

MEMORANDUM

TO: District of Columbia Board of Zoning Adjustment

FROM: Crystal Myers, AICP, Case Manager
MBR
 Maxine-Brown Roberts, Associate Director Development Review

DATE: July 17, 2026

SUBJECT: BZA Cases 21474 — Area Variance to construct an 87-unit Apartment House at 1459 Columbia Road, NW

I. OFFICE OF PLANNING RECOMMENDATION

The Office of Planning (OP) recommends **approval** of the following area variance pursuant to Subtitle X § 1002:

- Subtitle F §207.1- Rear Yard (26.66 ft. required, 4.8 ft existing, 0 ft. proposed).

II. LOCATION AND SITE DESCRIPTION

Address	1459 Columbia Road, NW
Applicant	Emory United Methodist Church represented by Holland & Knight
Legal Description	Square 2672, Lot 718
Ward, ANC	Ward 1, ANC 1A
Zone	RA-4 IZ+
Historic District	None
Lot Characteristics	139 ft. x 140 ft. square shaped lot with a 20-foot building restriction line in the front and a 20-foot public alley to the rear
Existing Development	2-story church
Adjacent Properties	The adjacent properties are multifamily buildings.
Surrounding Neighborhood Character	The property is in a predominantly apartment house neighborhood and within close proximity to the Columbia Height Metrorail station, restaurants, and retail.
Proposed Development	The proposal is to construct an a 87-unit, multifamily addition to a portion of the church. The development would include a 20% IZ set aside, which is approximately 17-18 IZ units.

III. LOCATION MAP



IV. ZONING REQUIREMENTS AND REQUESTED RELIEF

Zone: RA-4	Regulation	Existing	Proposed ¹	Relief
Lot(s) Area F § 202	N/A	19,460 sq. ft.	19,460 sq. ft.	No Relief Requested
Lot(s) Width F § 202	N/A	139 ft.	139 ft.	No Relief Requested
Density F § 201	4.2 (with IZ)	Not provided	4.1	No Relief Requested
Height F § 203	90 ft. max.	Not provided	80 ft. 4 in.	No Relief Requested
Rear Yard F § 207	26 ft. 8in	4.8 ft.	None provided	Variance Requested
Court F § 209	4 in. per 1 ft. of height of court but not less than 10 ft.	N/A	Court1: 41.5ft. Court 2: 32ft 5 ft. Court 3: 25.5 ft.	No Relief Requested
Parking C § 701	14 spaces min.	0	8 spaces + 2 car share= 14	No Relief Requested

V. OFFICE OF PLANNING ANALYSIS

Subtitle X § 1002 - Area Variance

The Applicant is seeking an area variance to provide no rear yard from the building.

Extraordinary or Exceptional Situation

The property currently houses a 120-year old church which although is not designated historic, the Office of Historic Preservation has indicated that if a request were made to completely demolish the church, it would qualify to be granted designation and to halt its demolition. In order to avoid

¹ Information provided by Applicant

having to stop the construction process and incur additional costs involved with undergoing the landmark designation process, the Applicant has chosen to retain and incorporate the architecturally significant portions of the buildings which includes the original interior floors and ceilings, exterior windows and walls, existing roof and dormers, and the bell tower

The property is encumbered with a – foot wide building restriction line that prevents approximately 2,780 square feet of space from being utilized for building. Although having a building restriction line is not a unique situation in this area, its presence combined with retaining some of the existing church significantly limits the amount of buildable space on the site. Together, they result in approximately 5,520 square feet of land, or nearly 30% of the property, being unusable for the new development.

Resulting Practical Difficulty

If the proposal were to provide the required 26.66-foot of rear yard, the project would lose an additional – square feet of buildable space as there is no practical alternative location for that density.

1. Requesting permits to demolish the existing church could prompt a member of the community to file a landmark designation application. If such a designation were granted, the project would face significant costs and delays, which would be particularly challenging for the owner given the limited funding available for the project.
2. Having to retain a portion of the church poses a practical difficulty as that area is lost for construction. Additionally, new construction above the preserved portions of the church is not practical as the preserved portions features a steep roof reaching approximately 31 feet and an adjacent tower rising to about 53 feet, making it impossible to design a functional floor plate above these elements. Preserving these portions of the building limits building space on the site and would increase construction costs over that if the building were to be reviewed. Increasing cost would include having to strengthen the foundation/base of the preserved portion of the church in order to incorporate it into the new development.
3. Due to its historic nature, new development is intentionally designed to remain subordinate to the retained portions of the church, consistent with recommended best practices for incorporating historic structures. Accordingly, the building's massing is concentrated to the north and east of the church, with no new construction placed on top of the preserved areas. To compensate for the loss of buildable area in those locations, additional massing is proposed within the rear yard area.
4. Providing the required 26.66-foot rear yard would negatively affect the building's design and layout because the 2,740 square feet occupied by the church cannot be used by the new development, and no space above the church can be utilized. As a result, the placement and configuration of units would be significantly constrained. Impacts to the building's design and unit layout would include:
 - Deep single-aspect units
 - Bedrooms far from windows
 - Living spaces requiring artificial lighting during daytime
 - Awkward dependence on mechanical ventilation
 - Higher energy use
 - Increased risk of stagnant interior air and thermal discomfort

Without the variance, the applicant would lose approximately 22% of the total proposed gross floor area, resulting in the loss of around 23 residential units from the project.

No Substantial Detriment to the Public Good

Although no rear yard would be provided, the design includes a large open court at the northeast corner of the site and there is a 20-foot-wide alley at the rear, which would help maintain light, air, and circulation. Furthermore, the property directly to the north has a parking lot along the alley. Additionally, in this area, it is not uncommon for rear yards to be absent on a property. As shown below, today the church and most of the neighboring buildings have little to no rear yard.



Granting this area variance would not result in a substantial detriment to the public good. The project would introduce 87 new residential units to the neighborhood, including Inclusionary Zoning units.

No Substantial Impairment to the Intent, Purpose, and Integrity of the Zoning Regulations

Granting them requested relief should not impair the intent, purpose and integrity of the RA-4 zone. Approving this relief would allow the property to be redeveloped with a multifamily building on a property zoned for multifamily housing. It would also allow for the partial preservation of this longstanding church building.

VI. OTHER DISTRICT AGENCIES

As of the writing of this report, no other District agencies have provided comments on this application.

VII. ADVISORY NEIGHBORHOOD COMMISSION

ANC 1A submitted a letter in support at Exhibit 25.

VIII. COMMUNITY COMMENTS TO DATE

Currently, there are several letters of support from members and organizations in the community in the record.