

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** District of Columbia Board of Zoning Adjustment

**FROM:** Matt Jesick, Case Manager  
*JL* Joel Lawson, Associate Director for Development Review

**DATE:** July 6, 2018

**SUBJECT:** BZA #19797 – 1925 Vermont Avenue, NW – The Grimke School  
 Request for relief in order to rehabilitate and construct an addition to a historic school

**I. RECOMMENDATION**

The Office of Planning (OP) recommends **approval** of the following requested relief:

- Pursuant to K § 813, K § 805.1 – Rear Yard (15’ required, 1’ minimum); *special exception*
- Pursuant to X § 1000, C § 711.3(b) – Parking Access (10’ alley required, 9.33’ alley existing); *variance*
- Pursuant to X § 1000, C § 712.5 – Aisle Width (20’ required, 17’ proposed). *variance*

**II. LOCATION AND SITE DESCRIPTION**

Applicant	Community Three Development
Address	1925 Vermont Avenue, NW
Legal Description	Square 361, Lot 827
Ward / ANC	1, 1B
Zone	ARTS-2, Moderate density arts and mixed use
Historic District or Resource	U Street Historic District
Lot Characteristics and Existing Development	Irregularly shaped lot fronting on Vermont Avenue, with alleys to the north and south, and a private alley on its southeastern edge; To the east is a 30’-wide, named public alley, 9½ Street. Existing development consists of the historic Grimke School and its associated gym, contributing structures to the U Street Historic District.
Adjacent Properties	Rowhouses on the south, east and north. One commercial structure is across the alley to the north.
Surrounding Neighborhood Character	Mix of commercial uses, apartment buildings and rowhouses. Across Vermont Avenue from U Street Metro.

Proposed Development	Rehab the school for office and cultural uses as well as a new home for the African American Civil War Museum. Rehab and add to the gym for residential uses.
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### III. ZONING REQUIREMENTS AND RELIEF REQUESTED

In order to develop as proposed, the applicant requests relief as noted in the table below.

ARTS-2 Zone	Regulation	Existing	Proposed	Relief
Lot Area	n/a	37,926 sf	No change	Conforming
FAR K §§ 801 and 802	5.0 Residential 1.5 Non-res. max 5.0 Total	1.82	2.75	Conforming
Height K § 803.1	70'	52.5'	No change	Conforming
Lot Occupancy K § 804	80% for floors with residential uses	Not provided	73%	Conforming
<b>Rear Yard K § 805</b>	<b>15'</b>	<b>1' for existing gym</b>	<b>1' min. for addition to the gym</b>	<b>Requested</b>
Parking C § 704.2	No additional parking required for an historic resource unless expanded by more than 50%	16	16	Conforming
<b>Parking Access C § 711.3(b)</b>	<b>10' alley required for parking access</b>	<b>9.33'</b>	<b>No change</b>	<b>Requested</b>
<b>Parking Aisle Width C § 712.5</b>	<b>20' drive aisle required</b>	<b>~17'</b>	<b>17'</b>	<b>Requested</b>

### IV. ANALYSIS

#### SUBTITLE K § 813 SPECIAL EXCEPTION (ARTS)

In order to be granted a special exception from the rear yard requirement of the ARTS zone, the application must satisfy the criteria of Subtitle K § 813.

*813.1 The Board of Zoning Adjustment may grant exceptions pursuant to Subtitle X, Chapter 9 from the requirements or limits of this chapter, other than Subtitle K § 811.9, subject also to the following criteria:*

- (a) *The uses, buildings, or features at the size, intensity, and locations proposed, will*

*substantially advance the purposes of the ARTS zones and will not adversely affect neighboring property or be detrimental to the health, safety, convenience, or general welfare of persons living, working, or visiting in the area;*

The uses proposed should advance the purposes of the ARTS zones. As part of the District's disposition for this site, the applicant was required to create a new home for the African American Civil War Museum (AACWM), and was also encouraged to incorporate other arts uses. The proposed design, therefore, includes 10,000 square feet for the new museum space, and 4,000 square feet for other cultural uses. In addition to promoting arts uses themselves, the ARTS zones are also intended to foster 18 hour activity, a goal which would be furthered by the creation of 30,000 square feet of office space, which would create additional daytime traffic in the area. Another goal of the ARTS zones is to create additional housing for a variety of income levels. The rear yard relief would facilitate the construction of an addition to the historic gym to allow for new housing, 30% of which would be affordable.

The proposed rear yard relief should not adversely affect neighboring property or be detrimental to the general welfare of neighbors or visitors to the area. The new construction would be in line with the rear wall of the existing gym – that is, one foot from the property line and alley. The bulk of the building, therefore, would be in keeping with the form that has been present in that location for many years. The mass of the addition would also be similar to the mass of the commercial building fronting U Street to the north of the site. See, for example, the rendering on Sheet 23 of Exhibit 7A. The level of afternoon shadow would likely be greater than a matter of right design, but the increased shadow should fall mostly on 9½ Street, and should not be detrimental to neighbors. The 4<sup>th</sup> floor addition to the gym would also require some rear yard relief, but would be set back 10 feet from the rear property line, and nine feet from the rear wall of the 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> floors, so its visibility should be minimized.

- (b) *The architectural design of the project will enhance the urban design features of the immediate vicinity in which it is located; provided, if a historic district or historic landmark is involved, the Board of Zoning Adjustment shall refer the application to the Historic Preservation Office for review and report; and*

The project would rehabilitate a building contributing to the U Street Historic District and the design, including the additions, has received conceptual approval from the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB). The addition to the gym would enhance 9½ Street by reinforcing the street wall, which is already defined by the gym and by rowhouses on the east side of the street. There would be no massing changes to the front of the school on Vermont Avenue; the historic façade would be maintained and the public space would be enhanced.

- (c) *Vehicular access and egress are located and designed so as to minimize conflict with principal pedestrian ways, to function efficiently, and to create no dangerous or otherwise objectionable traffic conditions.*

Vehicular access should minimize conflict with pedestrians. Access would be provided by the existing alley system, as well as an existing curb cut on Vermont Avenue. OP defers to DDOT's

analysis of the traffic to and from the site, but given the limited number of parking spaces it is unlikely that a large amount of traffic would be generated that would create conflict with pedestrians. The applicant would also be enhancing the public space and pedestrian experience along Vermont Avenue.

*813.2 The Board of Zoning Adjustment may impose requirements pertaining to design, appearance, signs, size, landscaping, and other such requirements as it deems necessary to protect neighboring property and to achieve the purposes of the zone districts.*

OP recommends no design conditions.

### **SUBTITLE X § 1000 VARIANCE CRITERIA (parking access)**

#### *(a) Exceptional Situation Resulting in a Practical Difficulty*

The lot exhibits exceptional conditions:

- It is bordered by a narrow, 9.33' alley to the southeast;
- It has an existing side yard of 29'8<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" on the south side of the building to be retained.

The project has a parking requirement of 16 spaces. In order to locate those spaces on-site, the applicant could either use the yards and courts on the property, or, theoretically, excavate under the school. Excavation and underpinning under such a massive, historic building would be impractical and likely too expensive, especially for such a small number of spaces and for the scale of the proposed project. Parking, therefore, can only be located in the yards and courts of the building.

The side yard on the south side of the building has been used for parking, and is proposed to be used for parking with this project. Because the building is existing and the side yard cannot be expanded, the dimensions for the parking spaces and drive aisles is limited. The applicant therefore requests that the 20' drive aisle requirement be reduced to 17' in that location. That dimension would allow for conforming compact spaces in that location, along with an accessible van parking spot.

Similarly, parking has been located in Court 2 and is proposed to be located in Court 2 in the future. Those parking spaces are accessed from an alley less than 10' wide. The applicant does not control the entire length of the alley and has no ability to widen it to 10' for its entire length. Court 2 is deep enough to accommodate standard and compact spaces and to increase the effective width of the alley for this portion of the alley, but in order for these spaces to count, the applicant requests relief from the alley width requirement.

#### *(b) No Substantial Detriment to the Public Good*

Relief to the parking standards should not impact the public good. As noted, the areas in question are already used for parking for the building, and with slight reconfigurations would continue to be used in the same way. In regard to the parking in the rear court, although the public alley is only 9.33 feet

wide, in reality there would be additional maneuvering room for vehicles because the parking spaces would not immediately abut the property line; there would be approximately 4' of paved space on private property between the dimensioned parking spaces and the alley. See Sheets 5 and 13 of Exhibit 7A. In the south side yard, the limited number of parking spaces should result in very little conflict between vehicles passing through that space.

*(c) No Substantial Harm to the Zoning Regulations*

The Regulations intend to generally provide safe and efficient maneuvering room for vehicles accessing parking spaces. In this instance, because of the de facto extra room along the alley, and because of the very limited number of vehicles accessing spaces on the south side of the building, access to parking spaces should remain safe and efficient.

**V. HISTORIC PRESERVATION**

The project has received conceptual approval from the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB), with final approval delegated to staff.

**VI. COMMENTS OF OTHER DISTRICT AGENCIES**

As of this writing OP has not received comments from other District agencies.

**VII. COMMUNITY COMMENTS**

As of this writing the record contains no comments from the community.