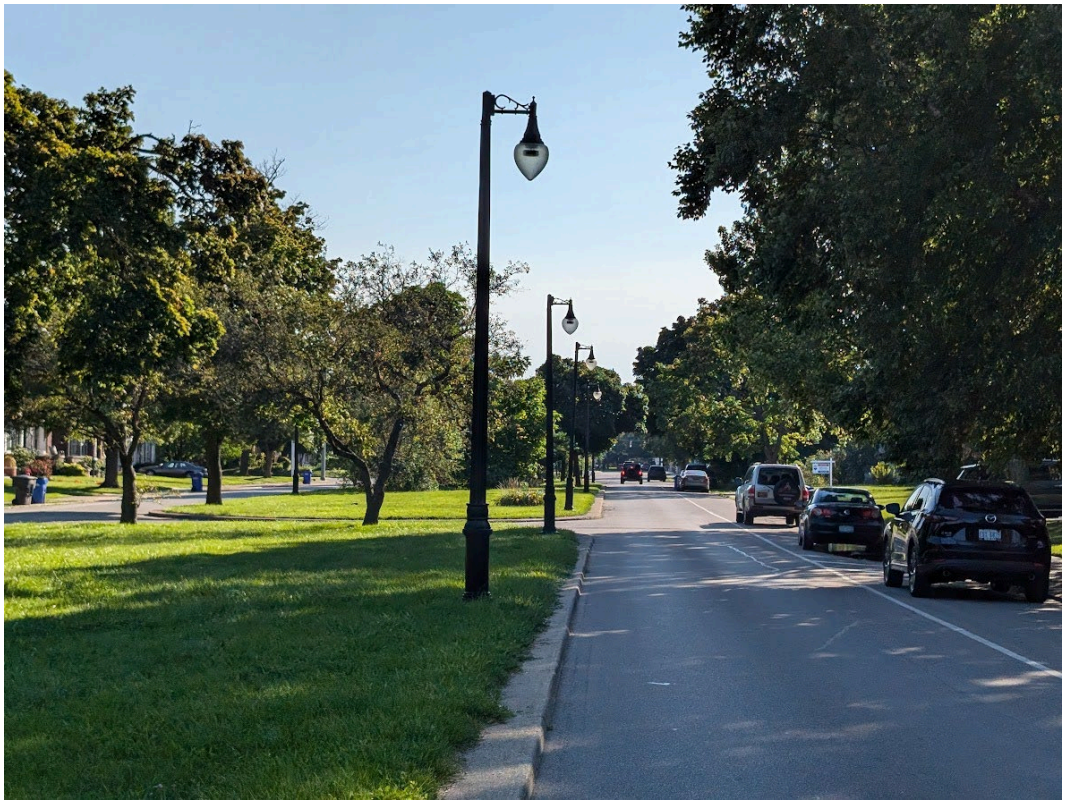
STAFF REPORT 08-14-2024 REGULAR MEETING **PREPARED BY:** G. LANDSBERG
APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2024-00357
ADDRESS: MULTIPLE LOCATIONS IN THE PUBLIC RIGHT-OF-WAY
HISTORIC DISTRICTS: BOSTON-EDISON, ARDEN PARK-EAST BOSTON, OAKMAN BOULEVARD
APPLICANT: MARK HALL/DETROIT PUBLIC LIGHTING AUTHORITY
OWNER: CITY OF DETROIT
DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 06-18-2024
DATE OF STAFF SITE VISITS: 08-07-2024

SCOPE: REPLACE STREETLIGHTS



Typical view of existing fiberglass (non-historic) streetlights in the Boston-Edison Historic District. Staff photo, August 7, 2024.

EXISTING CONDITIONS
This application includes all streetlights in the public right-of-way within the boundaries of three city historic districts: Boston-Edison, Arden Park-East Boston, and Oakman Boulevard. Existing streetlights in all three districts are modern "historic-style" black fiberglass poles with "acorn" luminaires installed without HDC approval during the emergency management era, circa 2008/2009. These inexpensive fiberglass poles replaced the original cast iron/wood shaft "bishop" style Public Lighting Company ("PLC") poles dating to the historic period. At the time of their replacement, many of the locally distinctive original poles had been rendered inoperative by vandalism and copper theft, others had deteriorated and were difficult to repair and keep in service due to decades of neglect and deferred maintenance. Most of the original luminaires had been replaced with modern plastic units. The installation of the existing fiberglass poles was apparently seen as a triage solution to the widespread problem of dark neighborhoods, a major political issue in the city during this time.

While superficially exhibiting generic historic "character" including acanthus leaf banding and a round columnar base, these were inexpensive mass market poles with no architectural or design relationship to Detroit in general, or these three historic neighborhoods in particular. This was in contrast to the original poles, which

were a unique design created and used only in Detroit, as far as can be determined. Because of a combination of poor initial quality and unconfirmed reports to HDC staff (circa 2008) of rushed or unprofessional installation, many of the fiberglass poles have suffered damage and destruction over the years. They are easily flattened by wayward automobiles, and have shown a tendency to tilt and bend over the years at mid-shaft due to foundation issues or other design failures. The Public Lighting Authority has faced considerable work and expense in repairing and replacing these newer poles in recent years.

Existing fiberglass pole at the historic entrance to the Arden Park-East Boston Historic District. Staff photo, August 7, 2024.

Detail view of arm and luminaire on pole along Oakman Boulevard. Note cheap "plasticky" appearance. Staff photo, August 7, 2024.

Another view of the current fiberglass poles along Arden Park Boulevard. Staff photo, August 7, 2024.

View of an existing fiberglass pole in the Oakman Boulevard Historic District. Staff photo, August 7, 2024.

Detail view of a fiberglass pole along Oakman. Note dislocated base leaning to the left, as well as the machined "historic" details attempting to portray a traditional appearance with no historic connection to the Oakman Boulevard Historic District. The dominant expression of these poles are gaudy and cheap. Staff photo, August 7, 2024.

Existing fiberglass poles flanking Chicago Boulevard in Boston-Edison Historic District. Some of the plastic luminaires on these poles have been replaced with smaller globes, contributing to a chaotic appearance, Staff photo, April 7, 2024.

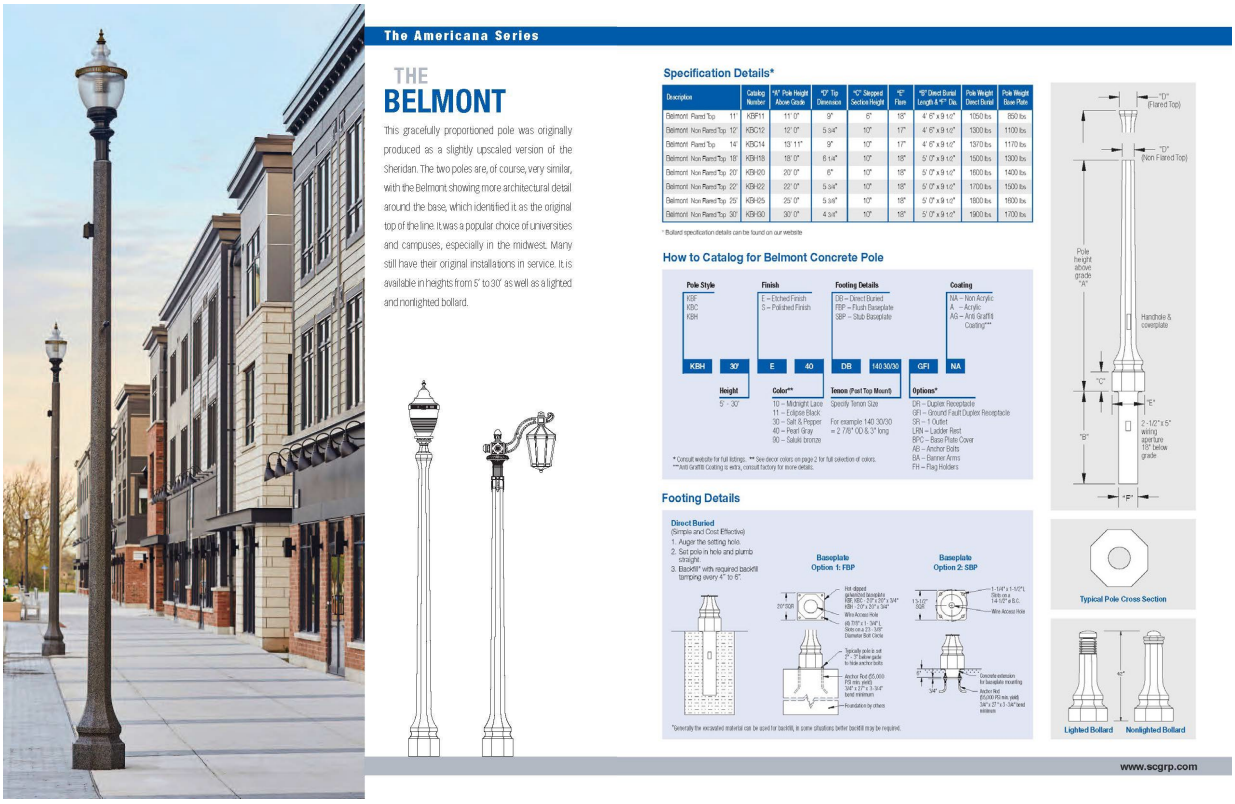
PROPOSAL
Because of the poor quality and high maintenance burden of the now 15-year old fiberglass poles, the Public Lighting Authority has developed a new plan to relight the subject districts with a sturdier pole. The plan is as follows:

- Remove all existing/remaining fiberglass poles (these poles are about 15' high; the original PLC "bishop" style streetlights were about 30' high)
- Replace with new "stresscrete" acorn-top poles of a streamlined generic design ("Belmont"). These proposed poles are about 14' in height. Material is "polished decorative spun concrete," color is "Detroit green."

The project, according to the PLA, affects 611 poles across the three districts, divided as such:

- 407 poles in Boston-Edison HD;
- 132 poles in Arden Park-East Boston HD;
- 72 poles in Oakman Boulevard HD.

Depiction of proposed poles from applicant's submission materials.



Spec sheet for proposed poles, as provided by the applicant (PLA).

These poles, found at Harmonie Park, appear to be older versions of the stresscrete "Belmont" poles proposed in this application. In staff's opinion, the simpler design and elegant stature of these units is superior to the aggressively false historicism and gaudy appearance of the fiberglass poles. Staff photo, August 8, 2024.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS

- The existing streetlights, while exhibiting generic historic "character," are ahistorical and anachronistic 21st century elements with no authentic connection to the protected historic character of these historic districts or the city of Detroit, and as such, should not be considered to be either contributing historic structures, or distinctive historic features, of the landscapes and districts in which they exist. In staff's opinion, their removal will have no affect on the historic character of these neighborhoods.
- In contrast, the unapproved removal of the original PLC "Bishop" style streetlights (back in 2008) did remove contributing historic elements and features from these districts, in staff's opinion.
- Upon initiation of this application process, HDC staff inquired with the Public Lighting Authority concerning the possibility of installing reproduction "bishop" style fixtures, which the city continues to produce and stock in a modified steel form, and which are used in certain downtown areas. Such an approach, in our opinion, would come closest to the National Park Service Standards and Guidelines that direct work in our districts, i.e., replacement of deteriorated original elements with matching reproduction units per Secretary of the Interior Standard #5.

Here is an example of a reproduction steel PLC pole, one of many installed in recent years downtown. Note modern construction (two-halved base, steel pole with no footpegs) in comparison with the cast iron base and wood shaft on an original pole pictured below.

- Original PLC poles in the Indian Village Historic District, after a fund-raising campaign within the neighborhood, were meticulously restored and reinstalled. An example is pictured below.

Original 110-year old PLC pole, restored and reinstalled in Indian Village HD. Note cast iron base, wood shaft, foot pegs.

- As to the question concerning specifying PLC "bishop"-style poles, the PLA (applicant) provided the following response for your consideration:

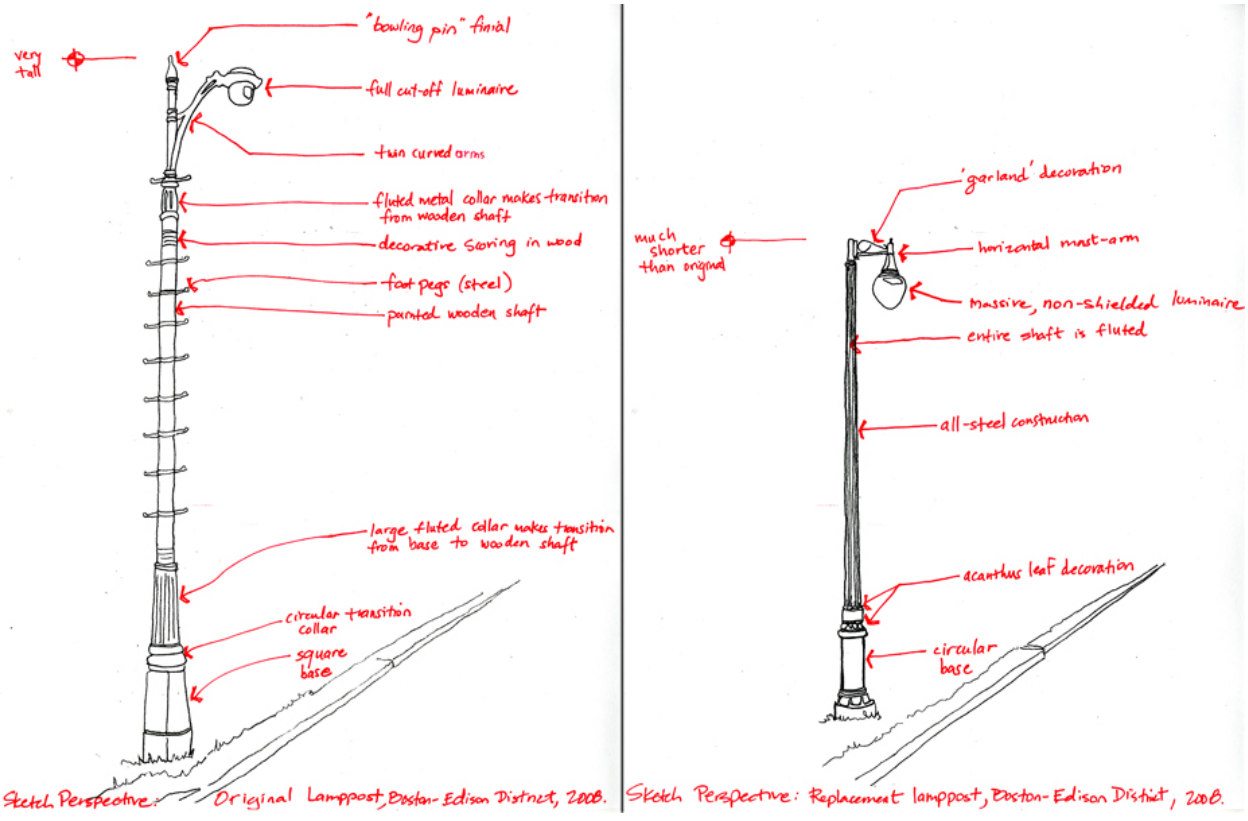
  The Issue with using the PL / Bishop poles is the cost, the PLA could simply not afford to do the project with its current budget. The project would cost about $6million and the labor cost would be about another $1million. The PLAs budget is $10million a year to keep 67,000 street lights working, 70% of the PLA budget on 611 lights is something that we cant do.

  Below is the break down of the cost of each option.

  The current proposal Pole and fixture total cost is 2769.64 for each unit, at 611 units would $1,692,250.04

  A replication pole, we call it a comerica pole is costly, first is $549.00 for the foundation, $1065.33 for the arm, the pole is $6,586.67 and the fixture is $1,539.00. Also take into account a lot more labor is needed to install these that cost would be higher as well. The unit price for a Comerica pole comes to $9,740 for each unit, at 611 units would be $5,951,140 just for material.

- In contrast to the current fiberglass poles, staff assesses that the proposed stresscrete poles are a substantial upgrade, not only in quality but also, to some extent, in compatibility with the districts. Although not a replication of the original "Detroit design" PLC bishop poles, they do not make the error of the existing poles introducing a discordant historic vocabulary into the district. The proposed pole has elegant lines suggestive of early 20th century prototypes, but does not try to inject falsely historic ornamentation into the district. As such, staff is hopeful that it will exist quietly as an element in the district, neither detracting from, or contributing to, the authentic historic context.



Sketch images prepared by the author, circa 2008, during the replacement campaign in Boston-Edison. While some details may be incorrect, the general comparison presented is between the original poles (left) and the existing (right) fiberglass units.

ISSUES

- The proposed poles, in staff's opinion, are superior to the existing ones. However, as the existing poles were apparently installed in violation and replaced the original historic PLC poles, the Commission should consider the proposed poles in comparison to the original poles, pictured below.

An image in HDC files of the original Boston-Edison PLC poles, salvaged after removal circa 2008. Exact date/location unknown.

- In such an analysis, the proposed poles are obviously not faithful replications of the originals, even stipulating that the originals may have required extensive repair making them eligible for replacement under the Standards. The proposed poles are half the height and a completely different design and material. Nevertheless, 36 CFR 67.7, directs reviewers that the Standards "are to be applied to specific rehabilitation projects in a reasonable manner, *taking into consideration economic and technical feasibility*."
- Given the very substantial cost difference in specifying a reproduction PL "bishop" pole for these districts (per the PLA, $7 million, or 70% of the authority's entire annual budget for streetlighting citywide, versus the $1 million budgeted here), staff recommends that it is "reasonable," under the Standards, for the Commission to find the proposed product appropriate, especially since the originals are already long gone. It is hoped by staff that the correct pole can be specified at a later date.
- Should the Commission not agree with staff that a Certificate of Appropriateness is warranted under feasibility and reasonability considerations, PDD would alternately urge the approval of a Notice-to-Proceed (an approval for inappropriate work) in these districts, given the obvious community interest served by reliable street lighting, per prong 4 of Section 21-2-75 of the 2019 Detroit City Code.

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

Recommendation, Certificate of Appropriateness
Staff recommends that the proposed work should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and the Boston-Edison, Arden Park-East Boston, and Oakman Boulevard Historic District's Elements of Design, given that it is economically infeasible and unreasonable, per 36 CFR 67.7, for the PLA to install historic reproduction poles at this time.