District of Columbia
Office of Planning

MEMORANDUM

TO: District of Columbia Board of Zoning Adjustment

FROM: Matt Jesick, Case Manager
MBR
Maxine Brown-Roberts, Associate Director for Development Review

DATE: September 25, 2026

SUBJECT: BZA #21498 – 1608 27th Street, SE – Request for relief to construct an addition to an existing flat

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I. RECOMMENDATION

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

- F § 203, pursuant to X § 1002 – Height (3 stories permitted; 3 stories existing; 4 stories proposed).

II. LOCATION AND SITE DESCRIPTION

Address	1608 27th Street, SE
Applicant	Ronald Briscoe, owner
Legal Description	Square 5585, Lot 6
Ward / ANC	Ward 7, ANC 7B
Zone	RA-1 (Low density apartments; flats permitted as a matter of right)
Historic District or Resource	None
Lot Characteristics and Existing Development	Rectangular lot, 117.8' x 25', sloping from west up to east; 15-foot public alley on the north side; Existing semi-detached 3-story flat; side yard along the alley; Grade is such that at the rear only two stories are exposed; Lot includes almost 4 feet of the building to the south; the party wall is on the subject lot, not on the lot line.
Adjacent Properties and Neighborhood Character	Adjacent building to the south extends across the property line almost 4 feet; That building appears identical to the one on the subject site but reversed; The next building to the south is a moderate-scale apartment building; The surrounding neighborhood is a mix of rowhouse-type buildings and apartment buildings, with the apartments ranging from moderate to large scale.
Proposal	Construct an addition to an existing flat, including a new upper story.

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO. 21498
EXHIBIT NO. 21

III. ZONING REQUIREMENTS

RA-1	Requirement	Existing	Proposed	Relief
FAR F § 201	0.9	0.62	0.86	Conforming
Lot Width F § 202	18’	25’	No change	Conforming
Lot Depth n/a	n/a	117.78’	No change	Conforming
Lot Area F § 202	1,800 sf	2,945 sf	No change	Conforming
Height **F § 203**	40’ **3 stories**	26.5’ **3 stories** **(2 floors + basement)**	40’ **4 stories** **(3 floors + basement**	Conforming **Requested**
Rear Yard F § 207	20’	52’	28’	Conforming
Side Yard F § 208.5(b)	5’	3.1’	No change	Existing Non-conforming
Lot Occupancy F 210	40%	29.3%	32.0%	Conforming

IV. ANALYSIS

The applicant requests an area variance from Subtitle F § 203, which limits building height to three stories. At the front of the building the lowest level is more than five feet out of the ground and therefore considered a basement, which counts toward the number of stories. As a result, the existing building has three stories, and the proposed addition would create a fourth. The Board is authorized to grant the requested relief pursuant to X § 1000. The application must meet the three-part area variance test, which is analyzed below.

i. Extraordinary or Exceptional Situation or Condition Resulting in Peculiar and Exceptional Practical Difficulties To the Property Owner

a. Extraordinary or Exceptional Situation

The subject property is encumbered by exceptional conditions. The party wall dividing the subject building from the adjacent building to the south is actually located not on the property line but rather 3.8 feet into the applicant’s lot. The building at 1610 27th Street is occupying a portion of the subject lot, 1608 27th Street. Please refer to the plat at Exhibit 2. In addition, the grade on the property slopes up considerably from front to back, such that the exposed basement at the front of the building is completely below grade at the rear of the building.

b. Strict Application of the Zoning Regulation Would Result in Exceptional Practical Difficulties

The applicant is impacted by a practical difficulty resulting from the exceptional conditions affecting the property. Because of the exceptional conditions, the owner cannot use the full extent of their property to construct an addition and create more living space. The presence of the neighboring building practically limits the applicant's use of the full width of the property. While perhaps legally the applicant could build a rear addition behind the adjacent building, up to the south property line, it would be impractical and could negatively impact the adjacent residents. A rear addition straight back from the existing party wall could be contemplated, but would be limited in width and could create an awkward and hard to maintain space on the subject property south of the addition.

Further, while the exact history of the building is unknown, it is possible that the basement level was built so far out of the ground to enable the main floor to still be above ground at the rear of the building. If the basement had been partially underground at the front, the exceptional condition of the grade would mean that even part of the first floor would have been below grade at the rear. The exceptional condition, therefore, results in a building that is considered to have three stories, whereas on a flat lot the basement might have been further below grade and not counted as a story.

ii. No Substantial Detriment to the Public Good

Granting the requested relief should not result in a substantial detriment to the public good. While the building would legally have four stories, the proposed design would continue to read as a typical rowhouse in the District. The total height in feet would remain within the matter of right height of 40 feet. Additionally, the footprint of the new 4th floor would be smaller than the lower levels, thus reducing the amount of impact to factors such as light or air availability. Furthermore, given the alley to the north, it is likely that any additional impacts to nearby properties from shadowing would not rise to an undue level of impact, and in fact would be no greater than a matter-of-right building built to the maximum height of 40 feet. In addition, because of the grade, the visual impact of the additional story as seen from properties to the east should be minimized, because from that vantage point the building would not be as high above grade.

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

Granting the requested relief should not impair the intent of the Regulations. While the proposed addition would technically result in a four-story building, it would remain within the height limitation by number of feet, and, based on the drawings submitted to the record, read like a three-story building with a cellar. In fact, the grade rises from the front to the rear, such that the lowest level would be entirely below grade at the rear of the building. The overall scale of the building, therefore, would be in keeping with typical rowhouses in the District.

V. COMMENTS OF OTHER GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

As of this writing the record contains no comments from other government agencies.

VI. ANC COMMENTS

Exhibit 19 is a letter from the Single Member District representative in support of the application.

VII. COMMUNITY COMMENTS

As of this writing there are no community comments in the record.

VIII. VICINITY MAP

