

**REVISED JUNE 14, 2023 (EDITS MARKED IN RED)**

**STAFF REPORT:** 6/12/2023 REGULAR MEETING

**PREPARED BY:** D. RIEDEN

**APPLICATION NUMBER:** #23-8395

**ADDRESS:** WASHINGTON BOULEVARD (MEDIAN BETWEEN PARK AND WEST LAFAYETTE AVENUES)

**HISTORIC DISTRICTS:** WASHINGTON BLVD LOCAL HD, GRAND CIRCUS PARK HD

**ADJACENT TO HISTORIC DISTRICTS:** DAVID WHITNEY BUILDING, LOWER WOODWARD AVENUE

**APPLICANT/ARCHITECT:** BEDROCK/ GROUNDSWELL

**PROPERTY OWNER:** CITY OF DETROIT, DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS/GENERAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT

**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION:** 5/24/2023

**DATES OF STAFF SITE VISITS:** 04/20/23, 5/24/23, 6/7/23, 6/13/23

**SCOPE:** ALTER LANDSCAPING

### EXISTING CONDITIONS

The medians of Washington Boulevard consist of 5 segments of green space stretching from Grand Circus Park southward to a finishing point just south of Michigan Avenue. Added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982, the Boulevard was one of Augustus Woodward’s original streets planned in the 1807 design for the City of Detroit. Because the plan was not fully implemented, a sharp curve occurs just south of Michigan Avenue to join an existing street. This boulevard has undergone several stages of development throughout history: from Woodward’s Plan, to the City Beautiful movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century which turned the Boulevard into a Beaux-Arts streetscape with sculpture-lined park, and finally the late 1970s, which introduced a complete redesign for an urban pedestrian mall that included new sculptures and an amphitheater, to a more recent restoration of tree plantings in the early 2000s. Despite these changes, Washington Boulevard has retained and preserved spatial organization and land patterns of the landscape, where the medians serves as center “islands” that divides and informs the relationship with the surrounding buildings, as stated in the Historic Designation Advisory Board’s (HDAB) Final Report which notes the following:

*“The major open space in the district is the wide public right-of-way that originally consisted of landscaped center islands dividing the roadways of a boulevard.”*



Site Photo 1, by Staff April 20, 2023: (facing north) showing General Alexander Macomb memorial at Michigan Avenue.



Site Photo 2, by Staff April 20, 2023: (facing north) shaded median showing view of Grand Circus Park framed by rows of zelkova trees.

The boulevard runs true north and south, with Park Avenue on the north end, Clifford Street, Grand River Avenue, State Street, Michigan Avenue crossing through the median, and the curved terminus approaching West Lafayette Boulevard to the south. Each of these intersections have no direct crossing between the medians at this time, but is an element that would be introduced in this proposal. Each intersection has a low arcing wall with a low metal barrier closer to the street. At Michigan Avenue, the statues of General Casimir Pulaski and General

Alexander Macomb face each other on either side of the Avenue. They both are raised on elevated paved areas with raised garden beds of flowers. Gingko and crab apple trees are planted in their surroundings. A Michigan Historic Site sign commemorates the War of 1812 in Detroit just north of the General Macomb statue. From there, the median is lightly covered with grass, with open dirt and exposed roots from the trees planted in the medians. All trees are planted at regular intervals along each side and in the middle of the median. None of these trees are of historic age, some are recently planted. The medians also feature light posts that feature elements that nod to the Beaux-



*Site Photo 3, by Staff June 8, 2023: (facing north) shaded median showing dog walking use under the canopy of zelkova trees.*

Arts style but are non-historic aged elements. Other recent features include Marcia Wood’s “Standing Together” (1980) sculpture located at the Clifford Street intersection, while an unlabeled metal sculpture is set facing Grand Circus Park on the northmost median. Most of the current use appears to be by dog owners, as was witnessed by staff site visits and the medians also have several dog bag stations and utility boxes under the canopy of trees that line the medians. Other than concrete walks at the perimeter of each median, there are no existing walkways.

## PROPOSAL

The City of Detroit has an agreement with Downtown Detroit Partnership (DDP) for the management and maintenance of the downtown parks, including the Washington Boulevard medians. Concept plans were completed by Groundswell in collaboration with Bedrock, DDP and the City of Detroit. A community meeting was held in May to review the project and the proposal has the following work. ~~The applicant states that a second community event happened on June 8, 2023, where the DDP and City of Detroit staff led a walkthrough with a handful of local business/property owners who are adjacent to the Boulevard. Please see attached drawings, the drawings are pending a survey which may cause further revisions to the plan. Please note that at the time of this report, additional changes were made to the plan that Staff has not yet received. Anticipated changes include the reduction in the number of trees removed, path lighting, and seating. All are pending a survey and further evaluation.~~

On the afternoon of June 14, 2023, staff received an updated plan which features the following changes from the formerly proposed plan (See Figure 1, below):

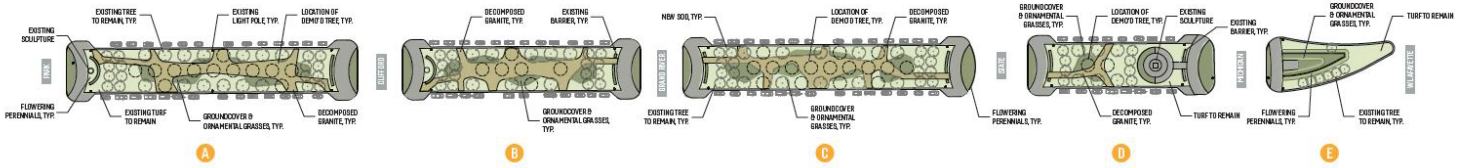
- The former plan proposed the removal of 36 trees, whereas the new plan proposes the removal of 84 trees.
- The former plan had the main central path cut through the arching wall at several intersections, the new plan has no proposed cuts through the arching walls. The plan does not connect the center pathway across the street intersections.
- Labels on the plan have been updated to identify known sculptures and statues.

The scope of work includes the removal of ~~84~~ 36 trees, mostly along the center, and ~~ends of the medians~~. A proposed path of crushed granite will run down the center of the median, ~~creating connectivity between Grand Circus Park and Michigan Avenue~~. A mix of ground covers, perennials and annuals are proposed as well as moments of seating ~~as shown in the attached drawings~~. A photometric study is underway to verify the need for pathway lighting, which may also be added to this plan.

The current submission requests that the Historic District Commission approve the Master Plan and give staff the authority to approve the final drawings.

## FORMER PLAN

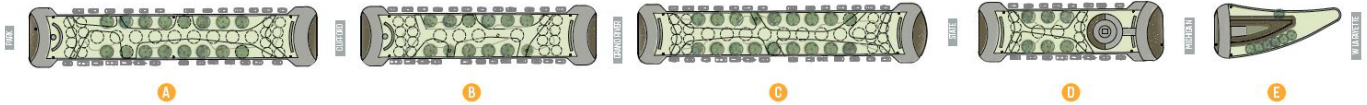
- DECOMPOSED GRANITE
- ORNAMENTAL GRASSES, GROUND COVER & FLOWERING PERENNIALS
- TURF
- POTENTIAL TREE TO BE REMOVED



## REVISED PLAN

### PROPOSED TREE REMOVAL

- POTENTIAL TREE TO BE REMOVED



### PROPOSED DESIGN

- DECOMPOSED GRANITE
- ORNAMENTAL GRASSES, GROUND COVER & FLOWERING PERENNIALS
- TURF
- POTENTIAL TREE TO BE REMOVED

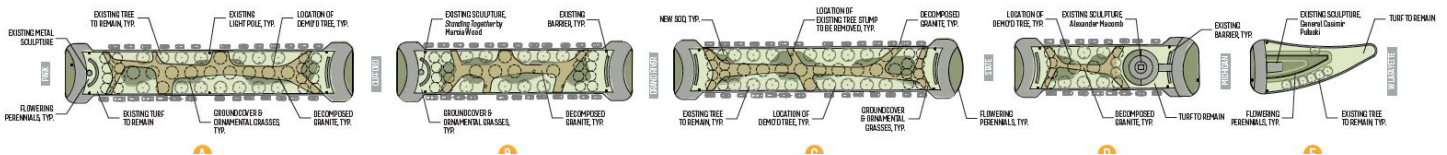


Figure 1, by Applicant: Former proposal and NEW Proposed site plans showing pathway with trees to be removed/retained.

## STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

The median of Washington Blvd runs from Michigan Ave. to Grand Circus Park and crosses two Historic Districts, Washington Blvd HD from the south to the Grand Circus Park HD to the north, and is adjacent to two historic districts: Lower Woodward Ave HD and the David Whitney Building HD.

- The HDAB report for Washington Blvd Local HD, enacted in August 2003, offers the following insight regarding the boulevard:
  - South of Michigan Ave., the boulevard was originally called Wayne Street, and does not share the planned development, architectural significance of that portion of the street derived from the Woodward Plan.
  - In mid-nineteenth century, Washington Blvd, one of the “grand boulevards” as identified in the 1807 Woodward Street plan, was developed as an upper class



Figure 2, Washington Blvd ca. early 1920s from Park Avenue, looking south, showing former crisscross pattern pathways and tree plantings that appears to extend Grand Circus Park's pathway scheme. (Detroit Historical Society)

residential area. One the residents, J. Burgess Book, Jr., dreamt of transforming this boulevard into Detroit's most exclusive shopping district after traveling Europe and the USA, studying grand boulevards.

- The Book family controlled 60% of the street frontage. Book was influenced by the City Beautiful movement, grown out of the Chicago World Fair of 1893. In 1915, Edward H. Bennett, who collaborated with Danile Burnham on the Chicago Plan, used the idea of this movement in the master plan for Detroit. Although his grand designs were not realized, his recommendations encouraged Book to plan a monumental Beaux Arts streetscape.
- Except for the Industrial Bank Building, all buildings were Beaux Arts classical in design, the grandest, Book-Cadillac Hotel (1924), which marked the gateway to the Book development on Michigan Ave. The Great Depression halted the continuation of the Book vision, and they were never able to control all the land on Washington Blvd., allowing for more architectural diversity erected by others. Notable is the control of the Catholic Church, which held land and its headquarters and St. Aloysius church. Also, two-story shops were allowed to remain, contrasting with their neighboring tall buildings, but held fashionable retail as reminder of the earlier Book vision.
- Louis Kemper later designed a grand scheme for the boulevard:
  - *“As a setting for the Books’ downtown land development, Louis Kamper designed a monumental scheme, since destroyed, of Washington Boulevard as a broad boulevard ornamented with stone balustrades, formal promenades, statuary and a series of extraordinary Beaux-Art street light standards. The original street design was destroyed over the years with successive alterations.”*
- In 1978-79, Washington Boulevard was completely redesigned: new planting, new brick and granite paving, concrete planters, a continuous, linear metal truss



Figure 3, Washington Blvd ca.1922 from Michigan Ave, *showing the only remaining feature today, the statue of General Macomb upon a raised circular dais with cannons.*



Figure 4, Washington Blvd looking north from Michigan Ave., *showing a central path with cross-paths and streetlights. (Burton Collection, date unknown- likely 1920s)*



Figure 5, Washington Blvd looking north from Michigan Ave., *showing a central path with cross-paths and streetlights. (Date unknown- likely late 1920s)*

sculptural element, and an amphitheater contribute to the street's new urban pedestrian mall motif. The HDAB report does not mention the streetlights in this period.

- The HDAB report for Lower Woodward Ave HD, enacted in December 2001, reinforces the exclusive, high-end setting of Washington Boulevard by the use of creating a high-end entrance on the Washington



Figure 6, Washington Blvd. from Grand River Ave. looking south, ca.2007

Blvd side, and a more common retail entrance for the Woodward Ave side of the Himelhoch's Building (1545 Woodward, Washington Arcade Building):

*“Since 1923, the building has been known to Detroiters as Himelhoch's, was a locally owned and rather exclusive women's department store. The store's high-volume business entered from the Woodward Avenue entrance, while the upscale 'carriage trade' entered from the Washington Blvd. side.”*

- The HDAB report for Grand Circus Park HD, enacted in August 2002, and the adjacent David Whitney Building HD, enacted in June 2000, do not add any additional insight regarding the boulevard itself.
- While the Elements of Design for all the above HD were reviewed, only the Elements of Design for the Washington Blvd Local HD offer the significant insights for this proposal:
  - *The major building materials common to wall surfaces in the district are limestone, brick, and terra-cotta. Many granite bases also exist.*
  - *Buff brick is plentiful; brown and orange brick also exists.*
  - *Architectural details generally relate to architectural styles. Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century buildings in the Beaux Arts, Renaissance Revival, and Italian Romanesque styles exhibit round arches, cartouches, quoins, fluted pilasters, and other Classically derived details... The two two-story buildings are of a plain Art Deco design with modest Classical details.*
  - *A strong, overall wall of continuity is formed by the buildings that abut and are sited on the front lot line.*
  - *Brick paving, concrete walls, trees in metal grates, and trolley tracks replaced the eastern side of the broad boulevard formerly ornamented with stone balustrades, formal promenades, statuary, and Beaux-Arts light standards. A multi-lane two-way roadbed is now on the west side of the public right-of-way adjoining the sidewalk adjacent to the building on the west side of the street. Concrete planters line the sidewalks.*
  - *The major open space in the district is the wide public right-of-way that originally consisted of landscaped center islands dividing the roadways of a boulevard; this has been replaced with the existing plaza dominated by concrete and a single roadway on the west. A bronze statue of General Alexander Macomb is located on its original granite base at the southern end of the boulevard.*

- The “Beaux Arts” streetlights are mentioned in both the HDAB and Elements of Design, but these are not the original lampposts. The proposed design has no lampposts proposed for removal.
- Other proposed features do not conflict with the Elements of Design in materials or design. The path materials are appropriate.
- It is staff’s opinion that proposed pathway is irregular and has potential conflicts with existing conditions that are not yet resolved in the proposed plan:
  - The pathway is in conflict with many above ground and below ground utilities, which may effect the location and design of the pathway. (See site photo 5.)
  - The proposed pathway at each terminus does not reach the connecting broad sidewalk, instead terminating at a 2’ wide curb. This condition is especially apparent between Clifford and Grand River, ie., “median B” in the proposed plan.



Site Photo 4, by Staff April 20, 2023: (facing west) median showing view lampposts, Marcia Wood sculpture and paving at the intersection of Clifford Street, and the first two rows of trees in the foreground proposed for removal. Note that the proposed terminus of the pathway would end behind the streetlight and at the 2’ wide curb, not at the broad sidewalk in the foreground.

- All trees are not of historic age nor historically significant. The applicant provided the following statement from a certified arborist:

*“In general, the trees on the Washington Boulevard Island between Grand River and State Street are in good condition. I did not see any indication of insect or disease pests on either of my visits to the site this spring. Now that the trees are starting to reach maturity it could be said the area was overplanted. Most of the grass in the center part of the island is gone from being shaded out. The trees will also shade each other out as their canopies start to come together. As far as root overcrowding is concerned, removing the center row of trees could help the remaining trees. Any volume of soil, whether it’s a planting pot in a house or a boulevard island such as this, has a maximum carrying capacity of how many plants can be supported. So, removing the center row of trees should benefit the remaining trees.”* -Tom Morgan, Owen Tree & Lawn Service (ISA Certified Arborist # MI-0300A)



Site Photo 5, by Staff June 13, 2023: (facing south) median north of State Street showing existing utilities and location for the proposed pathways. All trees in this part of the median shown are proposed for removal.

- The applicant also provided an explanation from the City’s General Services Department (GSD) horticulturalist, Barry Burton, that states that the extra trees being removed are mostly small ornamentals and other over-planted trees that are crowding the more mature trees. The intent for removing more than 80 trees is to allow more light into the median for the planting beds and to let the mature trees prosper. Staff does not have any issue with this approach.
- Staff observed that the proposed plan does not accurately show the number of existing trees: on the north side of median at State Street (“median D”), for example, staff observed a double row of trees encircling the arc, not a single row, all of which are located at the proposed pathway. Staff counted a total tree removal of

84 from the site plan and site visit. The current proposal no longer shows the total tree removal count as the previous plan did.

- Staff received confirmation that no new trees will be planted. The gaps of trees along the medians, where existing stumps occur particularly at medians B and C, are proposed to remain open. The intent is for GSD to monitor the health of the remaining tree canopy, making necessary tweaks/additions over time.
- Staff has no issue with the proposed planting beds, they are of an appropriate location, scale, design and composition.
- The existing seat walls at each intersection are not historic. ~~The proposal to cut through the walls to create pathways is not inappropriate.~~
- The General Alexander Macomb Statue is mentioned in the HDAB report and is present in historic images (see figure 3). ~~The proposal is missing the label and location of the General Casimir Pulaski statue south of Michigan Ave. Because~~ The HDAB report also indicates Michigan Ave. as the “gateway” to Washington Blvd., ~~staff recommends showing both sculptures are present.~~ It is staff’s opinion that this “gateway” and the statue of General Macomb, the raised circular dais upon which the statue sits with the surrounding cannons are historic distinctive character defining features that should be preserved. The proposal does not show any impact on these features and therefore is appropriate. The proposed plan also has no impact on the General Casimir Pulaski statue across Michigan Avenue.
- The sculptures at Clifford and Park are not mentioned in the HDAB reports nor the Elements of Design and do not appear to be of historic significance. They are not disturbed in the proposed plan.
- Axial views towards Grand Circus Park are preserved with this proposal. ~~No obstruction or changes are observed, and the proposed pathway will likely enhance this experience.~~
- Crosswalks are preserved at the street intersections, with no changes and no proposed direct connectivity between the medians are proposed. Staff has the opinion that this is appropriate. Staff had a conversation with the applicant that at a future phase, direct connection between each median may be proposed.
- Staff observed “desire-paths” that crisscross the median ~~between the Grand River State and Grand River Clifford medians.~~ The new proposal retains locations for potential cross-paths at these locations.

## ISSUES

- Upon completion of the survey, confirm final plans to resolve potential pathway/utility conflicts, lighting, seating, planting beds, and tree removal/tree planting counts.
- ~~Add labels for both statues on Michigan Ave.~~
- No other issues.

## RECOMMENDATION

### **Section 21-2-78. Determination of the Historic District Commission – Certificate of Appropriateness**

It is staff’s opinion that the project generally conforms to the Elements of Design for the district and meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Staff therefore recommends that the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for the Master Plan as proposed with the following conditions:

- The applicant provides final plans which includes seating, lighting, tree removal and planting plans.
- Staff shall have the authority to review and approve the final design of the work prior to their implementation.