



To: Planning Commission
From: Commission of Architectural Review
Date: January 16, 2018
RE: **Final Location, Character and Extent Review of renovations to Abner Clay Park,
200 W. Clay Street**

I. APPLICANT

Heywood Harrison, Dept. of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities

II. LOCATION

Abner Clay Park, 200 W. Clay Street

Property Owner(s):

City of Richmond

III. PURPOSE

The application is for final location, character and extent review of renovations to Abner Clay Park.

IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION

The Richmond Old and Historic Districts Handbook and Design Review Guidelines encourages landscape and streetscape that support well-designed public spaces. The Commission of Architectural Review (CAR) finds that 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 CAR finds that the overall structure of the proposed landscape improvements will enhance the adjacent large landmark buildings: Ebenezer Baptist Church, the Black History Museum, and the old Armstrong High School Building. The CAR 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 CAR finds that the proposal will create a well-designed public amenity in the Jackson Ward neighborhood that will serve to soften the extensive surface parking around the old Armstrong building. As the CAR's Guidelines note the importance of trees to ease the effects of temperature, CAR recommends conditions of approval to ensure that an attempt is made to retain healthy trees and replace removed trees on site.

The CAR has determined that the application, with the noted conditions, is consistent with the Standards for Site Improvements in Section 30-930.7(e) of the City Code, as well as with the Richmond Old and Historic Districts Handbook and Design Review Guidelines, specifically pages 76-77, adopted by the Commission for review of Certificates of Appropriateness under the same section of the code.

Therefore, the Commission of Architectural Review recommends that the Planning Commission grant final approval, 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 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.
- The applicant consider providing irrigation as a part of the project.

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V. FINDINGS OF FACT

a. Site Description and Surrounding Context

Abner Clay Park is bound by W. Clay Street to the south, Brook Road to the west, W. Leigh Street to the north, and the Adult Career Development Center building and residential properties to the east. The 4.36 acre park contains tennis courts, a playground, open space, a pavilion and a parking lot. 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.

The park property is zoned R-6 (Single family attached residential) and is located in the Jackson Ward Old & Historic District. The surrounding properties are primarily single-family attached and detached residences in a dense development pattern, also located in the R-6 zone, though there is a small grouping of neighborhood-serving businesses at the corner of Brook Road and W. Clay Street.

b. Scope of Review

The project is subject to location, character, and extent review as improvements to a park in accordance with Section 17.07 of the Richmond City Charter.

c. CAR Review History

The CAR 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 CAR reviewed the revised project on December 19, 2017 and recommended approval with conditions.

d. Project Description

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). At present Abner Clay Park has a relatively small number of trees: situated around its perimeter, at the northwest corner of the park, and in the plaza area at the southern edge of the park. The park contains a plaza 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 proposal for the park includes repairing the multi-use field; resurfacing the basketball court; removing existing hardscaping including the existing plaza and tennis courts; constructing a new plaza closer to Clay Street with a new pavilion structure; and installing concrete sidewalks with brick banding, 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 along Brook Road and surrounding the proposed open space areas; but as the proposed 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 also includes locations for future public art installations.

e. Master Plan

The park property is located in the Broad Street and Jackson Ward study area, as defined by the Downtown Master Plan, which designates the property as a civic area. The Plan recommends improving Abner Clay Park for the residents of Jackson Ward, and notes that it "is one of Downtown Richmond's few locations for active, organized recreation." The Plan states that the park "can be improved by adding additional shade trees within the park and along its perimeter" to "enclose the park, making it feel safer, more inviting, and provide relief from the summer heat" (page 4.10).

f. Commission of Architectural Design Review Guidelines

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 on parking areas and ease the effects of temperature and wind conditions. Every effort should be made to preserve and maintain them. (page 77)

VII. ATTACHMENTS

- a. Vicinity Map
- b. Application
- c. Plans