

**COMMISSION OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW
STAFF REPORT
December 19, 2017, Meeting**

4. **COA-0027104-2017** (City DPRCF)

**200 West Clay Street
Jackson Ward Old and Historic District**

Project Description: **Location, Character, and Extent Final Review
for the Renovations of Abner Clay Park**

Staff Contact:

M. Pitts

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 which has recently been upgraded.

The Commission reviewed the master plan for the park on August 25, 2015, and the plan was approved by the Planning Commission on September 21, 2015. The project has been redesigned as the budget for the project has been reduced. The revised proposal includes repairing the multi-use field, resurfacing the basketball court, removing the existing hardscaping including the existing plaza and tennis courts, constructing a new plaza closer to Clay Street with a new pavilion structure, installing concrete sidewalks with brick banding, and new benches, trash receptacles, bike racks, and lighting. The applicant is proposing to remove trees on site many of which are a part of the existing concrete plaza which is set to be demolished. The applicant is proposing to plant new trees; but as the tree replacement does not meet the City's standards which require a 1:1 replacement in regard to tree diameter, the applicant is proposing to pay into the City's fund for

tree planting in lieu of providing the trees onsite. The proposal includes locations for future public art installations.

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 30.930.7 (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 proposed 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 76).

...it is particularly important that these elements support and reinforce, rather than detract from, the overall historic character of the district. (page 76)

Brick or granite pavers are the most appropriate choice in most Old and Historic Districts. (page 76, #4)

Landscape design should enhance the streetscape and contribute a strong aesthetic along street frontages. (page 76, #8)

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 76, #9)*

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 77)

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. Staff finds the simplified design for the proposed pavilion structure is appropriate and does not detract from the historic district. The proposed concrete and brick paving materials and fences are consistent with materials and fence designs found in the district. The proposal will landscape and soften the extensive surface parking around the old Armstrong building. As the Commission's Guidelines note the importance of trees to ease the effects of temperature, staff had concerns that the playground area will not have adequate shade if the applicant removes the trees as indicated on the Tree Removal Plan. The applicant has confirmed that the trees in the playground area will remain. Staff recommends

a revised Tree Removal Plan be submitted to include maintaining these trees. Staff has concerns that the proposed tree replacement will not occur at a 1:1 ratio onsite. Staff recommends the applicant work with the City Arborist to determine if any additional healthy trees can be saved on site, and staff recommends an effort should be made to include additional trees onsite as a part of the park's design while maintaining the desired areas of open space. While the design of the lighting is appropriate for the Old and Historic District and is the same lights as was approved by the Commission in 2015, staff recommends the lighting meet the Urban Design Committee's recommendations for color temperature. In general, the proposed project with the recommended conditions 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 with the following conditions:**

- **A revised Tree Removal Plan be submitted to include maintaining the trees surrounding the playground.**
- **The applicant work with the City Arborist to determine if any additional healthy trees can be saved on site.**
- **An effort should be made to include additional trees onsite as a part of the park's design while maintaining the desired areas of open space.**
- **The lighting meet the Urban Design Committee's recommendations for color temperature.**