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To: Urban Design Committee  
From: Planning and Preservation Division  
Date: March 8, 2018  
RE: **Final Location, Character and Extent review of Monroe Park – Checkers House Revisions, 719 W. Franklin St.; UDC No. 2018-14**

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**I. APPLICANT**

Don Summers, Department of Public Works

**II. LOCATION**

719 W. Franklin St.

**Property Owner:**

City of Richmond Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities

**III. PURPOSE**

The application is for the final location, character, and extent review of revisions to the Checkers House renovation, as part of the larger Monroe Park Renovation.

**IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION**

This renovation of the Checkers House, constructed in 1939, is part of a larger effort to restore Monroe Park to its period of significance, identified as 1904. The Monroe Park Master Plan was adopted by the Planning Commission in 2008 with subsequent design and construction plans approved in 2009. Hitherto, the master plan has seen various updates in subsequent years, specifically 2017.

Staff recognizes the Checkers House and adjacent plaza are currently undergoing substantial restoration and renovation to accommodate modern needs such as a first floor commercial space, a second floor office space for VCU police, surveillance cameras, and modified landscaping to further enhance surveillance and policing. However, Staff believes the modification to accommodate a service window and awning, as proposed, for vendor occupation and surveillance over the seating area will significantly alter the character of the Checkers House in an irreversible way. Furthermore, Staff finds the proposal not in compliance with the Urban Design Guidelines that state “The number, size, style and type of windows should be appropriate for the architecture of the building.”

Therefore, Staff recommends that the Urban Design Committee recommend the Planning Commission deny the final design as submitted.

**Staff Contact:**

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**V. FINDINGS OF FACT**

**a. Site Description and Surrounding Context**

The proposed project is part of the Checkers House, an octagonal building which once held comfort stations. It is located in close proximity to Laurel Street,

opposite from the Altria Theater, within Monroe Park which is bordered by Belvidere Street to the east, Main Street to the south, Laurel Street to the west, and Franklin Street to the north. The public, urban park in which it is located is surrounded by a number of high-density zoning districts, including multi-family residential, institutional, and religious buildings.

**b. Scope of Review**

The project is subject to location, character, and extent review as part of a “public building or structure” under Section 17.07 of the City Charter.

**c. UDC Review History**

This project is part of the larger Monroe Park Master Plan. The Urban Design Committee and Planning Commission reviewed the Monroe Park Master Plan conceptually in October 2007, and then approved a final version of the plan in February 2008. In 2009, the Urban Design Committee and the Planning Commission approved final construction plans for the renovation of Monroe Park without conditions which included the approval of a fixed door for the bathroom and a functioning door for the adjacent space and two service windows with rolling doors to replace existing stationary windows.

In 2016, revisions to the renovation of the Checkers House to accommodate an ADA accessible restroom facility were submitted to, and approved by, the Permits and Inspections division. This did not require Location, Character, and Extent review as the proposed renovations did not impact the exterior of the building.

In 2017, various revisions and updates to the overall renovation of Monroe Park were submitted including:

- UDC 2017-08 Final review of Monroe Park Revisions
  - Permeable Pavers
  - Bio-filtration Planters
  - Planting Plan
  - Park Lighting-Interior
  - Park Lighting-Perimeter Streetscape
  - Checkers House Plaza – Wall Materials and Layout
  - Drinking Fountain
  - Bike Racks
  - Stage and Flagpoles
  - Games Court Design
  - Tree Removal Plan
- UDC 2017-12 Conceptual Review of Laurel Street Event Venue – Monroe Park Pavilion
- UDC 2017-17 Final Review of Laurel Street Event Venue – Monroe Park Pavilion
- UDC 2017-18 Final Review of Monroe Park Furnishings
- UDC 2017-19 Conceptual Review of Monroe Park Portland Loo
- UDC 2017-33 Final Review of Monroe Park Portland Loo
- UDC 2017-35 Final Review of modification to Checkers House Plaza (Monroe Park Revisions)

In 2018, plans for another revision to the renovation of the Checkers House were submitted to the division of Permits and Inspections. This submittal consisted of a modification to the exterior of the building and thus was denied as it had not been reviewed for Location, Character, and Extent, the reason for this application.

**d. Project Description**

The proposed vendor renovations to the Checkers House is part of the larger renovation of Monroe Park, currently under way.

The updated plan layout to accommodate a food and beverage vendor will include a kitchen, storage room and restroom. Existing room sizes are too small to function as a vendor kitchen or storage. The applicant is proposing the removal of one wall to create a kitchen large enough for a food and beverage vendor.

Additional vendor requirements include a service window large enough to receive and deliver orders, while maintaining surveillance over the seating area. Addition of a larger service window and counter requires the combination of two doors into one large opening, while infilling brick below the window opening. This will be completed within the constraints of one bay and maintain the head height of the existing windows.

A new steel awning is also proposed over the service window. It is designed to have minimum impact on the historic facade, while taking cues from traditional awning structures. The service window will have two sliding panels and muntins to match historic windows. The service counter will be commercial grade stainless steel.

The 2009 Masterplan called for vending food and beverage, as one method for activation of the park. The proposed alterations and additions to the Checkers House are intended to attract customers and retail vendors alike with a space suitable for a retail establishment.

**e. Master Plan**

Following the adoption of the 2008 Monroe Park Master Plan and the 2009 design of the park, the 2009 Downtown Plan contained recommendations for the surrounding neighborhoods and areas, as well as specific language about Monroe Park that “promote Monroe Park as the center of a campus and a community. With the growth of the Monroe Park Campus that surrounds the park on four sides, Monroe Park is becoming more important to the University as its primary green space, and as such has been endorsed as a central feature within the campus by the VCU 2020 Master Plan. The City and the Monroe Park Advisory Council have developed the 2008 Monroe Park Master Plan that will guide future enhanced use of the park as a cultural and passive recreational center for the campus and the neighborhood. This park plan has been reflected in the illustrations in the Downtown Plan. Respect for the park’s historic integrity and increased maintenance and security are key to the park’s success.”

The 2009 Downtown Plan further suggests the park receive "...a facelift with rehabilitated public facilities, new shade trees, improved lighting, and wireless Internet access."

**f. Urban Design Guidelines**

The Environment section of the Urban Design Guidelines state that "impacts to the natural landscape should be assessed and should generally be minimized when constructing man-made elements. A preference should be given toward materials and construction techniques which improve energy efficiency and water/soil quality. Lighting and landscaping should allow for surveillance and policing activities, but should be designed primarily to accommodate the intended use of the park" (page 9). The Guidelines express support for low-impact development, the goal of which is to "mimic a site's predevelopment hydrology by using design techniques that infiltrate, filter, store, evaporate, and detain runoff close to its source" (page 11).

The Public Facilities section of the Urban Design Guidelines state that "The number, size, style and type of windows should be appropriate for the architecture of the building. The rhythm, patterns, and ratio of walls to windows should be proportional and be compatible with adjacent buildings. Too many different window variations on a building can lead to visual confusion and should be avoided. Window design is also influenced by and should be compatible with details such as sills, sashes, lintels, depth of reveal, decorative caps and shutters." Furthermore, the guidelines note "Window openings should not be filled in with brick because of the difficulties in matching brick and mortar colors. If the filling of openings is unavoidable, the filled surface should be recessed from the original wall surface." (page 14).

**VI. ATTACHMENTS**

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