhoods and heritage parks that contribute to Richmond’s unique character as the capital of the Commonwealth”(p113).

One of the Seven foundations of the Downtown Master Plan suggests that development should “celebrate and promote Richmond’s history with an aggressive coordinated system of historic trails, museums and interpretive sites...by making it more accessible to the public”(3.32). The plan also encourages “increased pedestrian activity by encouraging neighborhood supported retail and cultural centers in the district” (4.1).

The Downtown Plan’s recommendations suggest that “new construction should take its cue from neighboring historic structure buildings” The plan also suggests that “new infill construction reinforce its urban character and relate to the scale and character of the adjacent buildings” (3.16) and should “respect the material and architectural vocabulary of nearby historic structures (3.17).

Zoning & Ordinance Conditions

The property is located in the R-6 Single-Family Attached Residential zoning district, which does not permit privately operated museums. If approved, the ordinance would permit the proposed use. Normal zoning regulations for museum uses require 10 parking spaces, plus one space per 300 square feet of floor area in excess of 2,000 square feet. The proposed museum and addition would require 44 parking spaces to be provided. If approved, the ordinance would reduce the requirement and allow the operator to provide 6 parking spaces located at the rear of the building and accessed from the public alley.

The applicant also intends to host private meetings and receptions in its galleries and community spaces to generate revenue to support the museum's normal operations. The projected capacity for these special events is a maximum of 175 attendees. The ordinance would also authorize the use of the property as a reception facility for these types of private events, which would not normally be permitted as accessory to the museum or in the R-6 zoning district.

Surrounding Area

The surrounding properties are all zoned R-6 Single-Family Attached Residential. Just north of the project site there are several single-family homes on either side of St. Peter Street. A continuous row of attached and detached single-family homes occupy the properties to the east along Leigh Street. South of the project site on the opposite side of Leigh Street is Abner Clay Park and an Adult Career Development Center which is operated by Richmond Public Schools in the former Armstrong High School building which operates from 8am–4pm on weekdays. West of the project site is Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, which has acquired several properties to create parking lots for its members.

Neighborhood Participation

Staff sent notice of the application to Council Representative Samuels, and the Historic Jackson Ward Association. Staff has received a letter of support from the Historic Jackson Ward Association.

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