



CITY OF RICHMOND

Department of Planning & Development Review *Staff Report*

Ord. No. 2021-097: To authorize the special use of the property known as 1500 North Lombardy for the purpose of four wall signs, upon certain terms and conditions.

To: City Planning Commission
From: Land Use Administration
Date: September 20, 2021

PETITIONER

David E. Gordon, Assistant Vice President of Capital Projects

LOCATION

1500 North Lombardy Street

PURPOSE

To authorize the special use of the property known as 1500 North Lombardy for the purpose of four wall signs, upon certain terms and conditions.

SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION

The applicant is requesting a special use permit to allow for the continued use of four illuminated wall signs that are attached on the sides of the bell tower connected to the Belgian Building on the Virginia Union University campus. The existing signage exceeds the sign area permitted in the I-Institutional District. Additionally, the existing signs are located within the Belgian Building City Old and Historic District. The Commission of Architectural Review (CAR) denied the request for a Certificate of Appropriateness for the signage because it does not meet the City's historic preservation guidelines. A special use permit is therefore required.

The Belgian Building, originally a pavilion designed by Henry Van de Velde in the International style for Belgium's entry into the 1939 New York World's Fair, is an individual City and Old Historic District and is individually listed on the State (1969) and National Registers (1970). The approximately 165-foot tower originally held bells, which were donated to President Herbert Hoover for his Stanford University library. Representative of the International Style, the complex has minimal ornamentation and colors, uses modular forms and flat surfaces, and has an emphasis on volumes. The belfry section of the prominent tower is defined by a distinctive use of louvers.

The existing signage, which was erected without a sign permit or approval from the Commission of Architectural Review, consists of 1,200 square feet of sign area, exceeding the 12 square feet permitted by the sign regulations in the zoning ordinance by 1,188 square feet. Moreover, the Commission of Architectural Review (CAR) denied the request for a Certificate of Appropriateness for the signage because it does not meet CAR guidelines.

Land Use Administration staff finds that the sign area of the signage significantly exceeds what is permitted by the zoning ordinance, and that the signage does not meet the City's historic preservation guidelines and is not consistent with the recommendations of the Master Plan.

Therefore, staff recommends denial of the special use permit request.

FINDINGS OF FACT

Site Description

The subject property is part of the Virginia Union University campus, which contains many buildings housing institutional uses. The four signs are presently erected on the 165-foot tower that is part of the Belgian Building, which is located directly southwest of the intersection of North Lombardy Street and Brook Road.



Proposed Use of the Property

The proposed ordinance would authorize the four existing signs, which contain a total area of approximately 1,200 square feet.

Master Plan

Richmond 300 recommends a future land use of "Institutional" for the property, with primary uses recommended being institutional, cultural, government and open space. The property is also within the proximity of the VUU/Chamberlayne Neighborhood Node. The plan envisions the node becoming more pedestrian-oriented with streetscaping, pedestrian lighting and signage being added to North Lombardy Street and surrounding streets. The portion of N Lombardy Street that abuts the property is designated as a "major mixed-use street" on the Street Typologies Map in Richmond 300.

Objective 3.1 of Richmond 300 is to "preserve culturally, historically, and architecturally significant buildings, sites, structures, neighborhoods, cemeteries, and landscapes that contribute to Richmond's authenticity." Strategy k. under Objective 4.1 of Richmond 300 calls on the City to "promote an attractive environment by minimizing visual clutter and confusion caused by a proliferation of signage, ensuring that public and private signage is appropriately scaled to the pedestrian environment" in order to create and preserve high-quality, distinctive, and well-designed neighborhoods and nodes.

Zoning and Ordinance Conditions

The property is currently located within the I Institutional Zoning District and is also located within the Belgian Building City Old & Historic District. The Zoning Ordinance permits a sign area of up to 32 square feet for signs visible from any street frontage, and where two or more main buildings are located on a lot (which is the case here), each building may be permitted to have a wall sign not exceeding 12 square feet in area.

CAR reviewed the Certificate of Appropriateness application at its February 25, 2020 meeting and denied the request. CAR staff recommended denial because the signs do not meet the following CAR guidelines:

- Standards for Signage: “Designs for signs in City Old and Historic Districts should reflect the pedestrian scale of the District. Signs within a District should be modest in size and addressed to pedestrians and slower vehicular traffic. Large signs designed with heavy, high speed vehicular traffic in mind are not appropriate.” CAR staff feel that the four signs do not meet this standard because the signs are not modest in size and are not designed to address pedestrians, but rather drivers on the surrounding streets and interstate highway.
- Flat Wall Signs: “Flat wall signs are wooden or metal sign panels applied directly to a building façade when a storefront cornice is not present. Generally, these signs are intended to be viewed from a moderate distance. Flat wall signs should be designed to enhance the façade by blending with the architectural features of the building. They should not be merely applied to the surface of the building, nor should they cover or obscure important architectural elements.” CAR staff feel that the four signs do not meet this standard because they are not designed to be viewed from a moderate distance. CAR staff also finds that the signs obscure important architectural elements of the building, namely the louvered belfry. Additionally, CAR staff finds that the signs are applied directly to a character-defining feature of the building, which obscure and likely damage this feature, and greatly detract from the overall character of the building.
- General Signage Guidelines: “Signs should not be internally illuminated.” The four signs are proposed to be illuminated, so are not permitted under the general signage guidelines.

The period for appealing CAR’s decision to City Council was not met. Appeals must be filed within 15 days of CAR’s determination per Sec. 30-930.8 of the Zoning Ordinance. The Commission of Architectural review denied the Certificate of Appropriateness request February 25th, 2020, and the appeal request was received by the City Clerk’s office via facsimile on March 12th, 2020, which is one day past the deadline.

The applicant (Virginia Union University) has been working with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources on an MOU regarding the erected signage, which had not been formalized at the time of the previous Planning Commission hearing.

Surrounding Area

Properties to the north are also located within the I-Institutional District. Properties to the east and south are also located within the I-Institutional District and the UB-2 Urban Business District. Properties to the south and west are located within the R-53 Multifamily Residential District. Additional institutional uses that are part of the Virginia Union University campus are located to the east and northwest of the subject property. A Richmond Police Department Training Facility exists to the north of the subject property. Single family and multi-family uses exist to the west and Interstate 95/64 exists to the south of the subject property.

Neighborhood Participation

Staff notified area residents, property owners, and the Edgehill Chamberlayne Court Civic Association of the application. A letter of support was received from the Edgehill Chamberlayne Court Civic Association.

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