

STAFF REPORT 07-12-2023 MEETING
APPLICATION NUMBER: 23-8433
ADDRESS: 477 WEST ALEXANDRINE
HISTORIC DISTRICT: WILLIS-SELDEN
APPLICANT: ROBERT SLATTERY/477 WEST WILLIS LLC
OWNER OF RECORD: 477 WEST ALEXANDRINE LLC
DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 07-01-2023

PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG

SCOPE: CONSTRUCT PARKING LOT

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The project site is a recently vacant parcel on the south side of West Alexandrine, between Cass and 2nd Street.



View of 115 Edmund Place, looking northwest, Staff photo, June 1, 2022.

An existing building on the site was demolished in or around 2018 pursuant to an emergency demolition order from BSEED. Mown grass and some shrubs/trees cover the site, along with an advertising sign.



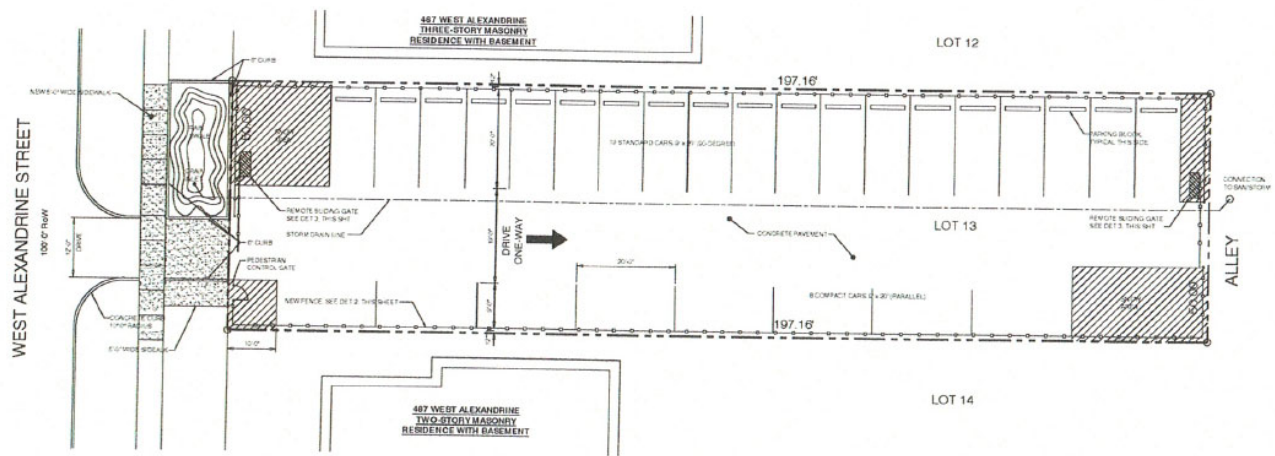
477 West Alexandrine outlined in yellow, per Detroit Parcel Viewer.



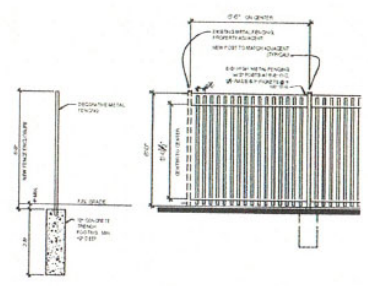
View to the east showing varied urban character of the block. Staff photo, July 10, 2023.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

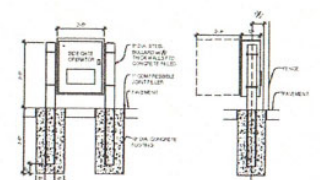
Per the submitted drawings, documents, and scope of work, the applicant is proposing to **construct a parking lot** on this mid-block parcel. Work includes concrete paving, curbing, wrought-iron style metal and vinyl fencing, card reader, sliding gates, LED lighting, and a new curb cut to West Alexandrine.



PROPOSED SITE PLAN
SCALE 1" = 10'-0"



FENCE DETAILS
SCALE 3/8" = 1'-0"



GATE OPERATOR
SCALE 3/8" = 1'-0"

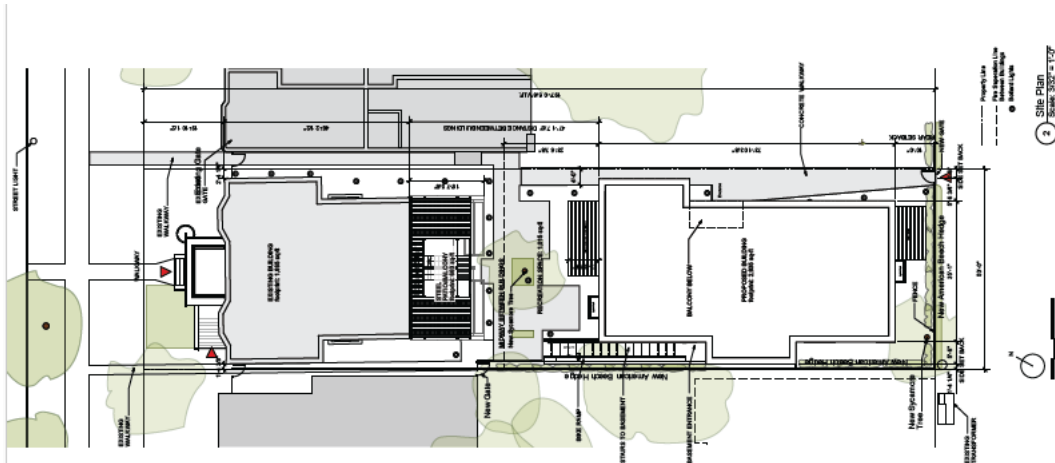
STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Willis-Selden Historic District was established in 2011.
- An historic multi-family apartment building (Bretton House) occupied this parcel until at least 2018, when it was ordered demolished by the Buildings Department per their authority for emergency work “immediately necessary for the protection of public health and safety” under Section 21-2-74 of the 2019 Detroit City Code. The property was owned by the current applicant at that time.



View of original historic building on the site, photo from 2004. Demolished 2018 as an emergency demolition.

- The applicant originally appeared in front of this body four years prior to that demolition, in October 2014, with a proposal to rehabilitate the historic building. The existing structure was to be renovated to accommodate six residential units. The project included the restoration of the building’s facades and the historically correct replacement of the front porch roof with a balcony, as well as a new design for balconies and egress stairs in the rear of the building. The Commission approved the project as proposed.
- In 2016, two years prior to the demolition, the applicant returned to the Commission with a revised plan (shown below), which included a separate and contemporarily styled “Garden Apartments” structure to the rear (south) of the existing historic building, creating a dense parcel with multiple housing options. The Commission also approved this proposal.





Aerial view of the existing Bretton House with new Garden Apartment Building



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midtown development group inc 17

Rendering from application for this parcel as approved by the Commission in 2016, two years prior to the demolition of the historic Bretton House building.

- At some point subsequent to the demolition, no later than November 2020 per Google Street View, signage appeared announcing the development of a contemporary building on the vacant parcel. It is not clear if the sign referred to a relocated version of the modern “Garden Apartments” building (sans the historic building), or was meant to be a new design. There are no additional HDC applications or approvals on record prior to the current parking lot proposal.



- The Commission, per the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards, is expected to review the work impact of a property’s change of use on the historic character of a local historic district, as such:
 - (1) *A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.*
- Several *Elements of Design* for the Willis-Selden Historic District, as codified in Section 21-2-217 of the 2019 Detroit City Code, have relevance to the current proposal, underlining added for emphasis:
 - **(5) Rhythm of spacing of buildings on streets.** *Rhythm of spacing on streets is generally determined by setbacks from side lot lines. The overall character of the district is one of densely clustered, yet visually distinct, structures separate by narrow setbacks. Commercial buildings frequently abut adjacent buildings, typically featured no setbacks from side lot lines, especially on Woodward Avenue where evenly spaced storefronts create a regular spacing of buildings. There is a general regularity in the widths of subdivision lots from one block to another, contributing to a regular rhythm of spacing of buildings on streets.*
 - **(12) Walls of continuity.** *Setbacks of residential buildings tend to vary slightly from one buildings to the next, but generally create a wall of continuity on all streets in the district, except where building demolition has created vacant lots. The continuous façades of commercial buildings, where they exist in rows, create significant walls of continuity in the district.*
 - **(14) Relationship of open space to structures.** *Front and side yards range from shallow to non-existent, while most smaller residential buildings feature rear yards. Other than public rights-of-way, large areas of open space exist only where they have been created by building demolition; sometimes these spaces serve as parking lots or are maintained as open lawns.*
 - **(17) Rhythm of building setbacks.** *A degree of irregularity is introduced by varying setbacks of front façades; smaller residential buildings tend to be set back several feet from the public sidewalk, while larger apartment buildings and other buildings often occupy their entire lots. While setbacks may vary slightly from one building to the next, the overall impression is one of a consistent rhythm of building setbacks. Where building demolition has occurred, the original rhythmic progression of buildings has been disrupted.*
- The Elements of Design clearly assess that the open spaces created by building demolition have diminished the historic character and represent “disruptions” in the historic “rhythm” and “regularity” of the district. The demolition of the former Bretton House building has been another such disruption. Analogous to windowless openings on historic buildings that require compatible new windows, these unfortunate gaps or “missing teeth” in the historic streetscape can only appropriately and compatibly be filled by buildings, not parking. Construction of such buildings is obviously not required of any property owner, but the elective construction of a parking lot cannot be, in staff’s opinion, compatible with the historic context. The existence of a temporary ahistorical condition does not require that it be perpetuated and made permanent, to the demonstrably negative impact on the wider district.
- The applicant states that the parking lot is required to serve a nearby restaurant (currently known as “Mad Nice”) at 4128 Second Street. This facility has its own parking lot, and neither the restaurant nor its existing parking lot is adjacent to the subject parcel. HDC staff notes the availability of street parking and several other lots in walking distance.
- Professional staff has consistently recommended against approval for surface parking lots in historic districts for the reasons stated above, except in limited cases where they directly support contextual and important new construction, and are visually obscured behind the streetwall of such new developments.

ISSUES

- A surface parking lot is a historically inappropriate development for this location, independent of the skillfulness of its landscaping or other design elements. The curb cuts required for access to the lot will further degrade the historic context and character of the vicinity. As such staff does not recommend approval for a Certificate of Appropriateness, signaling appropriate work, per Section 21-2-73.
- Staff also does not recommend a Notice-to-Proceed (Section 21-2-75) as an approval for *inappropriate* work, given the lack of evidence that adding parking spaces in this prominent location will provide the “substantial community benefit” or any other public purpose required under that section’s requirements.
- Staff therefore recommends a Denial for the current application.

RECOMMENDATION

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

Staff finds that the proposed construction of a surface parking lot places the property in a new use that is incompatible with the massing, size, and scale characteristics of the district, alters features and spaces that historically characterize this urban block, does not retain the historic character of the block and/or district, and is incompatible with the historic integrity of the Willis-Selden Historic District.

Staff therefore recommends that the Commission issue a Denial for the subject work, as it does not meet the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the defined elements of design for the historic district, specifically Standards:

(1) A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.

(2) The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.

(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 5, 12, 14, and 17.