



City of Charleston
Design Review Board
Minutes
April 17th, 2023
4:30 p.m.

A meeting of the Design Review Board was held at 4:30 p.m. on Monday, April 17th, 2023 at 2 George Street and adjourned at 5:25 p.m.

Notice of this meeting was sent to all local news media.

Board members present: Erica Chase (Chair), Andy Smith, Ben Whitener, Erin Stevens, Ashley Jackrel, and Stephanie Tillerson

Staff members present: David Meeks, Eric Pohlman, and Patrick Carlson, recording

Chair called the meeting to order at 4:30 p.m., introduced Board members and Staff, and explained protocol for the meeting.

Applications

The following applications were considered:

(NOTE: Unless otherwise remarked, Chair voted all items, Copy of complete staff comments/recommendations are attached. Copies of all recusals/letters/emails/petitions mentioned during this meeting are on file.)

1. 1362 Old Towne Rd. – TMS # 415-00-00-054 | DRB2022-000127

Request preliminary approval for a new 2-story office for Lowcountry Land Trust.

Owner:	Lowcountry Land Trust (Ashem, LLC)
Applicant:	Reggie Gibson Architects
Neighborhood/Area:	West Ashley

Presenter: Reggie Gibson and Will Wingfield

Project Detail: Reggie Gibson said that the goal of the project was to project the mission of the Lowcountry Land Trust and emphasized using natural local materials and styles that embodied that ideal. An organized office space would be contained on the second floor, while setting aside adequate open event space on the first level. He said it would be a stained grey color with the intention of blending the building into its natural surroundings so it was not easily visible from the surrounding roads. The exterior wall siding would be repurposed from an old building on King St., supported by glued laminated timbers that would age to a similar grey color over time.

Erin asked about what could be done to fill the open spaces adjacent to the building facades on the landscaping plan. Will Wingfield said that there was a lot of underbrush and secondary forest layers that would fill the space where lawn coverage did not reach. Mr. Gibson said that the back façade would also have a more intentionally open lawn that could accommodate outdoor events and tent space. Erin said the renderings did not match the landscaping plan and wanted more clarity in the future about the plan for landscaping in front of the building.

Ben said that the brick columns were visually striking and asked about the inspiration behind its incorporation. Mr. Gibson said there were two areas with brick on the site, including a large brick trellis and round columns in the front. The inspiration came from several sources, including the columns at St. James-Santee Parish Episcopal Church and the overall aesthetic projected by the adjacent communities.

Public Comment: None

Staff Recommendation: Preliminary approval

Board Comments/Action: Ben said he thought it was a beautiful building and recommended approval. Erin said that she wanted more definition concerning the landscaping plan for the front of the building.

MOTION: Preliminary approval

MADE BY: AS SECOND: ES VOTE: FOR 6 AGAINST 0

Miscellaneous

MOTION: To move the approval of the minutes before the discussion on demolition criteria.

MADE BY: EC SECOND: AS VOTE: FOR 6 AGAINST 0

Minutes

1. Approval of minutes from the 4/3/23 meeting

MOTION: Approval *with amendment to remove Stephanie Tillerson's name from the attendance list because she was not present at the time.*

MADE BY: AJ SECOND: AS VOTE: FOR 6 AGAINST 0

Discussion

Eric Pohlman said that he wanted to update the Board about recent planning updates and how to incorporate input, concerning those changes, from the Board, the community, and the West Ashley Revitalization Commission. The focus of recent conversations centered on historic preservation and how it could be applied differently, compared to the downtown neighborhoods. He said this conversation was intended to ask the Board how their authority could be supported, according to the prescribed boundaries and existing purview, when applications were submitted that requested property demolition. Even though there were only seven demolition applications throughout 2022, that number had been increasing since 2016. As such, he wanted to ask for their input in order to create more clarity on both sides of the application and make the consideration process more efficient.

Eric said that there were a variety of historic structures aligned along multiple corridors throughout West Ashley, and compared their geographic distribution to the other boroughs to show how many properties were approaching 50 years of age. The present demolition criteria included consideration of the architectural and aesthetic features of the structure, the quality of the materials, historical significance, and the relationship with the surrounding area. Based on those parameters, Eric asked the DRB what elements helped in the decision making process and what could be improved.

Stephanie asked how much weight to grant the local historical societies in the consideration process and at what point should those groups become involved in demolition conversations. Eric said that they were not part

of the city government structure, so they operated as advocacy groups and subject matter experts that could render opinions which could be utilized in the DRB's decision-making process at their discretion.

Andy said they also often received letters from structural engineers filled with extensive data about a given structure, but did not know how much weight City staff assigned to that correspondence and wanted to ascertain a clearer link to the relevant details.

Erica said that those details could be included in City staff comments for the DRB to consider and incorporate judgments and evaluations from multiple relevant departments in order to render the most informed decision.

Erin said it was possible for two structural engineers to have completely different opinions about a building, and Ben agreed adding that it all came down to money.

Andy said the DRB had experienced scenarios where a denial was ultimately met with inaction, and when the application was resubmitted years later the scenario had essentially evolved into demolition by neglect.

Erin agreed and said, since they couldn't force people to spend money to preserve a structure, it could undercut their authority to save certain properties.

Eric said that scenario was outside the scope of the current discussion and would be a conversation about expanding the purview of responsibilities and authority of the Department of Livability & Tourism.

Andy said it was something to keep in mind as demolition process criteria was developed because it posed an ongoing issue.

Ashley said that the initial part of the process worked well, because the existence of those conversations were vital to all of the following stages. However, the ordinance establishing the authority of the DRB left a lot of room for interpreting the application of their authority. Considering undefined factors, such as significance, in the process of considering the worthiness of a structure, made discussions difficult because those factors could be interpreted differently on an individual level. By creating clearer definitions of worthiness and suitability, the DRB and the public could engage in more productive conversations that established demolition worthiness from the beginning.

Ben said that it was difficult for outside developers to predict how a structure would contribute to the surrounding area if the focus of the City was to preserve and, conversely, revitalize different elements of the community.

Stephanie said that if an application contained area studies, it provided a better understanding of the property's relationship to the surrounding area.

Eric said that there were references to character plans for different neighborhoods in West Ashley, but the focus had been internal in order to identify potential supportive characters to work on preservation at the individual level.

Eric said that his recent research about suburban preservation and demolition focused on comparable programs in Savannah, GA and Columbia, SC. Their definitions of what a contributing building would be comprised of could help shape the guiding principles for similar conversations in the City of Charleston. The major difference between those systems and Charleston's application process involved the utilization of staff-level reviews. In Savannah and Columbia, city staff were authorized to review demolitions requests for buildings 50 years or older. If the building did not fall under a contributing definition, staff was authorized to approve demolition. If it was considered to have a contributing status, then the request would be passed onto the appropriate board authority.

Stephanie asked if it was possible to create a local historic district that was more restrictive, but not less, than the national guidelines. Eric said it was possible. She said that may be an option in order to support the DRB authority in the future.

Erica said that it would probably be an overlay instead of creating an entirely different zone.

Eric said that the closest local comparison was the Savannah Highway overlay and could provide a possible applicable option in the future.

Erica asked about the origin for the directive to have the conversation about demolition guidelines. Eric said it was more of a topical conversation between multiple groups and wanted to take an opportunity to help advocate for any desired updates to the existing system.

Stephanie said she had worked in other communities that had a board or commission convened specifically for preservation conversations, which would provide an additional layer of expertise to the conversations.

Ashley said that could help leverage community engagement and utilize local expertise to provide varied perspectives on controversial proposals. She asked Eric if the results of these conversations were meant to create a mission statement or an update to the ordinance governing the DRB authority.

Eric said that he anticipated using these conversations to eventually update the ordinance.

Erin said it could also be helpful to communicate the consequences of annexation and ensure people navigated both application procedures with clarity.

Andy said it would be helpful to have more clarity throughout these conversations and wanted more defined parameters in order to support their decisions.

Ben said that the system in Columbia still allowed for approving a demolition by neglect and should not be applied in the City of Charleston.

Erica said that they were not allowed to consider the economic proposals that would be installed on a demolished site, before rendering a decision, because the proposals were always subject to change.

Ashley said that it could be important to consider those elements, within reason, in order to view the entire conceptual picture and incorporate that proposal in a non-capitalist manner.

Ben said it was difficult to define these rules because so many applications fell within a case-by-case situation.

Andy said that there was a character fabric to any community and it was constantly fighting modern economics.

Eric said it sounded like the DRB wanted more defined responsibility criteria to make more informed decisions and to discuss a way to consider incorporating the economic impact component for a demolition application.

Ashley added that they should also consider resiliency and sustainability when discussing the elevations of the properties in question.

No vote was taken.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 5:25 p.m.

Patrick Carlson
Clerk of Council's Office