



CITY OF
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Historic Resources Board Staff Report

From: Planning and Development Services Director
Lead Department: Planning and Development Services

Meeting Date: March 28, 2024
Report #: 2402-2685

TITLE

261 Hamilton Avenue: Review and Recommendation of a Request to Update a Property's Individual Palo Alto Historic Inventory Category to Category 2 from Category 3; the Property is Located in the National Register Ramona Street Architectural District

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Historic Resources Board (HRB) take the following action(s):

1. Recommend the City Council reclassify the building from a 'Contributing Building' Category 3 resource to a 'Major Building' Category 2 resource on the Palo Alto Historic Inventory.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is to support the HRB's review of a requested reclassification of 261 Hamilton, the Medico-Dental building. It is currently listed as a Category 3 resource on the City's Historic Inventory. The owner requests designation as a Category 2 resource on the City's Historic Inventory, per the attached letter of request and evaluation prepared by the City's historic preservation consultant (Attachment A). The evaluation report was prepared directly for the City of Palo Alto at the applicant's expense.

The report's conclusion is that the subject building is a meritorious work of an important regional architect of merit, Birge M. Clark, and is an excellent example of commercial design in the Spanish Colonial Revival style that is both individually significant and contributes to the Ramona Street Architectural District. Further the report notes the building meets the local Criteria 1, 2, 5 and 6 in consideration for eligibility as a local inventory Category 2 resource, as a "Major Building".

BACKGROUND

The building at 261 Hamilton Avenue is located within the Commercial Downtown Community (CD-C) zone district, with Ground Floor and Pedestrian Combining Districts, and within the Downtown Parking Assessment District.

2014 Request for Rehabilitation, Major Project, and Category Upgrade

On April 16, 2014, the HRB reviewed and recommended a project proposed at this address, as well as a request for a category upgrade associated with a proposed seismic rehabilitation. On June 5, 2014, the Architectural Review Board (ARB) recommended approval of the rehabilitation along with relocation of basement floor area to a 5,910 square foot rear addition and addition of a 1,196 square foot mezzanine floor.

The 2014 staff reports noted that the requested upgrade in category related to the associated rehabilitation project was anticipated to lead to the owner's ability to generate 15,000 square feet of bonus area for potential future transfer to an eligible receiver site in Downtown Palo Alto. Council action was indicated for the category upgrade process, and the need arose for Council to weigh in on a code interpretation related to 'building envelope' to enable action on the larger discretionary project subject to Architectural Review (i.e. relocation of basement floor area above grade, which the community had commented on during the prior public hearing(s)). The zoning code in question was Palo Alto Municipal Code (PAMC) Chapter 18.18 section regarding grandfathered facilities and additional floor area.

The June 2014 Council action resulted in continuance of its review of the project to a date uncertain, and direction to staff regarding the code interpretation. That direction led to a code amendment to restrict future projects associated with grandfathered facilities in the Downtown. Council's code interpretation direction effectively scuttled the larger project the HRB and ARB had recommended. Links¹ to the staff report and meeting minutes of Council's 2014 hearing are provided below. Minutes of the April 16, 2014 HRB meeting begin on page 65 of the Council staff report; they reflect that the HRB recommended an upgrade from the local inventory Category 3 to Category 2 on a 6-0-1 vote (page 91) associated with the rehabilitation project. Links² to the ARB's 2014 minutes and staff report are provided below; within the ARB staff report, Attachment F is the April 16, 2014 HRB staff report.

¹ Link to Council staff report: <https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/files/assets/public/v/1/agendas-minutes-reports/reports/city-manager-reports-cmrs/year-archive/2014/261hamilton-ave-id-4678.pdf> and action minutes <https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/files/assets/public/v/1/agendas-minutes-reports/agendas-minutes/city-council-agendas-minutes/00-archive/2014/06-23-14-action.pdf>

² June 5 2014 ARB minutes <https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/files/assets/public/v/1/agendas-minutes-reports/agendas-minutes/architectural-review-board/archive-table-layout-2011-and-newer/2014/6-5-14-42912.pdf> and April 2014 ARB report <https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/files/assets/public/v/1/agendas-minutes-reports/agendas-minutes/architectural-review-board/archive-table-layout-2011-and-newer/2014/id-4598.pdf>

After the Council action, the applicant dropped the pursuit of the category upgrade until the March 2024 request that is now the subject of this report. In December 2015, the owner submitted building permit plans for seismic retrofit and interior rehabilitation plans that did not involve exterior work; the plans were reviewed by a qualified historic preservation firm, approved, and implemented. Separate tenant improvements and signage plans were also approved and implemented. The building was rehabilitated, such many of the original features were restored and several compatible new elements were added. As noted, the City's consultant has evaluated the building in its present state, and determined it rises to a category 2 local resource "Major Building" of regional importance in the Palo Alto Historic Resources Inventory.

Local Inventory Category 3 and Ramona Street Architectural District

The building at 261 Hamilton Avenue was designed by prominent local architect Birge M. Clark and constructed by builder Wells P. Goodenough in 1928. Clark designed the subject building to function as a "professional building." It was later renamed as the "Medico-Dental" building upon completion. The Medico-Dental 261 Hamilton Avenue is currently listed as a Category 3 historic resource per Council action (reflected in Attachment B) March 4, 1985; this action occurred before the nomination of the Ramona Street Architectural District for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. On May 21, 1985, the Ramona Street Architectural District was nominated and listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). As a contributing property in the National Register Ramona Street Architectural District, the building at 261 Hamilton Avenue is also listed on the California Register of Historical Resources.

ANALYSIS

Recent Historic Resource Evaluation and Local Inventory Categories

The City's consultant, Page and Turnbull, prepared a Historic Resource Evaluation (HRE) (within Attachment A) finding 261 Hamilton Avenue meets Criteria 1, 2, 5 and 6 in consideration for eligibility as a Category 2: "Major Building." These criteria are listed below:

- Criterion 1 (The structure or site is identified with the lives of historic people or with important events in the city, state or nation)
- Criterion 2 (The structure or is particularly representative of an architectural style or way of life important to the city, state or nation)
- Criterion 5 (The architect or building was important)
- Criterion 6 (The structure or site contains elements demonstrating outstanding attention to architectural design, detail, materials or craftsmanship)

The HRB's purview, as set forth in PAMC Section 16.49.040, includes recommending the reclassification to the City Council for approval, disapproval or modification. The building at 261 Hamilton has met the criteria for designation that are set forth in the City's historic preservation ordinance, Palo Alto Municipal Code (PAMC) Chapter 16.49.040 (b).

PAMC Section 16.49.020 (b) provides definitions for the four local inventory categories. The current local designation is a contributing building, Category 3 resource, defined as follows:

Category 3 or 4: "Contributing building" means any building or group of buildings which are good local examples of architectural styles and which relate to the character of a neighborhood grouping in scale, materials, proportion or other factors. A contributing building may have had extensive or permanent changes made to the original design, such as inappropriate additions, extensive removal of architectural details, or wooden facades resurfaced in asbestos or stucco.

The requested Category 2 resource is defined in the PAMC Section 16.49.020(b) as follows:

Category 2: "Major building" means any building or group of buildings of major regional importance, meritorious works of the best architects or an outstanding example of an architectural style or the stylistic development of architecture in the state or region. A major building may have some exterior modifications, but the original character is retained.

HRB Purview of Resources in the Ramona Historic District

Exterior alterations of resources within a National historic district are subject to HRB review. However, exterior changes are not proposed at this time. The modifications to the building submitted in 2015 via building permit application(s) were reviewed by Architectural Resources Group and the City's historic preservation planner for consistency with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, prior to issuance of building permits.

Benefits of Historic Listing and Reclassification

As a contributing building in a national register historic district, the building has a greater chance of obtaining grants or tax credits for rehabilitation. Such benefits are provided at the state and federal levels. The building is eligible for historic preservation incentives set forth in the California Historical Building Code and the California's energy standards.

Reclassification from a Category 3 to a Category 2 resource at the local level would allow for participation in the Floor Area Bonus/Transfer of Development Rights program, which is only available for local inventory Category 1 and 2 resources. The applicant's request to upgrade the local inventory category based on the attached evaluation does ask for transfer of development rights (TDR) or a floor area bonus. On-site use of bonus area would require review for compliance with the Standards and Architectural Review findings. PAMC Section 18.18.080 governs the process to transfer bonus floor area to eligible non-historic receiver site(s) in the Downtown area.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

Maintenance of historic designation of a property or reclassification of historic designation of a property is not a project under the California Environmental Quality Act and CEQA Guidelines per Section 21065.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Notice of this HRB hearing appeared in the Daily Post on March 15, 2024, which is 14 days in advance of the meeting and notice cards were sent out on March 14, 2024, which is 15 days in advance of the meeting.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Letter of Proposal Requesting Upgrade

Attachment B: Inventory Form from 1985

AUTHOR/TITLE

Amy French, Chief Planning Official