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To: Planning Commission  
From: Commission of Architectural Review  
Date: February 19, 2019  
RE: **Final location, character, and extent review of construction of a new elementary school, 813 N. 28<sup>th</sup> Street; COA-047059-2019, a2019-4059**

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**I. APPLICANT**

Bob Stone, Department of Public Works – Capital Projects

**II. LOCATION**

813 N. 28<sup>th</sup> Street

**Property Owner:**

City of Richmond School Board

**III. PURPOSE**

The application is for final location, character, and extent review of a new elementary school adjacent to the current site of George Mason Elementary School.

**IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION**

The project involves the construction of a new elementary school to accommodate 750 students. Richmond Public Schools (RPS) selected four school design prototypes and presented them to the School Board and community. The intention of the project is to reduce the design timeline in order to have the new school operational by 2020. The new building will occupy the southern portion of the property and front on M Street. The historic 1881 building, with numerous additions, is located on the northeast corner of the property at O and 29<sup>th</sup> Streets. The existing building will remain in operation until the new school is complete, at which time the proposal is to demolish the historic school.

Staff is supportive of the overall design and location of the school building, which is required to meet LEED Silver. Therefore, the Commission of Architectural Review recommends that the Planning Commission grant final approval of this project as presented with the following conditions:

- The decorative details including window keystones and splayed headers be simplified;
- brick detailing or recesses be added to unarticulated areas of the east, north and south elevations, to reduce the mass of long, unbroken brick walls; and
- perimeter fencing be submitted for review and approval by the Commission of Architectural Review.

Please note: The Commission of Architectural Review did not approve the overall site plan and recommended preservation of the historic school (which will be submitted under a separate application).

**Staff Contact:**

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## **V. FINDINGS OF FACT**

### **a. Site Description and Surrounding Context**

The subject property, totaling approximately 7.9 acres, is bounded by M Street on the south, an alley to the rear of 27<sup>th</sup> Street on the west, O Street on the north, and 29<sup>th</sup> Street (partially closed) on the east. The property lies within the R-6 (Single-Family Residential) zoning district and is currently improved with an 1881 with additions school building in the northeast corner and recreation areas.

The property is surrounded mainly by detached, single-family residential buildings. To the east and fronting M Street is a water tank owned by the City Department of Public Utilities.

### **b. Scope of Review**

The proposed project requires a Certificate of Appropriateness under Section 30-930 of the City Code as a property located in a City Old and Historic district.

### **c. Project Description**

In early 2018, The City of Richmond Public Schools issued an RFP for the design of a new 750-student elementary school. The intent of the RFP was to provide a prototype design that would allow for a reduced design timeline in order to have the new school operational by September 2020. Four prototypes were presented to the School Board and to the community, and the plans presented here represent the selected prototype.

The selected site is level and contains approximately 7.9 acres. It is anticipated that the new school will achieve a minimum LEED Silver certification. The site plan allows for the complete separation of car and bus traffic, and cars will be able to use the bus loop parking lot for varying events and purposes. It will provide parking for staff and visitors as well as a drop-off lane for parents that choose to drive their children to school. There will be playground areas behind the school that will be fenced for safety purposes. There will also be playground and athletic field areas at the back (north) of the site that will be used by the school during the day and by the community after school hours. Construction is scheduled to begin in the early Spring of 2019. Occupation of the new George Mason Elementary School is planned for the Fall of 2020 with the demolition of the existing school planned for Fall of 2020 and potentially into the Spring of 2021.

### **d. CAR Review History**

The Commission of Architectural Review conceptually reviewed this application at the November 18, 2018 meeting. At the meeting Commission members recommended ways to reduce the size and scale of the roof, and also recommended that the applicants consider adding additional openings on the ground floor, reducing the decorative features to be more consistent with an institutional building, and installing a covered walkway. Since the November meeting the applicants have provided additional information and photographs of prototypes. In response to community concerns they have moved the bus drop-off area from the parking lot accessed by Cedar Street to have buses travel on O Street, along 29<sup>th</sup> and out onto M Street. The applicants have also provided updated landscape and lightening plans.

At the November Commission meeting staff mentioned that a separate application for the demolition of the existing school building will be necessary. Staff has not received an application for the demolition.

The application for a Certificate of Appropriateness was partially approved at the January 22, 2019 meeting of the Commission of Architectural Review with the condition that site fencing be submitted for review. The Commission approved the building location and offered suggestions to alter the decorative details to simplify the window keystones and splayed brick headers, to add brick detailing or recesses to unarticulated areas of the elevations, including the main entry on the east elevation, and the north and south elevations at the end of the classroom wings. The Commission did not approve the overall site plan and recommended preservation of the historic school.

The revised elevations with simplified details and additional brick detailing are scheduled to be reviewed at the February 26, 2019 Commission of Architectural Review meeting.

**a. Master Plan**

The subject property is located within the East Planning District as defined by the citywide Master Plan. The Plan recommends Public and Open Space uses for this property, a designation that includes publicly owned and operated parks, open spaces, schools, and other government and public service facilities (pages 135, 167). The Public Facilities section of the Plan notes that “Richmond Public Schools has an ongoing policy of maximizing the use of facilities for both school and non-school related activities” (page 75). One of the “policies and strategies” intended to address specific school facilities deficiencies is “to enhance learning environments for all students, and to promote the use of all existing and planned facilities by the community-at-large by sharing facilities wherever practical and economically advantageous among public schools and other community institutions, organizations, programs and City agencies” (page 77). The “policies and strategies” section solidifies this desire by stating support for “designing buildings to allow for maximum flexibility in the use of the space, and multiple-use facilities that accommodate both students and residents of the surrounding neighborhoods” (page 77).

**b. Commission of Architectural Review Guidelines**

The Commission of Architectural Review Guidelines have a number of recommendations pertaining to new building construction, because of the size and massing of the new school it was reviewed under the guidelines related to new commercial construction. The guidelines suggest that new construction “*should incorporate human-scale elements at the pedestrian level,*” “*should respect the typical height of surrounding buildings,*” and “*should respect the vertical orientation typical of commercial buildings in Richmond’s historic districts. New designs that call for wide massing should look to the project’s local district for precedent. When designing new commercial buildings that occupy more than one third of a block face, the design should still employ bays as an organizational device, but the new building should read as a single piece of architecture.*” (pgs. 52-53). The Guidelines go on to say that “*materials used in new construction should be visually compatible with original materials used throughout the surrounding*

*neighborhood. (Page 53). The Guidelines note that “the size, proportion, and spacing patterns of door and window openings on free standing new construction should be compatible with patterns established within the district” and that “with larger buildings, applicants are encouraged to develop multiple entry points (doors), in keeping with historic precedent for the building type in question. Single entry points - such as a single garage entrance accompanied by single pedestrian entrances are not in keeping with historic precedent, which demonstrates that most large buildings had multiple pedestrian entry points.” (Page 56).*

*As to site layout, the Guidelines advocate that “buildings should face the most prominent street bordering the site” and “for large-scale commercial parking, parking within the building is strongly encouraged. If a building includes parking within it, vehicle entry doors should be located on non-primary elevations.” (Page 52)*

## **VII. ATTACHMENTS**

- a. Commission of Architectural Review Staff Report**
- b. Application**
- c. Plans**