

Landmarks Commission
Meeting of October 4, 2021
Agenda #3, Legistar 67569, Review of Draft Historic Preservation Ordinance

The case study, document #4 of Legistar 67569, addresses the final version of 817 Williamson, the version that was approved. 817 Williamson was before the Landmarks Commission three times, plus one cancelled meeting, for four versions of the plans. And then there were also the plans as approved by the Plan Commission.

- There was the version submitted for a March 16 meeting that was cancelled at the last minute due to a lack of a quorum. A staff report was done, recommending that the standards were not met.
- On June 1, 2020 the Landmarks motion was: "Refer the request for the Certificate of Appropriateness for new construction to a future meeting to allow the applicant to consider the commission's comments on height, volume, and the front façade design." The staff report recommended that the standards were met.
- On July 13, 2020 a motion to approve the new construction failed. The Landmarks motion that passed was: "Refer the request for the Certificate of Appropriateness for new construction to the August 17, 2020 meeting to allow the applicant to explore a solution that reads more like two street façades as opposed to a singular street façade." The staff report recommended that the standards were met.
- On August 17, 2020 the COA was approved.
- For the Plan Commission meeting of January 11, 2021, the plans were again revised. The building became 6 feet wider, 1 foot deeper, sited closer to the sidewalk (due to a City easement), height increased 1 foot, and the "L" portion at the back of the building was removed. Per the staff report, these changes were administratively approved by the Preservation Planner.

What would be interesting is an analysis of the prior versions under the proposed regulation and of the plans as approved by the Plan Commission -- whether those versions would meet the standards of the new regulation. Would the new regulation adequately address the Commission's concerns as expressed on the versions that were not accepted, or would the Commission's concerns no longer have relevancy?

The case study compares the final version of the project to the proposed ordinance. I have the following comments on selected sections.

Visual size

Draft ordinance: When determining visual compatibility for visual size, the Landmarks Commission shall consider factors such as massing, building height in feet and stories, the gross area of the front elevation (i.e., all walls facing the street), street presence, and the dominant proportion of width to height in the façade.

Staff Analysis: The building design presents a smaller scale at the front of the structure, with the bulk of the structure nested behind. The street frontage presents as two separate street facades, with a step back above the western façade. This mitigates the appearance of the structure, making the street presence compatible with the visual size of the historic resources within 200 feet.

My analysis:

Massing:

- The gross volumes of the historic commercial buildings (800, 805, 811 and 831, not including the non-historic separate structures on 805 and 831) which are the only buildings sited near the sidewalk, including attic space under gabled rooflines, range from about 27,000 cubic feet to 32,000 cubic feet.
- The July version of the proposed project had over 270,000 cubic feet (excluding the garage space). Even just the front half of the proposed building, going back only as far as the garage entry, was over 125,000 cubic feet. Thus, the front mass was almost 4 times larger than the largest historic resource, and the whole building, included the “nested behind” portion, was about 8.4 times larger than the largest historic resource.
- The approved August version had a volume of approximately 289,500 cubic feet. The front portion had about 156,000 cubic feet, or about 4.8 times more mass in just the front portion than the largest historic resource.
- The footprints of the historic commercial buildings range from about 1,200 to 1,500 square feet.
- The approved August version had a footprint of 7,900 square feet, with just the front portion at about 3,900 square feet.

Height in feet and stories:

- The heights of the historic commercial buildings are 20-28 feet.
- The approved version had a height of 40.64', including the cornice.
- The historic commercial properties are 2 stories.
- The approved version was 3 stories.

Gross area of the front elevation:

- The historic commercial buildings have street facades range from about 640 to 670 square feet. The facade of the approved project, not including the garage, was about 2,200 square feet. (The garage had a front elevation area of about 1,100 square feet.)
- The proposed ordinance says “the gross area of the front elevation (i.e., all walls facing the street).” It does not discuss what a building reads as, or what sort of gap is required to make a building read like two buildings. It also includes all walls facing the street, so the setback garage portion could not be excluded.
- Even if this is read as two buildings, and only looking at the portions sited at the sidewalk (not considering the garage walls that face the street), each segment would be 935 square feet – or about 40% larger gross front elevation of the historic commercial buildings.

Street presence:

- “Street presence” is mentioned just this one time in the draft ordinance, so exactly what this means is not clear. Perhaps the assertion that the building reads like two buildings would fall under this.
- This new building will clearly be the dominant street presence on the block face in terms of size. When one is looking down the block from the other side of the street, this building will read like a single building.
- Side note: Should any new structure ever overpower the existing historic resources?

Dominant proportion of the width to height in the façade:

- Of the historic commercial buildings, 2 have gabled roofs, so I am not sure how to factor in the attic for the width to height calculation. One is a true flat roof, about 24' wide and 28' high, or the width is about 86% of the height. One has a false front, and the width is about 79% of the height.
- The width of 817's two segments are each 57% of the height. The front portion sited at the sidewalk, as a whole, is 150% of the height.

What is the Commission to do with this information? The ordinance merely states that the Commission "shall consider" these factors, and the guidelines do not provide further guidance. When should an application be approved or denied? If a building is 30% taller than the historic resources within 200 feet, should that proposal be denied? Or 9 times the volume? Or if it has a 40% larger front elevation? Shouldn't developers, as well as neighbors, have some idea of what visual compatibility means? Wouldn't the Commission find more substantive guidance useful and time saving?

Building Form

Draft Ordinance: "When determining visual compatibility for building form, the Landmarks Commission shall consider factors such as building type and use, roof shape, symmetry or asymmetry, and its dominant vertical or horizontal expression."

Staff Analysis: "There are flat-roofed commercial structures within 200 feet, and one false front historic structure that gives the appearance of a flat roof. The building form is in keeping with the form of historic commercial structures in the vicinity."

My Analysis:

- The design of the roof, a flat roof, is only compatible with one historic resource – 800 Williamson, on the north side of the block and on a corner. All other 22 historic resources have a peaked roof. The one building with a false front does appear to have a flat roof if one looks at directly from the front – its peaked roof is apparent from other angles.
- Having a mid-block historic resource with a flat roof is rare on the south side of Williamson: 937 is a 2-flat, and 1019 is Nature's Bakery which is 2 stories with partially exposed basement, both of which are narrow, have a vertical expression and appear under 30 feet in height.
- The building type is a commercial block building. This type of building was generally found on corners, not in the middle of a block.

Garage Doors

Proposed ordinance: "Garage doors shall be similar in design, color, scale, architectural appearance, and other visual qualities prevalent within the historic district."

Staff analysis: "The garage door will be minimally visible from the public right-of-way, but should be of a compatible appearance with the structure and doors found in the district. Applicant should provide specifications on the garage doors."

My analysis:

- The garage door, as approved by Landmarks, would have been highly visible to anyone of the sidewalk - it would have been 18' wide, and about 9-10' tall. I doubt that scale of door is found anywhere on a historic resource in the Third Lake Ridge.
- The proposed ordinance does not limit garage door standards to what is visible from the public right-of-way. Rather, it lays out the standard that all garage doors have to have

visual qualities that are prevalent in the district. So even a garage entrance at the rear of the building needs to meet this standard. And, it is hard to say what counts as visual qualities “prevalent” in the district. Do 10 examples, or 50, or 100, need to be found?

- As a side note, it certainly makes sense that a new residential garage needs an appropriate door. But a commercial door is never going to be similar in scale to a historic garage door – just one example of why commercial needs different standards.

Balconies and Decks

Proposed ordinance: “Projecting, partially projecting/inset, and inset balconies are prohibited on elevations visible from the developed public right-of-way, unless there is precedent on the historic resources in the district.”

Staff analysis: “While there is a rooftop deck above the western projecting bay on the street façade the balconies on the rest of the structure are largely on the rear clapboard-clad half of the structure. Most of these are either not visible or minimally visible from the public right-of-way. The exception are three balconies above the garage entrance that face towards the street. These are substantially set back from the street and there is precedent of a street facing balcony on the residential-form historic structure at 839 Williamson.

My analysis:

- There were 6 inset balconies on the garage side, 3 facing the street and 3 facing the driveway, all of which were all visible from the “developed public right-of-way” (whatever that means). The proposed ordinance does not permit these balconies if visible from the developed public right-of-way – there is not an exception for those that are “minimally visible.”
- The proposed ordinance prohibits these inset balconies. There is no historic precedence for inset balconies.
 - The “balcony” at 839 Williamson is actually a second-story porch, atop a first floor porch. Porches are addressed separately in the regulation from balconies.
 - I am unaware of any historic resource in the Third Lake Ridge that has inset balconies.

Respectfully Submitted,
Linda Lehnertz