

STAFF REPORT 08-10-2022 MEETING

PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG

APPLICATION NUMBER: 22-7939, 22-7940, 22-7941, 22-7942, 22-7943, 22-7944

ADDRESS: 346-362 WEST GRAND BOULEVARD, 3636 PORTER

HISTORIC DISTRICT: HUBBARD FARMS

APPLICANT/ARCHITECT: TIM FLINTOFF, AIA/4545 ARCHITECTURE

OWNER OF RECORD: DETROIT LAND BANK AUTHORITY (DLBA)

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 07-11-2022

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 07-27-2022

SCOPE: ERECT TWO MULTI-UNIT TOWNHOUSE BUILDINGS AND DETACHED GARAGE

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The subject site consists of seven vacant parcels owned by the Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA) and advertised for redevelopment via RFP in 2020. The parcels are at a prominent corner location, fronting on West Grand Boulevard, with a shorter side street exposure along Porter Street. The area is currently a grass-covered vacant lot, with some illegal parking/storage of personal vehicles apparent at the extreme northwest corner. This site was identified as an opportunity site (priority redevelopment site) as part of the West Vernor Planning Study completed in 2018.



View of development site, looking northeast from West Grand Boulevard and Porter. Staff photo, July 27, 2022.

The existing historic context along West Grand Boulevard consists mainly of grand 2½ story residences and even larger, and similarly architecturally ambitious, multi-family and institutional buildings. With rare exception, the historic buildings in the vicinity exhibit prominent architectural features such as turrets, raised porches, colonnades, and other flourishes intended to amplify their architectural distinction. Entrances are mostly raised a half-story above grade, framed with stairs and associated landscaping in a number of cases. Materials are an eclectic mix of brick, stone, and wood, deployed by skillful designers in a variety of creative and eye-catching ways. The general historic character here is bold, even ostentatious (there are two separate residential buildings with Greek temple fronts book-ending the opposite side of the block). This block is meant to be a focus of attention, not a side street.



Subject development parcel outlined in orange, from original RFP.



Historic context immediately across the street from site at West Grand Boulevard and Porter. Staff photo, July 27, 2022.



Historic context near West Grand Boulevard and Porter. Staff photo, July 27, 2022



Historic context near West Grand Boulevard and Porter. Staff photo, July 27, 2022



Historic context near West Grand Boulevard and Porter. Staff photo, July 27, 2022



Historic context immediately across the street from site at West Grand Boulevard and Porter. Staff photo, July 27, 2022



Historic context immediately across the street from site at West Grand Boulevard and Porter. Staff photo, July 27, 2022



Historic context near West Grand Boulevard and Porter. Staff photo, July 27, 2022



Historic context near West Grand Boulevard and Porter. Staff photo, July 27, 2022



Historic context immediately adjacent to site at West Grand Boulevard and Porter. Staff photo, July 27, 2022

PROPOSAL

Per the submitted drawings, documents, narrative, and scope of work, the applicant is proposing to erect two new multi-family buildings, and a detached garage structure.



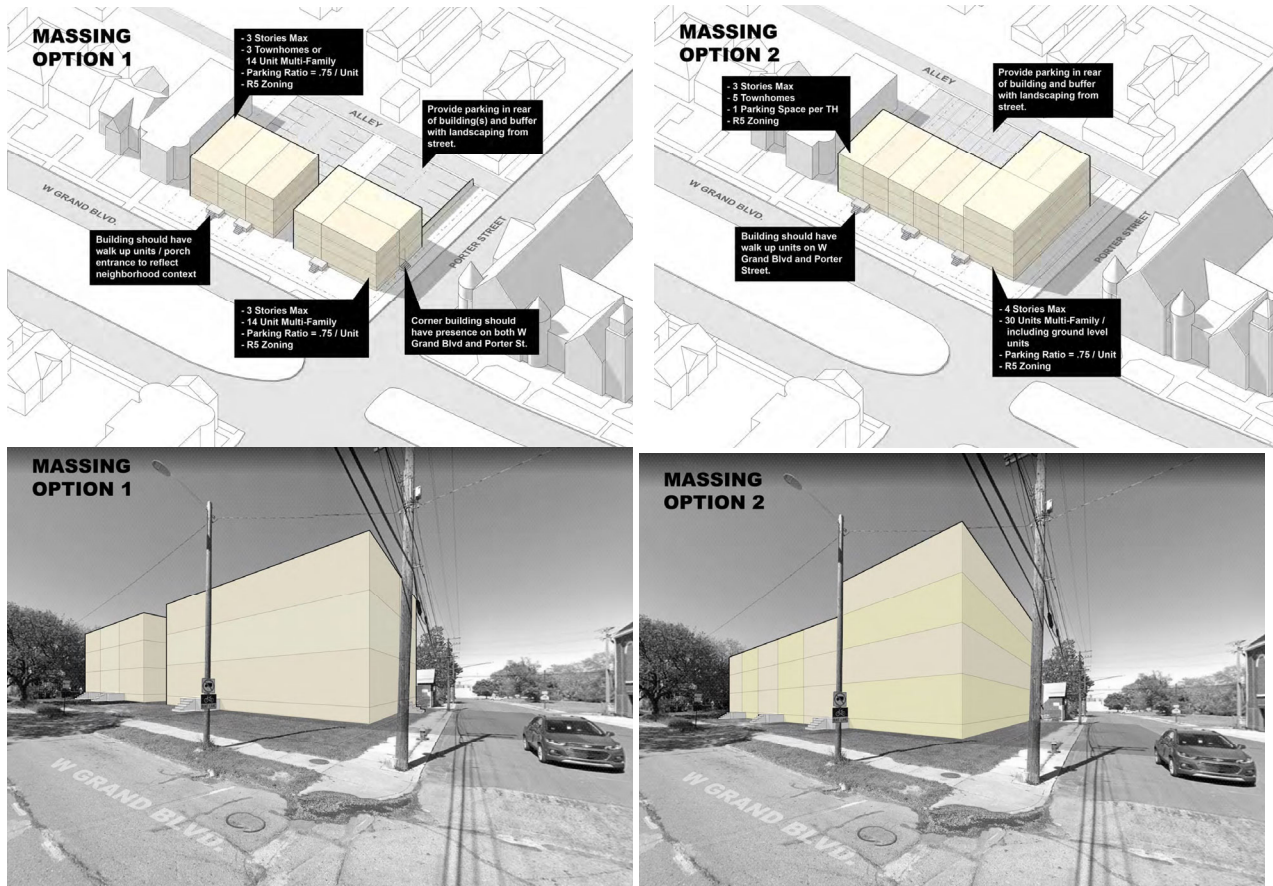
Applicant rendering – West Grand Blvd.



Applicant rendering – Porter Street

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Hubbard Farms Historic District was established in 1993. Per our records, it is believed the subject development site was already cleared at that time.
- The DLBA entered into a purchase agreement (attached) that requires the applicant to gain the approval of the Planning and Development Department for the final design. As part of the RFP process in early 2019, PDD prepared conceptual massing sketches suggesting appropriate ways that the site might be rebuilt. These massing studies, reproduced below, envision large blocks or rows; raised several feet above grade and showing 3-4 stories along West Grand Boulevard. They do not correspond to any particular architectural style.



- While there is naturally a design development, market research, and value engineering process between concept and final design, PDD is not fully satisfied with the submitted design. Until this application, the applicant had not discussed the project at periodic intervals with PDD. Such continued coordination on other projects has been critical in realizing projects that meet city and community objectives.
- PDD and HDC staff's main concern lies with the massing and architectural expression along West Grand Boulevard. Instead of the prominent, large development anticipated by PDD's concept massing at this major corner, the final massing as presented instead falls as low as 2 stories, has at-grade entrances, and is broken up into even smaller sub-elements to disguise its size further. In juxtaposition with the bulkier and more assertive historic context, the proposed massing fails to "fill the hole" in the streetscape (this *particular* streetscape) convincingly. Exacerbating the design problem, in staff's opinion, is the jumbled expression of tiny narrow elevations for each individual residence, which appears to be designed to recede and "blend in" when the context here expects the exact opposite. Multi-family buildings in this vicinity typically present a unified, monumental expression as a single building, overriding individuality for various types of architectural distinction, independent of style.
- Staff notes the following excerpts from Hubbard Farms Historic District Elements of Design (Section 21-2-157 of the 2019 Detroit City Code):

- **(1) Height.** *Commercial and institutional buildings range from one-story to four stories in height; some have single stories with very high ceilings and balconies, such as Aijalon Church, the former bank building at 4138 West Vernor and Bowen Library. ... Residential buildings range from one and one-half stories to five stories, the smallest being the workers cottages seen primarily on Bagley and the tallest being the five-story Whitedel Apartment Building on Porter and Hubbard. The majority of residential buildings are either two or two and one-half stories tall, meaning they have two full stories with an attic or finished third floor within the roof. ... new buildings shall meet the following standards:*
 - *The eight adjoining structures on the same block face shall be used to determine an average height. The height of the two adjoining houses shall be added into the total twice with a divisor of ten used to determine the average. Any new building must have a height of the main roof of at least 80 percent of the resulting average; in no case shall a new building be taller than the tallest roof height included in the computation. In determining the heights of existing structures and proposed structures, the highest point of the main roof shall be used, even where towers, cupolas, or other minor elements may be taller ... The proposed new structure shall have a height at the eaves, or cornice, of not less than 90 percent of the average determined from existing structures, and in no case shall the eaves or cornice of the proposed structure be lower than the lowest eave or cornice height used in the computation, or higher than the highest.*
- **(2) Proportion of building's front facades.** *No proposed residential building or addition shall create a front façade narrower or wider than those existing on the same block.*
- **(6) Rhythm of entrance and/or porch projections.** *Placement of entrance and porch projections vary from building to building, usually depending on type, size, and style. In general, a great variety of porches and entrances characterize Hubbard Farms...*
- The applicant's proposed West Grand Boulevard elevation would certainly be appropriate as infill on many side streets in our historic districts, but staff recommends that a "side street" infill elevation is not appropriate for West Grand Boulevard.
- PDD and HDC staff have been made aware that some community engagement was made, but our staff was not involved. The applicant reports that the community is in support of the project.
- The Porter Street elevation, as proposed for a side street subordinate to West Grand Boulevard, and consistent with the reasons outlined above, is appropriate for this portion of the project, in staff's opinion.

ISSUES

- Staff stipulates that larger and more architecturally ambitious structures are more expensive and may not mesh easily with the market conditions or development preferences identified by the applicant. They may also find some community opposition. However, it is the Commission's role, first and foremost, to assess a proposed new development under *historic appropriateness*. As outlined above, staff finds that the buildings are not massive enough, not distinctive enough, not coherent enough, and not tall enough for the monumental and distinguished historic context, particularly along West Grand Boulevard.
- Should the Commission find that the development meets a substantial community need, but falls short of "appropriateness," then a Notice to Proceed (NTP) can of course be considered for the approval of "inappropriate" work. However, the issue of a NTP would not absolve the applicant from receiving separate approval from PDD design review staff. PDD regrets that the applicant did not connect earlier with our design staff to discuss other directions which may have been possible to address the apparent disconnect between the desired massing and the stated market concerns.

RECOMMENDATION

Section 21-2-78, Determinations of Historic District Commission

The proposed work is incompatible with the massing, size, scale and architectural features of its environment. property. Staff therefore recommends that the proposal should be issued a Denial, for the reasons outlined in the staff report and the failure to meet Secretary of the Interior Standard #9 and several Elements of Design:

(9) New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.

And Elements of Design 1 (Height), 2 (Proportion of building's front facades), 6 (Rhythm of entrance and/or porch projections), and 22 (General environmental character), as applied to the West Grand Boulevard vicinity in particular.