

ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW STAFF REPORT

Before Dover Historic District Commission

February 20, 2025

<u>Application:</u>	The Old Post at 55 Loockerman Plaza, HI-25-01
<u>Owner:</u>	City of Dover
<u>Equitable Owner:</u>	Old Post, LLC
<u>Location:</u>	Northwest corner of Loockerman Plaza and Innovation Way in Dover, DE
<u>Addresses:</u>	55 Loockerman Plaza
<u>Tax Parcels:</u>	ED-05-077.05-04-53.00-000
<u>Size:</u>	1.267 acres +/-
<u>Present Uses:</u>	Vacant Building – Former Dover Post Office
<u>Proposed Use:</u>	Mixed-Use Commercial and Multi-family Housing (Apartments) and associated parking
<u>Present Zoning:</u>	C-2 (Central Commercial Zone) H (Historic District Zone) SWPOZ (Source Water Protection Overlay Zone)
<u>For Consideration:</u>	Architectural Review Certification

Note: This Review Report was initially prepared by Staff of the Rossi Group (under a Planning Services contract with the City of Dover). The Report was completed with additional review and editing by the City's Planning Office.

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

The Historic District Commission will act to make a recommendation for an Architectural Review Certificate for a Site Development Plan Application for the proposed building renovation and expansion for a mixed-use commercial and multi-family (apartment) development in Downtown Dover, to be located at 55 Loockerman Plaza, also known as The Old Post. The development proposal for the 1.267-acre site includes the demolition of the rear warehouse portion of the existing building, the preservation of a 4,560-SF portion of the existing building, and a proposed building addition of 31,500 SF for 36 residential apartments. The property is zoned C-2 (Central Commercial Zone) and is subject to H (Historic District Zone). The south portion of the site along the frontage

of Loockerman Plaza is within the SWPOZ (Source Water Protection Overlay Zone) Tier 3 Excellent Recharge Area. Because the property is within the Downtown Redevelopment Target Area, it is exempt from the requirements of the SWPOZ. The owner of record is the City of Dover, and the equitable owner is Old Post, LLC. Property Address: 55 Loockerman Plaza. Tax Parcel: ED-05-077.05-04-53.00-000

Surrounding Land Uses

The location of the subject property at the corner of Loockerman Plaza and Innovation Way is within the Downtown Development District (and Downtown Redevelopment Target Area). As previously noted, the parcel is zoned C-2 (Central Commercial Zone) and within the Historic District. Properties immediately adjacent to the subject project location are zoned IO (Institutional and Office Zone). The Dover Public Library is adjacent to the site to the west. Properties owned and occupied by the State of Delaware are adjacent to the north (Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control) and across Loockerman Plaza to the south. The property across Innovation Way to the east is Treadway Towers, which includes offices and a restaurant. The surrounding properties are also within the H (Historic Zone) and the SWPOZ (Source Water Protection Overlay Zone) Tier 3 Excellent Recharge Area.

Previous Applications

The existing structure was constructed in the 1960s and was in service as the Dover Post Office until the new post office location opened on Bank Lane in 2021. The property owner is the City of Dover. After the Post Office closed, the City initiated an RFP process to solicit proposals for redevelopment of the site. The equitable owner, Old Post, LLC was selected through this process. Application Z-24-01, approved by City Council on February 12, 2024, rezoned the property from IO (Institutional and Office Zone) to C-2 (Central Commercial Zone) with it remaining in the H (Historic District Zone) and SWPOZ (Source Water Protection Overlay Zone).

II. HISTORIC PROPERTY INFORMATION

Review of Historic Maps

Prior to 1926, Loockerman Plaza did not extend beyond South State Street. Loockerman Plaza was extended between 1926 and 1936. The building was constructed in the 1960's.

Property Information

The subject property is located within H (Historic District Zone) as established by the City of Dover. There are four contexts that contribute to the historic character of Dover, including the Green Historic Context; the Victorian Historic Context; the Loockerman Historic Context; and the Capitol Square Historic Context. This property is located within the Capitol Square Historic Context. The first buildings in the Capitol Square Context were built in the 1930's and 1940's as part of the Federal Works Project Administration. The *Design Standards and Guidelines for the City of Dover Historic District Zone* describe this context as "neo-Georgian featuring two-story brick facades with a water table, marble surround at the entrance, keystones over the window heads, dentilled cornices and hip roofs... greater latitude is recommended in determining what is appropriate for new construction and additions within this context... a compatible contemporary building is preferable to a falsely historical one."

The building located at 55 Loockerman Plaza was constructed in the 1960s. The most prominent features are the 5-bay Classical pediment with its turned gable, tympanum, and large columns. Under this projection, the front elevation wall is setback and includes the door entry with pedimented surround. The building has a gable roof with the rear being a flat roof system. It features a brick exterior, columns, dentil cornices, and shuttered windows. The building currently includes second floor offices (approximately 2,160 SF), a basement (approximately 5,865 SF), and the first floor of approximately 21,151 SF. There is an existing on-site parking lot (unmarked) and loading dock. The interior has been completely gutted as a result of recent asbestos abatement.

The structure is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and this portion of the Historic District is not part of an Historic District listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

III. PROJECT PROPOSAL

PROJECT PROPOSAL (Submission of January 2025):

The application proposes the demolition of the rear portion of the existing structure and replacement of that structure with a new addition, while maintaining and rehabilitating the front of the present structure (4,560 SF). *Capital City 2030: Transforming Downtown Dover Master Plan* identified the Old Dover Post Office as a Project Site. The Master Plan proposes that a new commercial building could reactivate the site. This project is also identified as a Key Project within the City's Downtown Development District (Renewal) application of 2024.

The proposed development will repurpose two 2,500-SF retail units and one 2,000-SF for a business (office) space in the former Post Office front area. The rear warehouse portion of the building will be demolished and replaced with a new three-story structure comprised of 36 apartment (multifamily) units.

The Applicant's submission includes a Narrative Letter, a Site Plan set, and Architectural Graphics set with building elevations and 3-D views. The elements of the project are as follows:

1. Partial Demolition: The rear flat-roofed warehouse portion of the building is to be demolished as this is where the three-story building addition is proposed. The front gable roofed portion of the existing building is to remain.
2. Existing Building Renovations: New wood trim is proposed to match the existing. It is unclear from the submission if the design includes dentil cornices. New replacement shutters, windows, front door are noted to match the existing. The building elevations feature headers or some framing above each of the smaller windows. Each wing of the front portion of the building will include new larger openings with a proposed large glass Nanawall door system.
3. Building Addition: The proposed three-story addition will be located directly behind the preserved portion of building. The proposed addition will be 35 feet tall. The existing building is 33' 2" tall at the peak of its roof. The addition will feature a brick veneer and brick engaged pilasters along all sides on floors two and three and floor one using EFIS in a

limestone finish. The east and west elevations include large glass windows (with door) for the apartment unit spaces. Glass and black aluminum railings will be used to enclose balconies.

4. Parking Lot: A parking lot will be developed along the west side and north side of the building with access from Innovation Way. This new parking lot will not have vehicular access from the large municipal parking lot at the Dover Public Library. The applicant is also working with the City in regards to the adjacent row of parking to the east of the Library. The parking lot is fenced and appears to have grass lawn areas at the perimeter.
5. Sidewalks and Site Amenities: The proposal maintains connected sidewalks along Innovation Way and Loockerman Plaza. There are also sidewalks adjacent to the parking lot leading to the building. The renderings show additional amenities, including bicycle racks and benches. A fenced in dog-run is proposed to abut the building addition along Innovation Way.
6. Tree Planting and Landscaping: The project plan identifies five existing trees on the current site, it is not clear whether they will be removed to create space for new concrete patio areas or be kept. Please identify the trees on the site plan (Sheet PL-03) or where five replacement trees will be located.

See the attached Plan submission and associated graphics and drawings for detailed information on building dimensions, locations, and material choices.

IV. ZONING REVIEW

The entire project site is located in the H (Historic District Zone) and subject to the provisions of the *Zoning Ordinance*, Article 3 §21 and referenced sections. *Zoning Ordinance*, Article 10 §3.2 outlines the review process for Architectural Review Certification and related building height, bulk, and setback standards.

The property is partially within the SWPOZ (Source Water Protection Overlay Zone) Tier 3 Excellent Recharge Area, but it is exempt from the requirements of this zone due to its location within the Downtown Redevelopment Target Area.

The subject project area is zoned C-2 (Central Commercial Zone). The C-2 zone allows for “retail stores, apartments and multi-family dwellings provided that new dwelling units shall be permitted on the first floor on the street frontage of Loockerman Street; uses accessory to the residential units such as lobby and amenity spaces are permitted on the first floor; live-work units; parking lots and parking structures” as principal uses. The subject property has frontage on two streets, Loockerman Plaza and Innovation Way. The C-2 zone requires a zero minimum front yard. No side yard is required; however, if one is provided then it shall be a 5-foot side yard minimum. A 20-foot rear yard setback is required above ground floor and 5-foot is required at ground floor. The maximum building height for this district is 10 stories or 125 feet.

<u>Code Compliance for C-2</u>	<u>Required</u>	<u>Provided</u>
Front Setback	0'	> 35'
Rear Setback	20' above ground floor. At ground floor, 5' required	> 100'
Side Setback	None required, but 5' min. if provided	Approx. 15'
Building Height	10 stories (125')	3 stories (35')

The C-2 zoning district also includes some design standards provisions. See the code excerpt below:

Article 3 Section 13

13.5 *Design standards.* The following standards shall apply to the site and building development in the central commercial zone (C-2):

13.51 *Facade articulation.* Building facades should incorporate design elements to provide a base, middle, and top of the building to reinforce the pedestrian scale at the street level.

13.52 *Height.* For buildings greater than four stories in height, then the upper floors above the fourth story shall step back six feet for fifty percent of the width of the primary facade. For buildings greater than six stories, then the upper floors above the sixth floor shall step back an additional six feet on the primary facade. These step back areas may begin at a lower height than these minimums as part of the building design in order to be compatible with the character of the area.

13.53 *Step back areas.* The step back areas should be open to the sky and can be open air balcony spaces or other design architectural features that are not enclosed spaces.

13.54 *Off-street parking.* Off-street parking lots shall not be permitted to be situated between the street line and the primary facade of the principal building. Consideration should be given to locating parking to the side or rear of the building.

13.55 *Screening.* Any off-street parking lots provided shall be screened from the street line by buildings, landscaping, or other means. Off-street parking lots shall be screened from adjacent residential zones and residential uses. This screening provision does not apply to adjacent alleys.

V. Review of DESIGN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

The subject property is located in the H (Historic District Zone) within the Capitol Square Context. The Capitol Square Context is described on pages 2-8 and 2-9 of the *Design Standards and Guidelines for the City of Dover Historic District Zone*. This *Design Standards and Guidelines* describe this context as “neo-Georgian featuring two-story brick facades with a water table, marble surround at the entrance, keystones over the window heads, dentilled cornices and hip roofs... greater latitude is recommended in determining what is appropriate for new construction and additions within this context... a compatible contemporary building is preferable to a falsely historical one.” Location within the Dover Historic District Zone requires proposals for demolition, new construction, building additions, and certain renovation or rehabilitation activities to existing buildings to receive an Architectural Review Certificate.

As stated in the *Design Standards and Guidelines for the City of Dover Historic District Zone*, an Architectural Review Certificate will be granted “if it is found that the architectural style, general design, height, bulk and setbacks, arrangement location and materials affecting the exterior

appearance are generally in harmony with neighboring structures and complementary to the traditional architectural standards of the historic district.” In accordance with Article 10 §3.2, the Historic District Commission will provide a recommendation to the Planning Commission regarding the project’s compliance with the architectural review standards.

This proposal must be reviewed for conformity with the design criteria guidelines found in Chapter 3: Maintenance, Repair, Preservation and Restoration of Existing Historic Buildings and Chapter 4: New Construction, Additions, Demolition and Relocation. Information on the review considerations is given below.

Maintenance, Repair, Preservation and Restoration of Existing Historic Buildings

The *Design Standards and Guidelines* for Maintenance, Repair, Preservation and Restoration of Existing Historic Buildings (Chapter 3: pages 3-1 through 3-27) provide the design criteria and development guidelines. The preservation of the historic character of the District is largely a function of the preservation of the existing historic building fabric. This Chapter discusses the various building elements and should also be referenced with new construction.

Any off-street parking lots provided shall be screened from the street line by buildings, landscaping, or other means. The guidelines specify that “parking lots should be screened from the street, their layout should include borders and islands planted with trees and shrubs to break-up expanses of paved areas. Given a parking lot within the Dover Historic District zone, at least 20% of the area within it should be unpaved and planted.”

Demolition

The proposal for demolition of a portion of the building must be reviewed for conformity with the design criteria guidelines found in Chapter 4: New Construction, Additions, Demolition and Relocation. The *Design Standards and Guidelines* gives guidance to the Historic District Commission by listing specific criteria to be evaluated when considering applications for the demolition of buildings (or portions of buildings) in the historic district (Chapter 4: pages 4-10 to 4-12). These guidelines are summarized below (see *Design Standards and Guidelines* for the complete text).

1. Determine the financial implications of maintaining a property versus demolition.
2. Regardless of economic issues the relative significance of the individual buildings slated for demolition should be evaluated.
3. In development related applications the City should review the schematic plans for the new structures to weigh the virtues of the new structure versus what exists.
4. Determine the extent of adequate recordation of a property the applicant would be required to complete if demolition were approved.
5. Lots left vacant by demolition should be treated in a manner that is sympathetic to the historic context.

New Construction

The *Design Standards and Guidelines* for New Construction (Chapter 4: pages 4-1 through 4-8) provide the design criteria and development guidelines. The guidelines specify the following individual considerations for new construction to be considered in the review by the Historic District Commission (and Planning Commission) of the project for Architectural Review Certification:

- Style
- Scale (*building to reflect dominant cornice and roof height of adjacent buildings*)
- Elevation of the First Floor
- Floor-to-Floor heights
- Bays, windows, and doors (*size, relationship, spacing of*)
- Absolute Size (*compare overall size of new building*)
- Massing (*relationship of solid-to-void*)
- Orientation (*location of primary façade*)
- Proportions (*comparison of height to width of building and elements*)
- Materials
- Forms (*shape of building and roof to be complementary*)
- Siting (*location of building on lot and in relation to street*)
- High density/ large-scale construction

The proposed project must also be reviewed for compliance with the standards established by the *Zoning Ordinance*. The standards include items such as setbacks from property lines, lot coverage, height, etc. This Proposal for the Old Post appears to conform to most of the bulk requirements of the C-2 Zoning District, however, should be verified via site plan review. The *City of Dover Zoning Ordinance* authorizes the Historic District Commission to waive certain bulk standards when issuing its recommendation to the Planning Commission for an Architectural Review Certificate if necessary.

STAFF COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are Staff comments and recommendations for this application regarding project activities and Architectural Review Certification.

- 1) Staff recommends conditional approval of the Architectural Review Certificate for The Old Post project, finding that the building to be of a compatible design with the nearby buildings and with the intent of the *Design Standards and Guidelines for the City of Dover Historic District Zone*. This includes the demolition of the rear portion of the building, the renovation of the front section, and the new building addition. The proposed multi-use site enhances the pedestrian scale of the downtown area. The preservation of the building portion fronting Loockerman Plaza maintains the historic context of the area. The brick exterior finishes on the upper two stories and EFIS in a limestone finish (to resemble stone) along the first story on the new addition take cues from the architectural styles seen in the Loockerman Street corridor and Capitol Square context.

- 2) The following conditions are recommended by Staff to improve the project's compliance with the recommended guidelines of the *Design Standards and Guidelines*. The following are recommended conditions:
 - a. The selected brick choices should be compatible with the brick on the existing structure. The brick material color, size, and format should be identified.
 - b. Clarify the wall section at the cornice shown as a soldier course to clarify if the cornice projects in a different plane than the general wall surface. Cornicework is a very significant feature of the buildings in the area. It is unclear if the proposed building would include dentil cornices. Dentil cornices are recommended, particularly on the south-facing side of the building.
 - c. Consider additional detailing on the north elevation walls of the new building addition and the transition brick wall of the front building section. In the elevations provided these walls appear flat as large blank areas. While they are not visible from the adjacent streets, they are visible from the parking lot areas.
 - d. A paneled door should be used on the door along Innovation Way. Modern flush doors are not appropriate.
 - e. Repairing windows with in-kind materials is preferable to replacing windows. When irreparable, replacement windows should replicate the historic windows as closely as possible in light pattern, opening size, and function.
 - f. While shutters are encouraged, vinyl and aluminum shutters are inappropriate. The material for the replacement shutters was not identified.
 - g. It is inappropriate to remove historic decorative elements such as roof cresting or finials.
 - h. Consideration of wall or free-standing signage may require additional review.
 - i. Any light fixtures utilized on the property should be consistent with the style of the lighting used in the nearby areas of the Capitol Square Context of the Historic District.
 - j. Any revisions or changes in the identified materials may be subject to further review by the Historic District Commission.
- 3) Some of the site improvements/amenities were not specifically described or had limited information within the application information. Please provide information for consideration and discussion.
 - a. Any off-street parking lots provided shall be screened from the street line by buildings, landscaping, or other means. A four-foot black aluminum fencing appears to be proposed.
 - b. Provide information on the dumpster enclosure construction and screening.
- 4) Clarify whether existing trees on the site will be preserved. If they are proposed to be removed, replacement of removed trees will be required. The development area (the property) is also subject to tree planting requirements of the *Zoning Ordinance*. A Landscape Plan sheet is listed in the Index on the Site Plan set as PL-04 but was not included in the submission.

- 5) Staff notes that the required setbacks and proposed building height listed in the data column are incorrect on the Site Plan set. Also use the project name of The Old Post consistently. See Dover Code, Appendix B, Article 4; Sec 4.14 for Bulk standards for the C-2 zoning district.
- 6) Staff recommends the following pertaining to the site design elements of the project:
 - a. The sidewalk system on the street frontage should continue and include barrier free access, crosswalk striping, etc. at the points of intersection with the entrance and exit drive aisles.
 - b. Any proposed landscaping or tree planting locations, and lighting fixture locations should be depicted on the plan and be consistent with the character of these elements as they exist within the Capitol Square Context area.
- 7) For building construction, the requirements of the building code or fire code must be complied with. Consult with the Building Inspection Staff and Fire Marshal regarding these requirements. The resolution of these items can impact the site design in some cases.
- 8) In the event that major changes and revisions to the design, materials, or site layout occur in the finalization of the plan and/or construction drawings contact the Department of Planning and Inspections. These changes may require resubmittal for review by the Historic District Commission.
- 9) This site development plan for this project is also subject to the application and review process for Site Development Plan (Article 10 §2 of the *Zoning Ordinance*) before the Planning Commission. Note: Additional technical items for compliance with the Zoning Ordinance and other regulations may be identified during the Site Plan Process. Review comments pertaining specifically to the Site Plan set will be issued at that time.
- 10) The applicant shall be aware that Building Permits are required to proceed with any construction activities on the project site. The permit applications must comply with the approvals and conditions granted through the Architectural Review Certification and Site Plan Review process.
- 11) The applicant should be aware that a Sign Permit is required to proceed with the placement of signage on the property.
- 12) The existing building has a cornerstone/date stone that should be retained. There may also be an opportunity to add a plaque or other method outlining the history of the building (time of service as the Dover Post Office).

Historic District Commission Action Required

The Historic District Commission shall consider the proposal and provide a recommendation in regard to the Architectural Review Certification for the Old Post building and associated Site Improvements. The recommendation should reflect consideration of the *Design Standards and Guidelines for the City of Dover Historic District Zone*.