

CAPITOL HILL RESTORATION SOCIETY

P.O. Box 15264 Washington, DC 202.543.0425

April 17, 2013

Ms. Gretchen Pfahler
Chair, Historic Preservation Review Board
1100 Fourth Street, SW, Suite E650
Washington, DC 20034

Re: 432 New Jersey Avenue SE, HPA #13-263

Dear Ms. Pfahler:

The Capitol Hill Restoration Society's Historic Preservation Committee appreciates the opportunity to share with you its thoughts and concerns about this project even though it's on your Consent Calendar. It's clear from the concept plans that the applicants have given a great deal of thought into designing an addition that will fit well into its neighborhood and harmonize with their historic home. They are to be commended for their outreach to neighbors to ensure understanding of their proposal, and we note that a number of neighbors have provided letters supporting it.

We understand that the current application is for a concept previously approved by the Board in 2007, with final approval delegated to staff, and that HPO staff signed off on the permit, which has expired and thus requires approval once again. We further understand that in light of the Board's earlier approval and staff signoff on the permit, the concept cannot be reopened for consideration of any concerns raised now by CHRS. That said, we believe it would still be helpful to make our concerns known to the Board and placed on the record so that silence on our part could not be interpreted by anyone later as tacit support for all of the project's components.

First I want to be clear that the Committee is quite happy to support an addition on the south side of the rowhouse in the space now occupied by the alley, and as noted above, the applicants have done a lot to make their addition compatible with the historic district and their house. For example, the brick, stucco, and cast stone on the exterior, as well as wood French doors and one-over-one double-hung windows, are all fitting and appropriate. Also, we appreciate the applicant's responsiveness to our comments earlier this month by centering the shallow 2-story oriel on the front of the addition and simplifying its windows to be more compatible with those on the historic house.

That said, the project as designed still raises some important concerns. One, a garage on the front of a house, whether at-grade or below-grade (including on an addition to a historic rowhouse), is not consistent with the character of the Capitol Hill Historic District. Although some rowhouses with front garages were constructed in the mid-20th century prior to passage of the city's historic preservation law, they were built after the historic district's Period of Significance (1790-1945) and are quite out of character with historic building types on the Hill.

Two, digging out in the public space in front of the owners' property to create an entrance to a below-grade garage does not appear to be consistent with the city's Preservation and Design Guidelines for Basement Entrances and Windows, which say: "New basement entrances should respect existing topography and site characteristics....the relationship of the building to grade and the relationship of the building to sidewalk grade all affect the visibility and impact of basement entrances on a building and its site....Lowering the front yard of historic property to provide an ... entrance is generally not appropriate. New entrances should be designed to minimize disruption of existing topography." The public space in front of the Hill's rowhouses is an important part of their setting, and excavating in that space alters a building's relationship to it. While we recognize that these guidelines were published in 2011, following the Board's approval of this concept, we're very concerned that such excavation, especially to provide access to a new below-grade garage, would set a very regrettable precedent in the historic district.

Three, the addition shows a roof deck in front of the set-back top floor that runs all the way to the front of the building. This does not appear consistent with the city's guidance regarding roof decks, which recommend enough setback from the front so the deck and its furnishings will not be visible from the street (we don't know when the applicable Guidelines and Preservation Brief were published). New Jersey Avenue is quite broad, and the sightline drawings provided have not convinced us that this all would be completely out of sight from the street. We note from the 2004 HPRB transcript that several Board members said they did not want anything on the roof to be visible from the street.

Four, if we were in a position to make recommendations, we would suggest that the garage door have no windows, both to give the addition a stronger sense of having a more visually solid base, as well as to make the door look less obviously like a garage door.

Five, although it may not be a specifically preservation-related matter, the proposed change in grade at the rear (elevating the back yard by two feet) raises concerns about possible changes in hydrology and the relationship of the rear yard to the existing walls and adjacent yards. We note that when HPO staff looked at other buildings in this block when reviewing other projects earlier this year, they observed significant compromising of structural integrity in a number of buildings both south and north of #432, with leaning walls and bowed front facades. These observations suggest to us that caution would be advisable when digging out and changing grades at #432.

Sincerely,

Shauna Holmes

Chair, Historic Preservation Committee