

Boards of Architectural Review Conceptual Project Review Policy

January 2001

Background

An application for the construction of a new building in the historic districts often requires approval from the Planning Commission and/or City Council as well as the Boards of Architectural Review (Boards). The Zoning Ordinance requires that the Boards review “height, mass and scale of buildings or structures” in determining the appropriateness of proposed construction. Therefore, it is desirable that the Boards review projects requiring Planning Commission and City Council approval— prior to Commission and Council review — under what is called “Conceptual Review.”

An early, conceptual review is beneficial because an applicant can avoid spending substantial money for design fees to develop architectural details before committing to the lengthy Planning Commission and City Council review process and the Boards do not spend time reviewing the details of a project which may not receive approval of, or which may be modified by, the Planning Commission and/or City Council. The applicant is also able to determine early in the review process whether the Boards feel the building envelope is appropriate or not, and can change design direction prior to a large expenditure of professional fees.

Procedure

Conceptual review requests are docketed for consideration at a regular public hearing of one of the Boards. In this review, the Boards determine whether the “scale, mass and architectural character” of a proposal is appropriate within the historic districts. In other words, the Boards determination in this preliminary review is whether the size and architectural character of the building is generally appropriate in relation to its surroundings. For projects on Washington Street or within the Potomac River Vicinity the Board will also make a formal finding of compliance with the additional standards listed in the Zoning Ordinance, to the extent possible without final architectural details. Detailed design elements, such as colors, signs, window details, etc., are normally deferred for restudy and final approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness if, and after, the project is approved by Planning Commission and City Council.

The conceptual findings of the Boards regarding the appropriateness of a proposed project’s scale and mass are then included in the staff report to Planning Commission and, in the case of a Development Special Use Permit, to City Council. However, no Certificate of Appropriateness is granted until after the project receives zoning approval by the Planning Commission and Council, responds to any revisions required by these other bodies and the applicant returns to the Board for approval of the final design details.

Staff will not route a case to the Boards for conceptual review if a project requires major zoning modifications because if a project is not legally buildable, then the Boards should not be spending time on design review. An example of a major zoning modification would be a case where a project is dependent upon a rezoning of the land from residential to commercial. In addition, Staff believes that the Boards are the most qualified bodies to review and comment on architectural and historic design issues but should not deal with such issues as traffic and other traditional Planning Commission issues.

Typical proposals reviewed in concept by the Boards:

- The proposal requires a Special Use Permit for additional density or height;
- The proposal requires Planning Commission review for a new building;
- Staff determines that the proposal requires preliminary review because the design would be a principal determining factor in the ultimate approval by other bodies.

The principal exception is when the zoning approval needed by the Planning Commission or Council is so uncertain and so critical to the basic format of the proposal, that, in Staff's opinion, changes to the application are likely and review by the Boards would have to be repeated.

Issues considered by the Boards during conceptual approval:

- Appropriateness of scale, mass and general architectural character;
- Additional standards for a Certificate of Appropriateness where applicable (i.e. Washington Street or the Potomac River Vicinity).

Recommendations of the Old and Historic Alexandria District Board of Architectural Review, December 20, 2000

In order for the Board to have more time to review projects in concept than at present and to better enable it to review mass, scale and architectural character in isolation from design details, the Board suggested two procedural changes:

1. Staff should not docket applications for Planning Commission review prior to the Board's conceptual approval of a project; and,
2. Staff should require concept drawings depicting only mass, scale and context in addition to other more detail drawings.

Adopted by the:

Parker-Gray District Board of Architectural Review, 01/03/01

Old and Historic Alexandria District Board of Architectural Review, 12/20/00