

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: MARCH 18, 2013

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

THRU: RASHAD M. YOUNG, CITY MANAGER 

FROM: FAROLL HAMER, DIRECTOR 
DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND ZONING

SUBJECT: CHANGES TO THE PARKER-GRAY HISTORIC DISTRICT REGULATIONS

In response to community requests, the Parker-Gray Board of Architectural Review (PG BAR) and the Parker-Gray Ad-Hoc Design Guidelines Work Group (Work Group) have recently completed a year-long evaluation of the existing BAR guidelines, policies and review process, concluding with the adoption of the new Parker-Gray Residential Reference Guide at the December 12, 2012 BAR hearing. We want to take this opportunity to update you on the collaborative process and the positive changes that will be implemented as a result.

The new policies represent significant procedural changes and overall reduced regulations for owners of residential properties within the Parker-Gray Historic District. Virtually all of the recommendations of the work group were adopted by the PG BAR, ranging from relatively minor modifications to the existing guidelines and policies, to significantly reduced review of most alterations, to no BAR review of any kind on rear elevations and in back yards. Furthermore, there has been a significant expansion of permitted modern and sustainable materials. While the changes may appear complex and complicated, the result is a “lighter regulatory touch” that has already been well received within the Parker-Gray neighborhood.

WORK GROUP COMPOSITION AND PROCESS

The Parker-Gray Work Group was created by the BAR in November 2011 in response to concerns expressed to both the BAR and the City Council by some residents of the historic district regarding the use of modern materials, the demolition of chain link fences, and what some perceived as excessive BAR fees and overreaching BAR regulation. The group was composed of nine members who live or work in the Parker-Gray Historic District, including: two members from the Parker-Gray BAR (Bill Conkey and Phil Moffat); two member representatives from the West Old Town Civic Association (Leslie Zupan and Heath Wells); two member representatives from the Braddock Station Civic Association (Bradley King and Matt Slowick – who is also a PG BAR member); one local builder/developer (Bill Cromley); one

representative recommended by the Black History Museum (Lovell Lee or Louis Hicks); and, one sustainable design expert/architect (Joe McCoy).

The group met seven times over ten months for a total of 19 hours, often with complex and spirited debate.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ADOPTION

One of the first items that the group discussed was the reduction of BAR fees and, in June 2012, City Council adopted the Work Group's recommended changes to the fee schedule for residential properties. These reduced fees have resulted in significant savings for residents and applicants in both historic districts.

The majority of the Work Group's meetings were devoted to evaluating the existing *Design Guidelines*, and the BAR's adopted policies on windows, roofing and minor architectural elements. In nearly every instance, the group voted to amend the existing Guidelines and policies, which resulted in 71 separate group actions. The Work Group represented a number of different interests and, as a result, some of their recommendations were complex and, at times, contradictory. The BAR reviewed the recommendations, resolved the inconsistencies and ultimately adopted the Work Group's recommendations, with very few modifications.

The recommendations adopted by the BAR represent significant, fundamental and positive changes to the requirements and review process for projects within the Parker-Gray Historic District. The Board has adopted and implemented those changes to the Design Guidelines regarding modern materials, etc. and delegated much administrative approval authority to staff. Staff and the BAR have already started using the amended guidelines. However, some of the changes describing what portions of a building require BAR review or where demolition may occur without BAR approval require specific changes to the Zoning Ordinance before they can be implemented. Staff will prepare a text amendment for Planning Commission and City Council's consideration of those changes, which we expect before the summer break.

The changes recommended by the BAR can be summarized in three general categories, as described below:

1. Architectural Classification/Period of Significance

In a significant departure from the way the BAR previously evaluated properties in the historic district, a local period of architectural significance was adopted in order to prioritize buildings. Each residential property will be evaluated based on its original construction date. For *Early* buildings, those buildings constructed *before 1932*, the BAR expressed a preference for preservation or reproduction of the exterior building materials, especially on their street facing elevations. Buildings constructed *after 1931* are considered *Later* buildings and will have more limited BAR review. The BAR generally considers these background buildings and recommended much greater flexibility for alterations and new construction, while insuring that Later buildings remain compatible with, and do not detract from, nearby Early buildings.

2. Hierarchy of elevations

In addition to prioritizing Early residential buildings over Later buildings, the group also articulated a clear preference for the preservation of the street fronting elevations, with more limited BAR review of side and rear elevations where they are not subject to close inspection by the public from the sidewalk. Therefore, the work group put forth different standards for street-facing versus non-street-facing elevations. For example, fiber cement siding is appropriate on the side and rear elevations of Early buildings, but not on street facing façades. In addition, rear elevations, particularly on Later buildings, will have little or no review. This new approach is a significant departure from the current requirement to evaluate all elevations visible from any *public right-of-way*, including alleys.

3. Hierarchy of BAR review

A significant concern expressed by some members of the Work Group was that the BAR's regulatory purview was too over-reaching. Therefore, the Work Group recommended, and the BAR has authorized, a significant list of minor alterations that may be approved at a staff level. A number of additional alterations and minor construction projects which currently require BAR approval at a full public hearing, such as small one-story rear additions, may be approved at the staff level or will require no BAR review of any kind.

UPDATE ON THE BAR PROCESS SINCE ADOPTION

Since the BAR adopted the recommendations of the Work Group, BAR staff has approved four applications for alterations that would previously have required a full BAR hearing, and two applications for alterations that will not require any BAR review after the text amendment has been adopted. For those items that are required to go to a full BAR hearing prior to the adoption of the text amendment, the evaluation is based on the new standards and the cases are placed on the Consent Calendar as a courtesy to the applicants. A new Residential Reference Guide for Parker-Gray property owners is posted on the City's Historic Preservation web page <http://alexandriava.gov/Preservation>.

NEXT STEPS

Staff has a significant amount of work over the next six to eight months to fully implement the new Parker-Gray Guidelines and policies. Staff must create new *Design Guidelines* for the Parker-Gray District that reflect the new policies and will work with the Board and the community to evaluate the feasibility of applying the same streamlined standards to commercial buildings. Staff will also bring the necessary text amendments to the Planning Commission and City Council in the spring. Finally, one constant concern that staff heard from the Work Group was the need for greater public outreach, so that property owners in Parker-Gray are aware of the positive changes taking place in the district. Staff and the BAR will work to expand public outreach and consider new ways to educate and inform local property owners, as well as realtors, architects and contractors who often work in the historic district.

If you have any questions, please direct them to Al Cox, Historic Preservation Manager in Planning & Zoning at 703-746-3830.

cc: Stephanie Sample, Urban Planner, Department of Planning & Zoning
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