
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Property Address:	1401-1405 15th Street, NW	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Grace Reformed Church	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	November 17, 2022	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	23-043	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

Jeff Epperson, agent for the prospective purchaser, seeks approval to subdivide lot 0829 in Square 210 (1401-1405 15th Street NW) into two lots. The current owner is the Central Atlantic Conference of the United Church of Christ.

Property Description

The lot at 1401-1405 15th Street is occupied by three buildings: the Gothic Revival styled Grace Reformed Church, constructed in 1902-03 and designed by architect Paul J. Pelz and A.A. Ritcher; a Sunday School addition to the rear of the church, constructed in 1911-12 and also designed by Pelz; and a bay-fronted Victorian rowhouse constructed in 1892 by W.H.H. Knight, a member of the congregation who later donated the house to the church for use as a parish house. President Theodore Roosevelt laid the church's cornerstone in 1902 and was reportedly a weekly communicant upon the building's completion in 1903 until he left Washington at the conclusion of his second term in 1909.

The three buildings were designated a landmark in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1991. The church and Sunday School were listed under National Register criterion C as notable examples of the work of master architect Paul J. Pelz and master sculptor James Farrington Early and were found to be excellent examples of the Gothic Revival architectural style. The buildings were included within and listed as contributing to the 14th Street Historic District when it was designated in 1994.

Proposal

The subdivision would subdivide the single lot into two separate record lots, with the church and Sunday School on one lot and the rowhouse on the other. As explained by the applicant in an email submitted with the application:

My client, a local DC congregation that is currently renting out a church in NW DC, is looking at ways to purchase the Grace Reformed Church (1401 15th St, NW) and the abutting Townhouse at 1405. To purchase we need the ability to separate the lot so the current owner may keep the Townhouse and we can buy the abutting Church and the lending bank (for the purchase of the Church) can place a lien solely on the Church without encumbering the Townhouse. The Townhouse would be rented to the Church by the current owner.

There is no expectation of altering the exterior of either building (other than a few needed repairs including the leaky roof). The Grace Reformed Church has been empty since before 2019. The Church building will remain a place of worship and the abutting Townhouse will continue to be used as a residential and office environment for some or all of the Church.

Evaluation

The Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act stipulates that applications for subdivisions that disassemble the lot of a landmark property be referred to the Historic Preservation Review Board and the Mayor's Agent for a hearing to determine whether the subdivision is consistent with the purposes of the preservation act (D.C. Official Code § 6-1106).

The church and Sunday School buildings have been vacant and the entire site actively marketed for sale since 2018. HPO has talked or met with multiple potential purchasers and those conversations have made clear that the reuse options for the site are limited by the buildings' very specific designs and landmark protection. The site's RA-5 zoning, allowing up to 90 feet in height and 6.0 FAR, suggests a level of development potential that is unrealistic for this landmark but nevertheless creates pressure on the buildings that ultimately could result in a request for substantial alterations or new construction.

HPO recommends that the Review Board find the proposed subdivision to be consistent with the purposes of the act and necessary in the public interest, as it would facilitate the buildings' preservation and reuse. The proposed subdivision would not change the boundaries of the landmark but would simply result in it being comprised of two lots rather than one; the three buildings would continue to be fully protected under the Act. The stated intent of the applicant in pursuing the subdivision is to allow the purchase and reuse of the church and Sunday School to serve in the uses for which they were originally constructed, which is consistent with the first preservation principle cited in the federal Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.¹ While the applicant states that no exterior alterations other than repairs are currently planned, the subdivision would not affect the Board's or the Mayor's Agent's authority to ensure that any future alterations were compatible and consistent with the purposes of the preservation act.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Review Board find the proposed subdivision to be consistent with the preservation act.

¹ A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.