

# U.S. COMMISSION OF FINE ARTS

ESTABLISHED BY CONGRESS 17 MAY 1910

401 F STREET NW SUITE 312 WASHINGTON DC 20001-2728 202-504-2200 FAX 202-504-2195 WWW.CFA.GOV

24 February 2017

Dear Ms. Gillis:

In its meeting of 16 February, the Commission of Fine Arts reviewed concept designs for short-term family housing facilities in Wards 3, 5, and 6 of the District of Columbia, an initiative managed by the Department of General Services (DGS). The Commission commended the D.C. Government for developing this innovative building program that recognizes the value of decentralized short-term housing and provides residents with safe and dignified accommodations.

In general, the Commission members strongly endorsed the overall goal of building transitional housing for homeless families in established residential neighborhoods, and they expressed support for the development of programmatic and operational guidelines for these facilities. However, they commented that when sites are selected quickly, initial feasibility studies may reveal that specific building programs need to be adjusted, requiring more flexibility in following guidelines as the designs for new the multi-family housing projects are tested for real neighborhood sites. In their review of the three properties, they observed that many programmatic areas are appropriately devoted to children, and they suggested that more communal spaces for adults also be included in the design. They noted that these spaces would serve as places for community building and respite for residents, who may be under stress and facing many challenges. Finally, they observed generally that the appearance of the proposed facilities should convey a character that is more residential, than institutional, which is beneficial for all residents of the neighborhoods where the properties are located.

## Ward 3

For the new six-story building proposed at 3320 Idaho Avenue, NW, the Commission did not take an action and provided the following comments, requesting a revised concept submission.

The Commission members commented that the new building would act as a transitional structure between single-family houses and adjacent blocks of larger institutional buildings, and they agreed that a multi-family project here could be sympathetic with the context of the neighborhood. However, while they found that the massing of the program could reasonably be accommodated on the site, they observed that the programmatic ideal of ten families per floor has resulted in a design that is too tall for its immediate context of single-family houses and a low-rise police station. Furthermore, they expressed concern that the intervention required to make the facility possible—a three-level open parking garage—may have a substantial effect on the neighborhood and on the federal property adjacent to it, and they requested analysis and documentation to understand it.

To best accommodate the program to this site, they recommended that the entire property be analyzed as a master plan in order to determine how different uses can coexist on the parking lot of the police station, and within the existing single-family neighborhood. They requested further study of building typology, site planning, and context, with the inclusion in the next submission of such additional documentation as sections and elevations along the sloping topography of Idaho Avenue. They suggested more

flexibility in the programmatic guidelines for the building itself, commenting that other configurations—such as a two-wing floor plate with clusters of seven to ten units separated by common spaces—could allow for a lower building with a larger footprint. As the architectural character of the project is developed, they cautioned against creating an appearance that is more institutional than residential.

The Commission anticipates the submission of a new concept design for this project that responds to its comments.

### Ward 5

Expressing concerns about the design for the proposed facility at 1700 Rhode Island Avenue, NE, the Commission did not take an action and requested a new concept proposal for the project. For this location, the Commission members advised that there may be a mismatch between the size of the program and the constraints of this small site, which already holds a historic police station building and a cellular telecommunications tower and support shed. Because of these challenges inherent to this site, they emphasized the difficulty of designing a new building that can reasonably meet the specified program, and they suggested that there may need to be a reduction of units for this site; they recommended that the District Government remove at least one of these constraints, by relocating the telecommunications facility to another site.

For the planning of the building, the Commission members observed that the proposed massing is too tall for its context, appears bulky, and overwhelms the historic Colonial Revival-style building; they identified several opportunities to improve the configuration of the building and outdoor spaces on the site. In general, they recommended the development of an L-shaped plan along the east and north sides of the site so as not to crowd the historic building and the outdoor spaces. Specifically, they recommended that the building's southeastern wing come forward to the property line along Rhode Island Avenue and its northwestern wing to 13th Street in order to create a more usable floor plate, to avoid the awkward adjacency with the historic building, and to maximize usable outdoor spaces. They observed that the typical floor plan contains unnecessary and redundant circulation space and could be rationalized to make the floors more compact and efficient. They were critical of the narrow ground-level recreation space envisioned along the site's north edge, characterizing it as small and awkwardly proportioned, and which would be shaded by the building at all times of day; they noted that the building to the north has a party-wall condition which provides the opportunity to extend this new building toward the blank wall of this adjacent building rather than setting so far back for very little gain.

For the development of the design, the Commission members recommended that the exterior architecture take clues from the surrounding context without replicating it. For example, they recommended that the darker brick base of the proposed new building not align with the height of the historic building's elevation, as it results in awkward proportions on the façade, and they recommended that the proposed false mansard at the top story either be detailed as a full-story mansard or eliminated. For the design of the exterior spaces, they suggested the exploration of capturing the peripheral public space for use as recreation space for the tenants in order to relieve some of the pressure on the planning for this small site and to provide adequately sized outdoor spaces for the families who will live here. Observing the modernist design character proposed for the

landscape, they recommended that the landscape and building design be more integrated in their design approach, possibly drawing inspiration from the site's historic structure.

The Commission anticipates the submission of a new concept design for this project that responds to its comments.

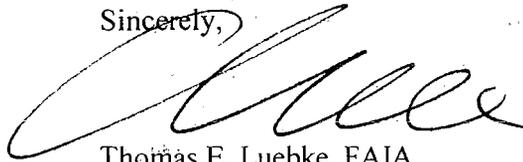
Ward 6

The Commission approved the concept for the proposed building at 850 Delaware Avenue, SW, providing several comments for the development of the design. The Commission members expressed strong support for the massing, program disposition, and careful siting of the building and its creative use of the site to provide outdoor recreation space. They commended the project for its rational, compact planning and the approach of contemporary architecture for a public project in Washington, D.C. While endorsing the refined modern aesthetic of the design, they advised anticipating the need to control interior visibility created by the floor-to-ceiling glass windows, both for its impact on the exterior and for the privacy and comfort of the residents. They commented that the openwork masonry screen walls proposed for the common balconies were inappropriately confining and institutional in character; they recommended revising the design with more open screening. They recommended careful study of how the first-floor glazing system meets the building's plinth, particularly as this architectural base responds to the varying conditions around the perimeter. They also expressed support for the green roof for the top of the building, but they recommended that the plantings proposed for the narrow setback ledges be eliminated given their relatively high cost of implementation and maintenance.

The Commission looks forward to the review of a final submission for this project.

In summary, the Commission of Fine Arts is strongly supportive of the District of Columbia's effort to create decentralized short-term family housing in the city's eight wards, and it anticipates further development of the proposed designs to insure that the proposed facilities contribute to the quality of life of the residents as well as respect the character of the existing neighborhoods where they will be located.

Sincerely,



Thomas E. Luebke, FAIA  
Secretary

Greer Johnson Gillis, Director  
D.C. Department of General Services  
2000 14th Street, NW, 8th Floor  
Washington, DC 20009

cc: Michelle J. Chin, D.C. Department of General Services  
Joe McNamara, Ayers Saint Gross  
Ronnie McGhee, R. McGhee & Associates  
John Burke, StudioTwentySevenArchitecture