

STAFF REPORT: DECEMBER 13, 2023, REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: T. BOSCARINO

APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2023-00137

ADDRESS: 4305-4309 BUENA VISTA

HISTORIC DISTRICT: RUSSELL WOODS-SULLIVAN

APPLICANT AND PROPERTY OWNER: MICHAEL PITTS

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: OCTOBER 19, 2023

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: NOVEMBER 30, 2023

SCOPE: INSTALL CHAIN-LINK FENCE

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The subject property consists of two adjacent parcels under common ownership, shown in the photo and site plan below. 4309 Buena Vista is occupied by a two-story, Tudor Revival house built in 1927. 4305 Buena Vista is a vacant lot that formerly contained a house and is now covered in a maintained, grassy lawn. Both lots have concrete driveways at their eastern edges. A six foot, chain-link fence encloses the back yard of 4309 Buena Vista and nearly the entire area of 4305 Buena Vista.



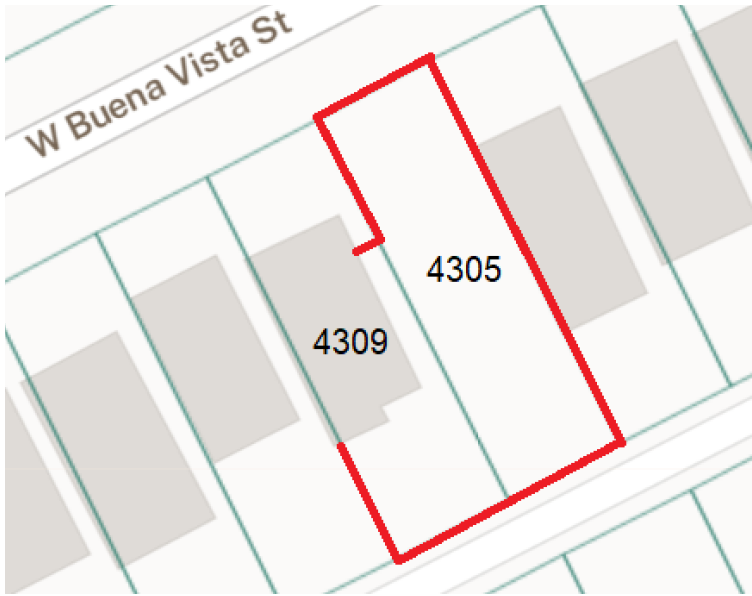
October 2020 photo by staff.

PROPOSAL

The proposal is to install a galvanized steel chain-link fence, six feet tall. The fence is already installed without approval of the Historic District Commission and is visible on the property. The proposed (already installed) fence is set back twelve inches from the sidewalk of 4305 Buena Vista but encloses only the back yard of 4309 Buena Vista. The driveway of 4309 Buena Vista is spanned by a six-foot gate, completing the enclosure.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District was established in 1999. The Final Report for the district implies a Period of Significance beginning in 1920 and extending through the 1950s.



Site plan with proposed (already installed) fence indicated by thick red line. Illustration by staff.

- The Elements of Design for the historic district (Sec. 21-2-168) provide the following guidance:
 - “Houses are usually situated close to the western lot line, allowing for just enough space for a side driveway along the eastern lot line.”
 - “The common setbacks of the houses on the residential streets . . . create very strong walls of continuity.”
 - “Hedges and fencing between properties are not common, although rear yards are commonly fenced. There is a wide range in the type of fencing with chain-link common.”
 - “Front and side yard setbacks are consistent on each residential street.”

- The 4200–4300 block of Buena Vista is consistent with the character described in the Elements of Design quoted above. There are 23 lots on each face of the block (46 total). Back yards are always fenced. As the west side of each house abuts the lot line, and the remaining space on the east side of each house is taken up by a driveway, there are no side yards and, consequently, no side-yard fencing. In almost all cases, a back-yard enclosure is completed by a four-foot- or six-foot-high gate across the driveway near the rear of the house. In only five cases on the block, the gate is located near the front plane of the house.



Left: Driveway spanned by a gate near the rear of the house and not readily visible. This configuration is common. Right: Driveway gate at the front plane of the house. This is much less common but is also appropriate. November 2023 staff photos.

- The uniform setbacks and consistent, open front yards are an important, character-defining feature of the Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District, as noted in the Elements of Design.



Open front yards and uniform setbacks, as noted in the Elements of Design. The proposed (already installed) fence is visible in the background. November 2022 photo by staff.

- The *Fence and Hedge Guidelines* state that side yard and side-lot fences should be “at the front face of the house (set back line)” and that “Front yard and full perimeter fencing will be allowed only in districts where such fencing has been shown to be contextual in that district’s Elements of Design.”
- The house at 4305 Buena Vista was severely damaged by fire in the 2010s and was subsequently demolished. There is no record of Historic District Commission approval of the demolition, which may have been subject to an emergency demolition order from the Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department.



Damaged house at 4305 Buena Vista. 2013 Google Maps photo.

ISSUES

- A front-yard fence disrupts the character-defining pattern of open front yards and uniform setbacks that defines the Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District, contrary to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, which direct that “spaces that characterize a property” should not be altered (Standard #2).¹
- Although six-foot-tall chain-link fences are common in rear yards, such a fence, when visible in the front of a house, is out of character for the environment. This is contrary to Standard #9, which states that new elements “shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment” (a four-foot-tall chain-link fence is more domestic in appearance and would be compatible).²
 - In a relatively small number of instances, six-foot, chain-link fences are employed at the front façade of a house in Russell Woods-Sullivan. However, these are not historically appropriate and appear to be old enough that they likely predate the designation of the historic district. Therefore, they should not be used as models for new fences.



Six-foot chain-link fences in the vicinity of the subject property. November 2023 photos by staff.

RECOMMENDATION

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

Staff recommends that the Commission issue a *Certificate of Appropriateness* for the proposed work as it meets the Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District Elements of Design, the *Fence and Hedge Guidelines*, and the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, with the following condition:

- The front (north) section of the fence shall be set back at or behind the setback line of the adjacent houses and shall be a maximum of four feet in height.

¹ “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.”

² “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.”