



CITY OF
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ALTO**

City Council Staff Report

From: City Manager

Report Type: CONSENT CALENDAR

Lead Department: Planning and Development Services

Meeting Date: April 22, 2024

Report #:2403-2834

TITLE

CONSENT: 261 Hamilton Ave: Upgrade Historic Inventory from Category 3 to Category 1

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that Council reclassify 261 Hamilton Avenue, the Medico-Dental Building, which is a contributor to the historic Ramona Street Architectural District, from a Palo Alto Historic Inventory Category 3 Resource ('Contributing Building') to a Category 1 Resource ('Exceptional Building') as recommended by the Historic Resources Board (HRB).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report and Record of Land Use Action (Attachment A) provide background and support the HRB's March 28, 2024 recommendation to upgrade the Medico-Dental Building's Historic Inventory classification from Category 3 ('Contributing Building') to Category 1 ('Exceptional Building'). The HRB staff report¹ includes the consultant's assessment and inventory form.

The Spanish Colonial Revival Style building is located within the Commercial Downtown zone, and provides ground floor retail spaces (Sweet Greens, Warby Parker, and Scandia) and office spaces on the upper floors. The United States Post Office originally occupied the ground floor until 1933, with medical offices on the upper floors. The building, designed by Birge M. Clark and constructed by builder Wells P. Goodenough in 1928, was listed in 1985 as a contributing building within a National Register and local historic district, the Ramona Street Architectural District, and listed individually as a local historic resources inventory Category 3 "Contributing Building."

BACKGROUND

The building was first evaluated and added to the local historic inventory in May of 1978 as a Category 3 resource. The inventory form was later updated on March 4, 1985, when the

¹ Link to HRB report with consultant assessment and inventory form

<https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/files/assets/public/v/1/agendas-minutes-reports/agendas-minutes/historic-resources-board/2024/hrb-3.28-261-hamilton.pdf>

property was deemed a contributing building to the National Register Ramona Street Architectural District. In 1998, with the creation of the California Register of Historical Resources, the building was listed by default in the California Register as a contributor to the district. In 2000, the building was found eligible for individual listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

PAMC 16.49

The Palo Alto Municipal Code (PAMC) Chapter 16.49, Historic Preservation, notes Category 1 buildings are of “preeminent national or state importance, meritorious work of the best architects or an outstanding example of the stylistic development of architecture in the United States.” The building is listed in the National Register as a contributor to the Ramona Street Architectural District and is currently listed on the Palo Alto Historic Resources Inventory as an individual Category 3 resource.

PAMC Chapter 16.49 defines a Category 3 contributing building as: “a good local example 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.”

PAMC Chapter 16.49 defines a Category 2 major building as: “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.”

PAMC Chapter 16.49 defines a Category 1 exceptional building “any building or group of buildings of preeminent national or state importance, meritorious work of the best architects or an outstanding example of the stylistic development of architecture in the United States. An exceptional building has had either no exterior modifications or such minor ones that the overall appearance of the building is in its original character.”

Assessment of 2015 Rehabilitation Project

The property owner completed a rehabilitation project in 2015, which included seismic-related improvements, and restored many of the original features based on historic drawings and documentation. The City’s consultant report evaluated the work done in 2015, and states that the ground-floor storefront systems have been “largely restored to their original condition and have received compatible new storefront systems, wood doors, tilework, wood spindles, awnings, and awning boxes.” The report notes all seven aspects of integrity remain and supports a local inventory classification upgrade to a Category 2 resource, a “Major Building” of regional importance.

The consultant report concludes 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.

Upgrade Request

In December 2023, the property owner expressed interest in having the restoration work that was done several years ago evaluated to document compliance with the Secretary of the Interiors Standards in consideration of a request to upgrade the resource status to a local inventory Category 2 historic resource. Staff received funds from the owner to have the City's historic consultant prepare a historic resource evaluation (HRE), completed February 2024.

The attached record of land use action is provided with some additional background information. The City's consultant's February 2024 report recommended a category upgrade to a local historic inventory listing of Category 2, as a "Major Building" of regional importance.

HRB Recommendation

On March 28, 2024, the HRB reviewed the historic resources evaluation and staff report² and received presentations. The HRB reviewed the owner's request to elevate the building's local inventory historic category from 3 to 2, as supported by the City's consultant report, which also noted the building appears eligible for individual listing on the National Register of Historic Places as a separate property, where it is currently listed as a contributor to the historic district.

The HRB determined the building is an exceptional building eligible for local inventory category 1, as an 'Exceptional Building'. The HRB felt the architecture of the building is an excellent example of the Spanish Colonial Revival style and rises to the level of state-wide significance (Criterion 6). The HRB report included the original Historic Inventory form as well as the recent Historic Resource Evaluation. The HRB recommended the class upgrade to Category 1 with no requirement for rehabilitation, given the recent seismic and historic rehabilitation performed in 2015.

ANALYSIS

Ramona Street Architectural District

The building and construction of the Ramona Street Architectural District was carried out by designer Pedro de Lemos, a prominent regional designer, and Birge Clark and William H. Weeks, well-known local architects. The district was central in the 1920s and 30s expansion of Palo Alto's downtown commercial district and its location addressed concerns that the town center

² Link to March 28, 2024 staff report: <https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/files/assets/public/v1/agendas-minutes-reports/agendas-minutes/historic-resources-board/2024/hrb-3.28-261-hamilton.pdf> which includes HRE and original inventory form

was growing too laterally along University Avenue. The Ramona Street Architectural District contains eight National Register District contributing buildings.

The Medico Dental building is the only Category 3 building in the district. The district has two Category 1 buildings, four Category 2 buildings (the Cardinal Hotel was elevated from Category 3 to Category 2 in 2020), and one Category 4 building. The eight buildings were built between 1924 and 1938. The Inventory Category 1 resources in the district are both Pedro de Lemos' buildings – the building at 520 Ramona, originally built in 1925, but modified significantly over time, and 533 Ramona (the NOLA restaurant building).

The addresses of buildings in the district and associated Inventory category numbers are as follows:

- 235 Hamilton Category 2 (up from Category 3 as per HRB and by Council approval in 2020)
- 267 Hamilton Category 3
- 520, 522, 524, 526 Ramona Category 1
- 528-530 Ramona Category 2
- 533-539 Ramona Category 1
- 532, 534-536 Ramona Category 2
- 538-542 Ramona Category 2
- 541-545 Ramona Category 4

The City's local historic resources inventory reflects a total of 89 Category 1 resources, 267 Category 2 resources, 236 Category 3 resources, and 281 Category 4 resources, citywide.

Bonus Floor Area

An owner of a Category 1 or 2 resource may request a floor area bonus for qualified rehabilitation and restoration projects. Following Council reclassification of the building, the property owner may apply for a floor area bonus, though staff would have to consider whether the bonus is available for already-completed rehabilitation projects. In the event a floor area bonus is granted, it may be used on-site, or may be transferrable to a non-historic building in the Downtown, in accordance with PAMC section 18.18.080. Modification of the building exterior with bonus floor area would be subject to review for compliance with Secretary of the Interior's Standards during the Architectural Review process.

FISCAL/RESOURCE IMPACT

The City's consultant cost to prepare the evaluation was covered by the property owner. Though not proposed, any project utilizing bonus floor area on site would include review by the HRB and Architectural Review Board with the appropriate processing fees in effect at that time, as defined in the Municipal Fee Schedule.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The HRB members have been the key community partners during the process to reach this point.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

Reclassification of a historic building to a higher category of resource is exempt from CEQA review under California Environmental Quality Act and CEQA Guidelines per Section 21065.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Draft Record of Land Use Action for Council April 22, 2024

APPROVED BY:

Jonathan Lait, Planning and Development Services Director