



DATE: April 24, 2023

AGENDA ITEM #1

AGENDA REPORT

TO: Historical Commission
FROM: Sean Gallegos, Senior Planner
SUBJECT: H23-0001 – 236 Eleanor Avenue

RECOMMENDATION:

Recommend approval of an addition and exterior alterations to a Historic Resource property subject to the listed findings and conditions

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This application seeks advisory review for a proposed project involving the addition of a 1,647 square-foot first story, 327 square-foot second story, and 832 square-foot basement to an existing two-story house that is a designated historic resource. Additionally, a new 588 square-foot detached accessory structure (garage) is also proposed as part of this project.

BACKGROUND

The C.W. Morris House, a 1914 farmhouse located at 236 Eleanor Avenue, is listed in the Los Altos Historic Resource Inventory as one of the few farmhouses remaining in the city. The property was owned by Charles Wadsworth Morris and his family, including wife Alice, daughter Dorothy, and son David, in 1921. Morris, who had retired from managing the W.W. Montague Company in San Jose, moved to the Fremont District (Los Altos) with his family in 1921. Although the original owner of the property is unknown, it is believed to have been occupied by the Morris family during this time.

The two-story, wood-frame Craftsman Style residence has a square plan and a side-gabled roof, with decorative wood knee brackets supporting the gable ends and exposed rafter tails visible from the open eaves. The ground floor entry porch features a large front-facing gable with a balcony, supported by paired, square wood porch posts. Although the balcony has been remodeled since 1997, it still retains its original design elements. Other paired porch posts, connected by simple wood railings, are located at either end of the full-width porch. The entrance is offset to the right, with two large plate glass windows to the left, while other original wood sash windows with smaller panes across the top remain intact. A circular driveway surrounds a single mature palm tree in the front yard.

The bungalow was originally associated with agriculture, specifically orchards, and was part of the 1911 Adams Subdivision. According to oral history transcripts, the Morris family owned the

surrounding 14 acres of orchards, and C.W. Morris was listed as an orchardist in city directories beginning in 1922. However, it is not clear if the Morris family was the original occupant of the home. The house is one of the few remaining farmhouses left in the city today.

Although the house has undergone several alterations, it retains the aspects of location, overall design, materials, and workmanship, making it a significant representation of the Craftsman Style. The house does not retain the feeling of a farmhouse due to the loss of acreage and the house's current location on a back parcel flag lot, not facing the street, diminishing the feeling of a farmhouse and the historical association with the property. Additionally, Charles Morris's retirement and lack of significant contribution to the history of the area further reduces the property's historical significance. The conclusion is that the design, materials, and workmanship of the Craftsman Style house is sufficient to consider that the house retains integrity. The property's historic report is included in Attachments A and B.

DISCUSSION

The proposed project entails adding a 1,647 square-foot first story, 327 square-foot second story, and 832 square-foot basement to the existing 1,790 square-foot, two-story historic house. The addition will be attached to the back utility porch area, which will be remodeled. The landscaping, including the rose gardens and most trees, will remain unchanged.

The site plan illustrates the existing house in white, with the proposed addition connecting to the rear façade and extending to the north façade. The plan also highlights the location of a new 588 square-foot one-story accessory structure (garage, which will replace the current pergola (carport) on the property.

The house at 236 Eleanor Avenue may not be a classic example of the Craftsman style, but it still incorporates many of its distinctive design elements. Originating from the Arts and Crafts Movement, this style emphasizes the use of natural materials and showcases the design, structure, and construction skills through exposed beams, rafters, and a combination of shingles, stucco, and timbers on the front paired posts of the porch. The following are the main design features of the house:

1. Wood construction with partial wood siding, including shingles
2. Low-pitched gable roofs
3. Overhanging eaves with exposed rafters and beams
4. Knee braces under the eaves, at the corners, and along the eave line (similar to those found in barn construction and farmhouses of the period)
5. Heavy timber, paired columns at the front porch
6. Patterned windowpanes on the upper sections of the sash
7. Full-width covered front porch with a low or half-lower wall

According to the National Park Service, integrity of a historic resource is defined by seven aspects: location, design, materials, workmanship, setting, feeling, and association. Although the house has undergone some alterations, there is still enough historic fabric to maintain its integrity and make a finding of historical importance. The house's design, materials, and workmanship from c. 1919 are significant enough to communicate its reason for being designated as a historic resource, even though the aspects of setting, feeling, and association may not be as present.

Historical professional, Bonnie Bamburg with Urban Programmers reviewed the project to ensure consistency with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Structures (SOIS) (Attachment A and B), and the historian's and staff's comments are provided below:

1. *A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.*

Response: The application proposes to maintain the house's current use as a single-family residence while expanding its footprint through the proposed additions and alterations, including the construction of a new garage. These changes have been carefully planned to ensure that the defining characteristics of the building, as well as its site and environment, remain unchanged.

2. *"The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces, and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided."*

Response: The rear façade has undergone significant alterations that removed historic materials, including a protruding section with a multi-pane glass door and three non-original wood windows. The original design of the farmhouse included a utility porch with a wood back door with a glass panel at the top, small and plain framed windows, and stairs along the side of the house. The current windows, which appear to be from an earlier remodel, are not character defining.

While the original style roof framing may have been used, it is unusual. Typically, the roof was straight across, and a second shed roof covered the utility portion. The roof has been extended over the protruding section with exposed rafter tails. The shed dormer seen on the front of the house would have dictated a cross gable or gable dormer on this house, making the shed dormer out of proportion with the rest of the house. It appears to have been added to create a bedroom in the attic storage area, and is not an original character defining feature.

In addition, a deck has been added to the rear of the house, which is also not a character defining feature. In summary, the rear of the house has been remodeled and the original style and materials have been changed. The rehabilitation plan proposes to remove characteristic elements such as the roof slope with exposed rafter tails, which is a defining element of the Craftsman style, and the siding on half of the rear wall, which is typical of the Craftsman Style and this house. The removal of these elements will alter the design and character of the house's rear façade. However, the proposed rehabilitation plan retains the existing historic character of the Craftsman design and construction in the building along the front and side elevations.

3. *"Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken."*

Response: The proposed addition to the building does not include any conjectural features. Instead, it utilizes compatible forms without any stylistic decoration. Additionally, any similar materials used in the addition are offset or textured to distinguish the different eras of construction and maintain the historic integrity of the original building.

4. *“Most properties change over time; those changes that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.”*

Response: The historic building did not showcase any artistic or significant changes, and the alterations made, especially to the rear of the house, are not of historical importance. A more detailed explanation of the significance of alterations along the rear elevation is discussed under Standard 3.

5. *“Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property shall be preserved.”*

Response: The original design and construction, workmanship and materials are preserved in the historic house and the addition is located on the rear of the building.

6. *“Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.”*

Response: There are no known deteriorated features.

7. *Chemical or physical treatments, such as sandblasting, that cause damage to historic materials shall not be used. The surface cleaning of structures, if appropriate, shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible.*

Response: Because the work is limited, there will be no physical or chemical treatments that will affect the wood shingle or wood trim.

8. *Significant archeological resources affected by a project shall be protected and preserved. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures shall be undertaken.*

The project scope does not include invasive foundation work or landscaping that would affect the site. Because the ground was disturbed previously in 1911, and subsequently with landscape improvements, it is unlikely that undisturbed archeological resources are present at the site.

9. *“New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and environment.*

Response: The proposed new rear addition is designed to be compatible with the historic building, using wood construction and shingles with an off-set pattern that differentiates it from the historic materials. Additionally, stucco siding with a slightly different texture is also used. The addition does not exceed the height of the historic building and is located on the secondary rear, which has already undergone remodeling. This design is in keeping with the massing, size, and scale of the historic building and does not diminish its feeling or presence.

Moreover, the proposed detached garage is a simple gabled roof design without any historical ornamentation. The materials used in its construction will match those used in the addition, and it will not appear as a historic structure.

10. *“New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.”*

Response: If the new addition were to be removed, the historic building could be repaired without significant damage to the historic envelope of the building. This is because the alterations and addition are made of wood construction, and therefore the original could be recreated in the roof and rear façades. Additionally, the proposed new garage is a separate structure and does not affect the historic envelope of the building in any way. However, it should be noted that the new addition and garage have been designed to be compatible with the historic building, and their removal would alter the building's current design and character.

As outlined in the report from the Historical professional, Bonnie Bamburg with Urban Programmers, the proposed demolition, addition, and exterior alterations do not adversely affect the physical integrity or the historic significance of the property and are consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Structures.

In order to make a positive advisory recommendation, the Commission will need to find that the project is consistent with the provisions of the Historic Preservation Ordinance and does not adversely affect the physical integrity or the historic significance of the property. Once the Commission provides a recommendation, the project will be reviewed by the Planning Commission.

Variance

As part of the application for a two-story addition to the existing two-story historic structure and the new one-story accessory structure, a variance will need to be approved with the design review application.

As part of the proposal for a two-story addition to the existing house, a variance is requested for the following:

1. The applicant is seeking a variance from the current definition of a "basement" as per the Zoning Code, which specifies that a basement can only extend a maximum of two feet above the surrounding ground level. The applicant is requesting permission to build a basement that exceeds this height limit and still be classified as a basement under the Zoning Code.
2. The applicant is requesting a variance to allow for the construction of a second-story addition to an existing two-story house on a flag lot, where the Zoning Code currently prohibits the construction of second stories.

The applicant is also seeking a variance to allow for the construction of an accessory structure in the front yard, which is currently prohibited by the Zoning Code. The proposed structure is a one-story building that would serve as a garage. The applicant has argued that the location in the front yard is necessary for the structure's intended use and that it would not be feasible to locate it in the rear yard due to site constraints due to being a historic resource.

In order to grant the requested variances, the applicant will need to demonstrate that:

1. That the granting of the variance will be consistent with the objectives of the zoning plan set forth in Article 1 of Chapter 14.02;
2. That the granting of the variance will not be detrimental to the health, safety, or welfare of persons living or working in the vicinity or injurious to property or improvements in the vicinity; and
3. That variances from the provisions of this chapter shall be granted only when, because of special circumstances applicable to the property, including size, shape, topography, location, or surroundings, the strict application of the provisions of this chapter deprives such property of privileges enjoyed by other property in the vicinity and under identical zoning classifications.

The applicant will provide evidence that there are unique or unusual circumstances related to the property due to the site being a historic resource that justifies the need for the variance. The applicant will show that the addition will not adversely affect the surrounding properties or the character of the neighborhood and that it will meet the requirements for setbacks, lot coverage, and other zoning regulations. The decision to grant the variance will ultimately be considered by the Planning Commission, which will consider the specific circumstances of the case and weigh the potential impacts on the neighborhood against the need for the proposed structure.

Community Outreach

The applicant conducted community outreach by mailing letters with renderings of the accessory structure to neighbors in the immediate neighborhood context. A copy of the letter mailed to neighbors is provided as attachment C. Staff has not received any public comment regarding the proposed project.

Cc: Walter Chapman, Applicant and Designer
Jennifer Jacobsen and Todd Parmacek, Owners

Attachments

- A. Secretary of the Interior's Standards Review Report, Urban Programmers
- B. Secretary of the Interior's Standards Review Addendum, Urban Programmers
- C. Community Outreach Letter
- D. Materials Board
- E. Project Plans

FINDINGS

H23-0001 – 236 Eleanor Avenue

With regard to the Advisory Review, the Historical Commission finds the following in accordance with Section 12.44.140 of the Municipal Code:

1. The project complies with all provisions of the Historic Preservation Ordinance (Chapter 12.44) due to the project not adversely affecting the physical integrity or the historic significance of the subject property, and the project being in compliance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties; and
2. The project does not adversely affect the physical integrity or the historic significance of the subject property. Although the house has undergone alterations, it still retains enough historic fabric to be considered as having integrity. The house is significant as a variant of the Craftsman style, and although the aspects of setting, feeling, and association are not present, the design, materials, and workmanship from around 1919 are still evident enough to convey the historical importance of the building.

CONDITIONS

H23-0001 – 236 Eleanor Avenue

GENERAL

1. Expiration

The Historical Commission Advisory Review approval will expire on April 24, 2023, unless prior to the date of expiration, a building permit is issued, or an extension is granted pursuant to Section 14.76.090 of the Zoning Code.

2. Approved Plans

The approval is based on the plans and materials received on April 11, 2023, except as may be modified by these conditions.

3. Indemnity and Hold Harmless

The applicant/owner agrees to indemnify, defend, protect, and hold the City harmless from all costs and expenses, including attorney's fees, incurred by the City or held to be the liability of the City in connection with the City's defense of its actions in any proceedings brought in any State or Federal Court, challenging any of the City's action with respect to the applicant's project.

INCLUDED WITH THE BUILDING PERMIT SUBMITTAL

4. Conditions of Approval

Incorporate the conditions of approval into the title page of the plans.