GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF PLANNING

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Board of Zoning Adjustment

FROM: JLS for Andrew Altman
Director

DATE November 1, 2004

SUBJECT: BZA Application **17234**
D.C. Fire Department – 4811 MacArthur Blvd., N.W.

APPLICATION

The applicant, The D.C. Fire and Emergency Medical Services (DC Fire & EMS), is requesting variance relief pursuant to 11 DCMR §3103.2 from:

- The lot occupancy prescribed under Section 403, and
- The side yard requirements under Section 405

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATION

The Office of Planning **recommends approval** of the requested area variances.

SITE AND AREA DESCRIPTION

The subject property is located at 4811 MacArthur Boulevard in Square 1372. The property is sandwiched between a PEPCO substation to the north and the Lab School to the south. Immediately across MacArthur Boulevard, the property faces the Georgetown Reservoir. The surrounding neighborhood to the north, south and east is a mixture of single-family homes and some institutions.

The property is Zoned R-1-B, and currently there is no use category for fire stations within this Zone District. However, proposed rulemaking is being considered by the Zoning Commission to include fire and emergency service uses as matter-of-right uses within residence zones (ZC– 04-29).

The existing structure was constructed in 1925 and was one of the first of two fire stations that was built in the District before World War I. It is described as a conspicuous

BZA
Case No. 17234
Exhibit No. 26

Board of Zoning Adjustment
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CASE NO. 17234
EXHIBIT NO. 26

landmark for the Palisades neighborhood and has been in continuous use to the neighborhood's residential community.

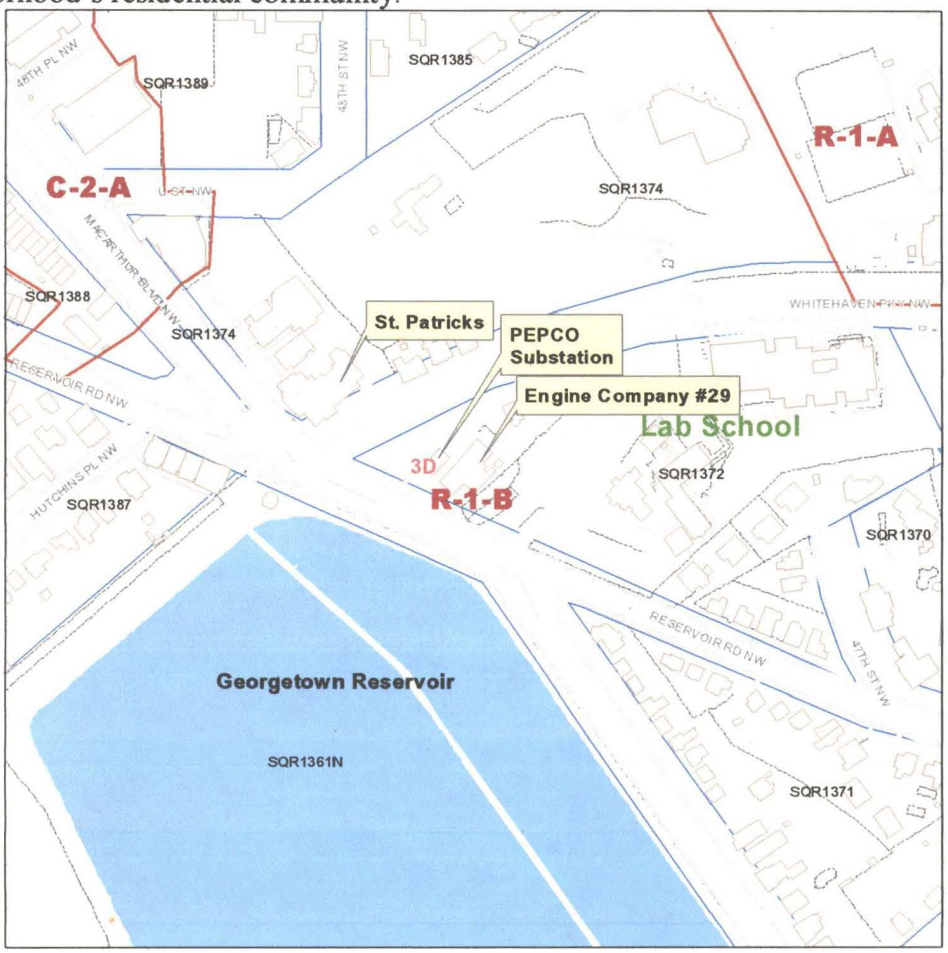


Figure 1

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The District of Columbia Department of Fire and Emergency Medical Services, is proposing a complete renovation of Engine Company #29, including two (2) additions designed to contain an apparatus bay, locker rooms and bathrooms and other site improvements to modernize the existing structure for the needs of the Engine Company. The design accommodates areas for decontamination of equipment and ambulances, and facilities for women EMS workers, thus recognizing the changing program needs of the Fire Department since the building's original construction in 1925. Currently, the area relies on ambulance service from the Cleveland Park station or the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Rescue Squad, and the proposal represents a significant public safety improvement in a currently underserved community.

ZONING REQUIREMENTS and ANALYSIS

The proposed expansion of Engine Company #29, which is zoned R-1-B, requires two (2) area variances, including lot occupancy and side yard, pursuant to §§403.2 and 405 according to the following:

Item	Existing	Required	Proposed	Variance
Lot Area	15,248	5,000	-	-
Lot Occupancy	33.1%	40%	43%	3%
Side Yard	8 feet	8 feet	0 feet	-8 feet

The applicant must show that a practical difficulty exists in upholding the lot occupancy and side yard requirements of the R-1-B Zone District according to the provisions of Section 3103.2 accordingly:

(a) *The property is unique by reason of its exceptional narrowness, shallowness, shape, topography or other extraordinary or exceptional situation or condition;*

The fire station was constructed in 1925 on a trapezoidal shaped lot. The existing T-shaped brick facility does not align parallel to the length of the southern lot line. The structure is placed on the lot whereby a portion of the building, 50 feet in length and a maximum width of approximately 7 feet, occupy the side yard on the south side of the lot. As demonstrated in the site plan, the south side of the building is not parallel to the lot line.

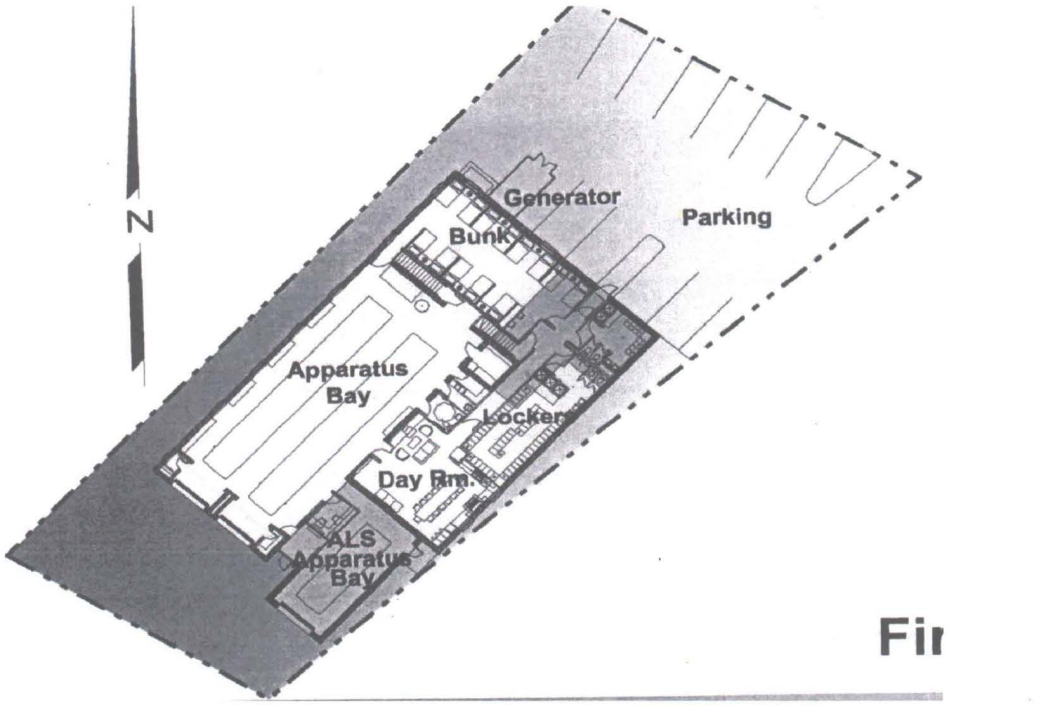


Figure 2

Therefore, OP believes that the alignment of the existing structure, in combination with the shape of the lot, creates an exceptional condition of the property due to the portion of the building, which encroaches into the south facing side yard.

(b) *By reason of the aforementioned unique and exceptional condition of the property, the strict application of the Zoning Regulations will result in peculiar and exceptional practical difficulties or to exceptional and undue hardship upon the owner of the property.*

The existing location and shape of the building creates an exceptional condition. A practical difficulty arises in attempting to modernize the building, which was constructed in 1925. The lot is long but not wide enough to accommodate any practical additions for this type of facility that would not violate any bulk provisions of the Zone District, including the side yard requirements, the height restriction or the lot occupancy.

The facility's proposed design accommodates the space requirements of the Fire Department's apparatus, including an additional bay for an ambulance. The depth of the property makes it ideal to stack vehicles of various sizes and store the majority of the Company's fleet on location. The addition to the front of the building, which encroaches into the side yard, allows the necessary width for the ambulance bay, which for operational purposes, must be located at the front of the station.

In its staff report, Historic Preservation staff deemed that the unique T-shape of the existing building allowed the site to retain convenient and sufficient locations for additions. Inability to increase the site's buildable area as intended would create a practical difficulty for the Fire Department, since its fleet will lose approximately 1,400 square feet of expansion space required for necessary modernization.

Further, due to the historic designation of the existing facility, Historic Preservation staff agrees that the location of the proposed addition, its size and scale, preserves the character and integrity of the structure. The addition would not be in alignment with the right elevation, if the 8-foot side yard were maintained. A practical difficulty exists since the existing structure cannot be partially demolished to realign the building to satisfy the side yard requirement.

In light of the historic status of the site, OP concurs that the locations of the proposed additions are appropriate and a practical difficulty exists in the conflict created in satisfying the lot occupancy and side yard requirements, with the Historic Preservation elements of the site.

(c) *The variance will not cause substantial detriment to the public good and will not impair the intent, purpose and integrity of the zone plan as embodied in the Zoning Regulations and Map.*

Granting the area variances will not cause substantial detriment to the public good since the project results in an increase in public safety and modernization of a facility that has been in place for almost eighty (80) years. The applicant states that there would be no expected increase in traffic and noise due to the proposed improvements.

While the existing structure predates the Zoning Regulations, renovation and modernization of the existing structure, would enhance the Engine Company's ability to accommodate women at the facility and improve ambulance service to neighboring residents, as well as include communication facilities on site.

OP believes that the increase in lot occupancy and decrease in side yard is minimal in an effort to modernize an important public service facility for the immediate neighborhood.

Parking
Since the structure has been proposed for listing on the National Register for Historic Places, according to Section 2100.5, "no additional parking shall be required for a historic landmark or building ...which is certified by the State Historic Preservation Officer..." Therefore, the 12 existing parking spaces would not have to be increased to 15 to satisfy the requirement of Section 2101, for all other structures, in all districts.

OP has not received comments from the District Department of Transportation regarding this project.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

The Historic Preservation Review Board reviewed and approved the conceptual design for the firehouse's two additions, including an apparatus bay, locker rooms and bathrooms, with other improvements at its public hearing held on June 24, 2004. According to the review, the firehouse's "unique T-shape allowed the site to retain convenient and sufficient locations for the additions." The HPR Board determined that the additions "deferred to the existing structure and they are sufficiently distinct in form and detail from the original to avoid confusion." The Board recommended approval of the additions in concept, on condition that the property was designated to landmark status. The Board subsequently designated the property a Historic Landmark and forwarded the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for listing.

COMMUNITY COMMENTS

ANC 3D voted unanimously to recommend approval of the firehouse additions at its regularly held meeting in June 2, 2004.

CONCLUSION

OP's analysis of the subject site's development proposal concluded that granting the area variances would not impair the intent, purpose and integrity of the R-1-B zone requirements, even though the municipal use is not a designated use within this zone district. The site was developed in 1925 and has not been improved since the 1958 Zoning Regulations and the proposed improvements would allow the DC FEMS to improve its service capacity in this area. OP does not believe the intent of the Zoning Regulations will be compromised, since the applicant has made efforts to abide by the other bulk regulation of the zone including the height limitation at 40 feet.

OP therefore **recommends approval** of the applicant's request for the requested lot occupancy increase and the reduction in side yard variances to accommodate improvements for Engine Company 29's apparatus and personnel.

Attachments:
Historic Preservation Review Board
- Staff Report
- Landmark Designation Case 02-14

AA/kt

HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	**Engine Company 29**	(x) Agenda
Address:	**4811 MacArthur Boulevard, NW**	( ) Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	**June 24, 2004**	(x) Alteration
Date Received:	**June 14, 2004**	(x) Addition
Staff Reviewer:	**Tim Dennée**	(x) Concept

The applicant, the District of Columbia Department of Fire and Emergency Medical Services, requests the Board's review of a conceptual design for two additions to the firehouse to contain an apparatus bay and locker rooms and bathrooms, plus other improvements.

As with the other firehouse projects, much of the work is interior, including the demolition of partitions and a narrow stair, and a very small amount of structural demolition in order to reorganize and make modernize the plan.

On the exterior, work is largely restorative including repairs, refurbishing existing windows, and generally cleaning up clutter from the exterior walls and site.

Three small additions/outbuildings housing the present boiler room, electrical room and flammable storage will be demolished (the utilities will generally be relocated to the basement). The additions are later, but the pyramidal-roofed flammable storage building appears to date to 1925 and was probably originally used for the storage of petroleum products for the fire trucks. Clearly, it is a contributing and compatible structure, if also minor and simple. However, given that it is so small and stands in the way of an addition, its destruction would not appear to constitute "substantial" demolition when considered in the context of the larger project. Its demolition should be viewed in a similar light to the demolition of portions or residential rear ells or additions for the purpose of building new additions.

The major item of work is the construction of two additions, one parallel to and connected to the main, front-gabled section of the building, and one at the rear corner of the building Because of the firehouse's unique T-shape plan, the site has retained convenient and sufficient locations for such additions. The drawings depict modestly scaled, hip-roofed structures, connected to the main section of the building. The additions defer to the existing structure and are sufficiently distinct in form and detail from the original to avoid confusion. A representative of Fire/EMS suggested that the vehicular opening in the front addition has been drawn a little too small for the apparatus, but that does not appear to be a problem. There is sufficient room to scale up the

doorway and, in fact, scale up the building a few feet, if necessary, in order to accommodate the apparatus and maintain the same overall proportions. This adjustment and other refinements will naturally follow with the development of the drawings to 100 percent. While representing a significant increase in floor area, the additions manage to allow the original sense of the building to be retained.

If the Board designates the property a landmark, then staff recommends that the Board approve the additions and demolition in concept and delegate to staff further review of the proposed addition up through the permit stage.

DECISION

HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 02-14

Engine Company 29
4811 MacArthur Boulevard, NW
(Square 1372, Lot 808)

The Historic Preservation Review Board, having held a public hearing on June 24, 2004 on the application for historic designation of the property known as Engine Company 29, hereby designates the property a historic landmark in the *District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites* and requests that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing.

Engine Company 29 was constructed in 1925. It and Engine Company 10/Truck Company 13 were the first fire stations built in the District since before World War I, and they were the first of a long-lived but not very prolific period of Colonial Revival-style one- and one-and-a-half-story firehouse construction ushered in by the Office of the Municipal Architect in the 1920s and 1930s with the encouragement of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. Both of these firehouses were innovative in plan, breaking a strict pattern of the two-full-story firehouse that had been established by the 1850s.

Post-World War I construction was intended to fill gaps in fire service and particularly to cover developing areas. As with the older Engines 17 and 25, more service was required in an emerging suburban neighborhood, this time the nearly built-out Palisades, with its scores of frame houses. The completion of the conversion to all-motorized apparatus in the District in 1925, however, meant that more rapid response necessitated fewer firehouses overall. But the firehouses did grow larger. Spreading into developing suburban areas meant that more land was available to spread each firehouse's program over a broader, more convenient first floor and perhaps accommodate more bays, outbuildings and drive space.

Generally following neo-Georgian principles, the main block of the firehouse is symmetrically balanced, but the dormitories were placed to the side in a smaller Federal-style wing, creating a unique T-shaped plan. Another unique feature was the offset location of the truly majestic, four-story hose tower two-thirds of the way rearward. Despite returning briefly to the asymmetry employed only in a couple of stations at the beginning of the century, the Office of the Municipal Architect created an overall harmonious and balanced composition. It is a conspicuous neighborhood landmark in the broad sense, featured, for instance, on a 2003 interpretive map of the Palisades "showing geographical and historical points of interest." Albert Harris, the Municipal Architect himself, was responsible for this neoclassical design. And the placement of the

dormitory off to the side and the deletion of a second floor was a simple innovation given sufficient room, but it had never before been attempted. It positioned the firefighters conveniently while reducing the threat of injury from falls and the difficulty of sealing dorms spaces off from the fumes, varying temperatures, and noise of the apparatus room.[1]

The firehouse has two tiny, brick additions at the rear, erected to house utilities and of little significance in themselves. Just rearward of these is another freestanding structure, a square-section, brick pyramidal roofed building, built as an "oil room," presumably to house combustible petroleum products for the vehicles and now still used for flammable storage. While a minor and undistinguished structure, it was built contemporaneously with the firehouse, generally retains integrity, and should be considered a contributing structure for the purpose of any designation.

- Engine Company 29 was originally constructed for and is still used by the District of Columbia's professional firefighting force. Over the years, the personnel and equipment headquartered here have fought numerous fires and effected rescues and rendered medical assistance. The firehouse has been a visual landmark of the Palisades since its construction and supported residential development by protecting the predominantly frame suburban homes of the surrounding area (Historic Preservation Review Board Landmark Criterion A1 and National Register Criterion A).
- The utility of Engine Company 29 was, of course, the principal consideration in its construction. Nonetheless, it is an excellent example of early twentieth-century Colonial Revival, albeit with an unusual plan, and notable especially for its impressive tower. It was the first or second D.C. firehouse executed in the style, a style that nonetheless originated in the 1870s but was now favored by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts as appropriate for municipal institutions located in residential neighborhoods. The station was designed by Albert L. Harris, a very prominent District architect responsible for three firehouse designs in his capacity as Municipal Architect, as well as many other schools and local government buildings of the Nation's Capital (Historic Preservation Review Board Landmark Criterion A2, A3 and A4 and National Register Criteria B and C).
- Engine Company 29 is remarkably well preserved maintaining the integrity of its appearance and context (Historic Preservation Review Board Criterion B).
- Nearly eighty years have passed since the construction of the building, permitting sufficient time to evaluate the building in its historical context in the history and development of Washington, of the Palisades neighborhood, and of local and national firefighting (Historic Preservation Review Board Criterion C).

Tersh Boasberg, Chairman

[1] Having been located above the apparatus floor, the dormitories were exited via poles, of course, during alarms. The problem of making the poles immediately accessible while somehow temporarily sealing the aperture in the floor was a persistent one.