

**STAFF REPORT 01-11-2023 SPECIAL MEETING**

**PREPARED BY: PDD STAFF**

**PROPOSED HISTORIC DISTRICT: KRAINZ WOODS – SOJOURNER TRUTH HOMES**

**DATE APPROVED BY HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD (HDAB): 10-13-2022**

**BACKGROUND AND CHARGE**

The Historic District Commission, under the powers enumerated to it in Section 21-2-56 of the 2019 Detroit City Code, is asked to review and provide comment to the City Council prior to the establishment of proposed historic districts. The Commission’s role is only advisory, and the final decision is left solely to City Council.



*View of east side of Fenelon Street looking north, between Stockton and East Hildale Streets. All photos included in this report were taken by historic staff on January 5, 2023 within the proposed district.*

The Historic Designation Advisory Board (HDAB), which serves as Detroit’s study committee for designation of new historic districts under state statute, has proposed the *Krainz Woods – Sojourner Truth Historic District*, an area of approximately one-half square mile containing more than 1,500 properties sprawling across about seventy (70) city blocks. The proposed district is bound by East 7 Mile to the north, Ryan to the West, east Nevada to the south, and Mound to the east and appears to be about half a township section.

HDAB has determined that the area contains 1,400 historic (or contributing) resources, or approximately 90 percent of the existing building stock. No breakdown of historic/non-historic resources appears in the report or has been provided to the Commission. While the majority of the potential resources are single-family residential homes, there are several dozen commercial buildings lining the enclosing boundary roads. The proposed district also contains Krainz Park, the associated playground, churches, and a school (the former Atkinson Elementary, now the privately owned Legacy Charter Academy). Additionally, the proposed district contains the Sojourner Truth Homes housing development, which is composed of several dozen attached townhouse-style dwellings arranged in blocks. A portion of this development is already on the National Register of Historic Places. Should the Council approve the proposed local historic district, all of these buildings will be under the Commission’s

regulatory jurisdiction for any exterior changes. This would include alterations at the park (managed by the city's Parks Department via the General Services Division) and the housing development (managed by the Detroit Housing Commission).

The Commission, per the City Code, is asked to comment on the following points in particular:

- *relation to the Detroit Master Plan of Policies,*
- *the practical budgetary effects on City resources,*
- *legal implications for the owners, residents and the City, and*
- *the historical and architectural values of the district*

While designation as a local historic district is seen by many as an honor, it is an honor that comes tightly bound with a substantial regulatory apparatus under city and state statutes. Via this report, PDD staff submits their professional assessment for the Commission's consideration. The Commission will also hear public comment during its deliberations.





## RELATION TO THE DETROIT MASTER PLAN OF POLICIES

The Master Plan of Policies establishes “History, Legacies and Preservation” as a citywide policy. In an overview, the Plan states that:

*People of many ethnicities, races and religions have settled in Detroit and brought with them the character, skills and values of their culture. This settlement is reflected in the lifestyle of city residents and in the city’s built environment. Preservation is important to maintain a connection between the City’s past settlers, its current population and those to come. Detroit must look to its past to educate, guide and enhance its future development.*



Several goals related to historic preservation are then promulgated. Goal 1 is to “Maintain the integrity of historic areas.” Under this goal are two policies that are directly supported by the designation of historic districts, in our opinion, indicated by asterisk below:

*\*Policy 1.1: Undertake assessments to identify and protect structures with historic significance*

*Policy 1.2: Use code enforcement as a blight prevention measure*

*Policy 1.3: Use demolition as a last resort to clear blighted structures*

*Policy 1.4 Use code enforcement as well as tax incentives to encourage adaptive reuse of historic functionally obsolete buildings*

*\*Policy 1.5: Encourage the construction of new structures that visually reinforce historic areas.*

The next goal under this citywide policy, Goal 2, is to “Provide assistance to owners of historic properties.” Only the first of two policies is relevant to designation of districts:

*\*Policy 2.1: Strengthen enforcement and increase citizen awareness of design guidelines in historic districts.*

*Policy 2.2: Implement programs that provide assistance to property owners and others engaged in the redevelopment of historic properties*

Goal 3 is to “Preserve public facilities.” Excepting Krainz Park and the playground, there are no such facilities in the proposed district, to staff’s knowledge. The policies for this goal are listed below:

*Policy 3.1: Increase education and awareness of preservation within government agencies*

*Policy 3.2: Find alternate uses or adaptive reuses for underutilized public facilities*

*Policy 3.3: Encourage increased maintenance of public facilities*

The next goal under this citywide policy is Goal 4, “Recognize the economic benefits of historic preservation.” None of the policies, given below, though important, are immediately relevant to designation of the proposed district:

*Policy 4.1: Encourage partnerships among tourism bureaus, community business associations, and historic preservation organizations*

*Policy 4.2: Encourage preservation programming at museums, libraries and other public facilities*

*Policy 4.3: Provide information and educate the community of the benefits of preservation as a profitable development tool*

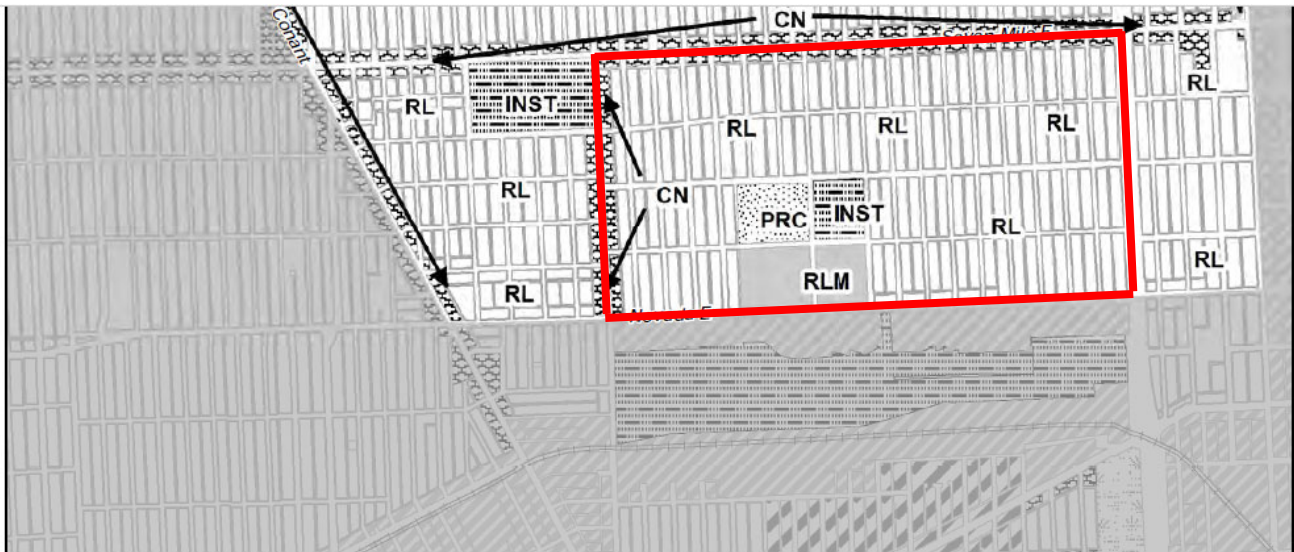
*Policy 4.4: Assist Detroit’s workforce in training and acquiring jobs in preservation fields*

Goal 5 explores the issue of relevance. The Master Plan states that “preservation efforts limited to aesthetics or a neighborhood’s past can seem irrelevant to an area’s current residents or businesses. Such a focus curtails the potential impact of preservation efforts.” Two policies are outlined to “Ensure the relevancy of preservation efforts”:

*Policy 5.1: Create outreach programs to businesses and residents in neighborhoods surrounding historic sites*

*Policy 5.2: Minimize the impact of gentrification associated with preservation efforts.*

The Master Plan of Policies, Neighborhood Cluster 1, Pershing Map #1-5B (see below) shows the area of the proposed historic district designated with several future land use indicators, including Low Density Residential (RL) for most areas, Neighborhood Commercial (CN) for the Ryan and East Seven Mile corridors, Recreation (PRC) for Krainz Park, Low/Medium Density Residential (RLM) at the Sojourner Truth Homes, and Institutional (INST) at the school site. Designation as a historic district would not conflict with these classifications, as the current/historic uses would be accommodated and perpetuated.



**Map 1-5B**  
City of Detroit  
Master Plan of  
Policies

## Neighborhood Cluster 1 Pershing

Future Land Use		
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Staff assesses that, overall, designation of historic districts, and by extension the designation of the proposed Krainz Woods – Sojourner Truth Homes Historic District, is consistent with the Master Plan of Policies. Should the district be designated, planning staff will support the district consistent with the goals and policies outlined above. No amendments to the Master Plan appear to be necessary to designate the district.

## PRACTICAL BUDGETARY EFFECTS ON CITY RESOURCES

The proposed district consists of 1,561 buildings. Currently the Historic District Commission and its staff are responsible for the administration of approximately 10,000 individual buildings across more than 150 locally designated historic districts. As such, the proposed district, if approved by Council, will add about 15% to the city-wide total of historic buildings under regulatory jurisdiction. Approximately one out of every ten historic buildings in the city will therefore be in Krainz Woods, a disproportionately high percentage given the existence of historic buildings across the city. This represents a substantial additional burden on the Commission for enforcement and permit processing. There is a related impact on city resources devoted to BSEED permit processing and enforcement of violations, and Law Department support for administrative appeals and court cases. Occasionally other departments, including Demolition, Police and Fire, are involved in the administrative and enforcement work of the Commission. Other affected agencies include the Detroit Land Bank Authority, which currently owns approximately three dozen properties across the proposed district.



While planning staff has seen marked improvement in BSEED enforcement (including inspections, violation citations, and subsequent court action, as necessary) within currently designated historic districts, staff is particularly concerned with the number of potential violations and unpermitted/unapproved work within the proposed district. Many of the individual structures require immediate repair, especially in the eastern section of the proposed district, and we would anticipate a disproportionately large stream of both applications and violations in this proposed district, exceeding even the 15% expected increase in the Commission's workload.

The Land Bank (DLBA) structures are another concern. When present in large numbers in a designated district (e.g., Russell Woods-Sullivan) they have required careful attention and tracking from city staff. As the government is responsible for the work, historic staff serves as an advisor to the Land Bank to ensure proper rehabilitation, or to ensure that a structural engineer's report is available for proposed demolitions. City staff, coordinating with Land Bank staff, currently spend additional time reviewing specifications and potential scopes

of work on these properties for consistency with historic standards. Given the market in Krainz Woods, staff is concerned that historically correct renovations of distressed structures would not meet the price points established for this area. Demolitions, even when necessary, take longer to be approved in historic districts.

Given all of the above, we estimate that the Planning and Development Department would have to seek funding from City Council for at least one additional permanent full-time staff position to properly administer the additional expected workload for this district without reducing services for existing districts. Moreover, it is clear that overlaying another regulatory process on more than 1,500 additional buildings will increase the load on BSEED, the Land Bank, and the Law and Demolition Departments, and, without additional hires, reduce their capacity to serve the needs of current historic districts.





## LEGAL IMPLICATIONS FOR OWNERS, RESIDENTS, AND THE CITY

All property owners in the district, *including the City and its departments/agencies*, will be required to abide by Section 21-2-71 of the 2019 Detroit City Code, which requires that “Before work commences within an historic district, an interim historic district, or proposed historic district, the person, individual, partnership, firm, corporation, organization, institution, or agency of government proposing to do that work shall file an application for a permit the Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department. No work shall begin before the issuance of a permit.”



Section 21-2-72 then requires that BSEED, upon application for a permit, “shall forward, within seven calendar days, the same, together with all necessary plans, specifications and supporting materials to the Historic District Commission. *All plans, elevations, construction documents and any other information and documentation deemed necessary by the Historic District Commission to make the application complete and to determine the appropriateness of the proposed work shall be submitted to the Historic District Commission by the applicant before the application will be considered to have been received by the Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department or by the Historic District Commission. (emphasis added)*

Section 21-2-73 then further requires that the “Historic District Commission shall approve a permit application for work which the Body determines to be appropriate in a designated or interim historic district through the issuance of a certificate of appropriateness. *In reviewing plans for the issuance of a certificate of appropriateness, the Historic District Commission shall follow the U.S. Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for rehabilitation and guidelines for rehabilitating historic buildings..”*

In addition to securing Commission approval for all exterior work, including but not limited to demolition, new construction, additions, painting, siding, masonry, windows, doors, roofing, fencing, landscaping, tree removal, and paving, property owners will also be required to perform the maintenance necessary to prevent a situation of

“demolition by neglect,” as defined by city code in Section 21-2-2 and further discussed in Section 21-2-59. *Demolition by neglect* is defined as “neglect in the maintenance, repair or security of a resource resulting in deterioration of an exterior feature of the resource, the loss of structural integrity of the resource, or any of the following conditions:

- (1) The deterioration of exterior walls or other vertical supports;
- (2) The deterioration of roofs or other horizontal members;
- (3) The deterioration of exterior chimneys;
- (4) The deterioration of exterior plaster, or mortar or stucco;
- (5) The ineffective weatherproofing of exterior walls, roofs and foundations, including broken windows or doors
- (6) The serious deterioration of any documented exterior architectural feature or significant landscape feature which, in the judgement of the Historic District Commission, produces a detrimental effect upon the character of the district.”

The vast majority of the 1,561 structures in Krainz Woods are clearly well-tended by their owners. However, almost immediately, in staff’s assessment, the Commission would be required to docket dozens of cases of demolition-by-neglect, as a non-trivial number of potential resources are in visibly deteriorating condition, missing major elements like doors and windows, or are otherwise open to trespass. Additionally, staff notes that there are upwards of a dozen standing structures that have suffered fires which will either need to be rebuilt under historic standards or gain the Commission’s approval for demolition.

Independent of demolition-by-neglect, staff notes that recent and ongoing renovations observed in the potential district are not being performed to historic standards, perhaps based on market values of the subject properties. For example, rather than historically appropriate wood or metal windows in traditional configurations, inexpensive vinyl windows are common; quite often as inappropriate picture windows (i.e., no internal divisions) or sliders. Similarly, historic wood siding has often been replaced or covered by non-historic siding of various synthetic types and materials. Similar inappropriate modifications of porches, railings, shutters, and other exterior elements are widely present. Paint colors are varied, often ahistorical. Should the Commission gain jurisdiction over this proposed district, it is important for property owners to understand that inappropriate treatments would no longer be approved. While there is no proactive requirement for property owners to “restore” their house to a historic condition; any *new* applications for work (even an application for replacement of pre-existing inappropriate features) would require review and approval consistent with National Park Service standards as applied to protected resources in any other locally designated historic district. As such, there is no “grandfathering” of inappropriate treatments; should inappropriate vinyl windows need replacement at some point in the future, compatible windows per federal standards would then be required for issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness, and by extension, a building permit.

## HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL VALUES OF THE DISTRICT

Both the **Michigan Local Historic Districts Act 169 of 1970 (399.203, Section 3)** and the **Detroit City Code Chapter 21 “History” (399.203, section f)** state the following:

*In evaluating the significance of resources to be included in the historic district, the Historic Designation Advisory Board and the City Council shall be guided by the Criteria for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, as published at 36 CFR Part 60, and criteria established or approved by the Michigan State Housing Development Authority, if any*

Please see the National Park Service’s document entitled ***How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation (nps.gov)*** to understand how the National Park Service applies the National Register of Historic Places Criteria in evaluating properties that may be significant in local, State, and national history and therefore worthy of designation.

The draft designation report recommends that the proposed Krainz Woods/Sojourner Truth Homes area be considered significant under National Register of Historic Places Criterion A: *Event* “... at the local level, for its role in Community Planning and Development, Ethnic Heritage: Black, and Social History.” Per the above-referenced National Park Service document, properties which qualify for historic designation under National Register of Historic Places Criterion A, *Event* must demonstrate a **strong association** “...with events that have made a **significant** contribution to the broad patterns of our history.” Specifically, in order to be considered significant (and therefore worthy of designation) under Criterion A: *Event*, “...a property must be associated with one or more events important in the defined historic context.” Within the draft designation report, the section entitled “Detroit’s African American Neighborhoods” provides a general historic context within which the significance of the Krainz Woods and Sojourner Truth Homes area might be understood compared to other Detroit neighborhoods

Field visits to the neighborhood as well as a review of the historic background outlined in the sections of the draft designation report entitled “Developmental and Planning History”, “Early History of Krainz Woods”, “John Krainz Memorial Park”, and “Krainz Woods – Mid-20th Century” revealed a vibrant community with an important history. However, it is not yet clear to staff that the neighborhood (outside of the Sojourner Truth Homes development) demonstrates a **strong association** “...with events that have made a **significant** contribution” within the context of “Detroit’s African American Neighborhoods.” In staff’s opinion, other Detroit neighborhoods which might more clearly represent significance in the areas of Community Planning and Development, Ethnic Heritage: Black, and Social History are the following:

- McNichols & Mackay (70 Houses) - Hayes Construction Company, under Milton Ratner, plans 70 homes at McNichols and McKay. Thirty homes started as of September 1944 (Grixdale extension of Conant Gardens)
- Conant St., 7-Mile, & Nevada St. (Conant Gardens Neighborhood – First housing subdivision in Detroit built by African Americans for African Americans, 1920s/1930s)
- Pembroke, Santa Barbara, 8-Mile, & Mendota (Eight Mile-Wyoming Neighborhood) - Traditional black working class neighborhood established c. 1920s. Experienced growth in 1944 as need for war worker housing increased. The Wayne County Better Homes organization built over 1500 houses in the neighborhood between 1944 and 1950.
- Electric, Liddesdale, Beatrice, & Deacon (Shaefer-S. Fort neighborhood) - First black-financed low cost housing in the city (17 houses), financed by Home Federal Savings, 1953
- Clairpointe, Tennessee, & Conner - African American neighborhood in Jefferson-Chalmers. Post WWII Veteran's temporary housing between Clairpointe and Tennessee south of Avondale. Keating Elementary (not extant) was the "dividing line". Commercial node (parts survive) at Freud and Conner, 1940s
- Tireman, Epworth, Warren, Grand River (Tireman/Grand Boulevard Neighborhood) - "Black West Side" - early and largest middle-class African American enclave outside Black Bottom/Paradise Valley, 1920s/1930s

- Ethel and Bassett streets between Visger and Outer Drive (Welch Oakwood Hills Subdivision) - African American neighborhood developed in 1944 by Watson Realty, owned by black realtor Everitt Watson who owned the Negro National League Stars in 1931.

However, it is staff's opinion that the report does clearly demonstrate that the Sojourner Truth Homes development (listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2018) possesses a high level of significance under National Register of Historic Places Criterion A, *Event* in the areas of Social History and for Ethnic History. Per the property's National Register Nomination, the "...housing complex was designated for Black tenants sparking protest from the surrounding White neighborhood residents and igniting a passionate demand for equity in housing from the Black community.... the violent events which occurred at the site and the site's significance in the fight for equity in housing highlight the significant role the Sojourner Truth Homes played in the course of national Civil Rights history." The Sojourner Truth Homes also display historic importance in the areas of Politics/Government due to its significance "...in relation to the federal government's shaping of public housing policy in the nascent years of the public housing movement."

The Sojourner Truth development includes townhomes that were erected in 1941 and in 1986. Staff notes that the 2018 National Register boundaries for the Sojourner Truth Homes development only include the townhomes that date from 1941. The townhomes that date from 1986 are outside of the National Register district's boundaries. The HDAB designation report has noted that the townhomes within the Sojourner Truth Homes which date from 1986 are significant because they were designed by Sims Varner & Associates Inc., Detroit's most significant African American architectural firm. Per the designation report, the firm "...has been headquartered in the city of Detroit since 1968 and is Detroit's most prominent 20th century African American architectural firm. The firm has been responsible for the design of many of Detroit's prominent buildings including the Robert Millender Center (1985), the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History (1997), the addition to Cobo Hall (1989-90), and the Golightly Career and Technical Center (1982)." Note that a property typically must be 50 years or older to qualify for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. However, National Register of Historic Places *Criteria Consideration G: Properties that Have Achieved Significance Within the Last Fifty Years*, allows for the listing or designation of a property which is less than 50 years of age if it is of **exceptional importance**. Per National Park Service guidance, "the phrase "exceptional importance" does not require that the property be of national significance. It is a measure of a property's importance within the appropriate historic context, whether the scale of that context is local, state, or national. "Staff does concur with the HDAB draft designation report's recommendation that the townhomes within the Sojourner Truth Homes development which date from 1986 display exceptional significance due to their association with the Sims Varner & Associates Inc. architectural firm and that they therefore meet National Register of Historic Places Criteria Consideration G at a local level.

The draft designation report recommends that the Krainz Woods/Sojourner Truth Homes area, containing 1,561 properties, is significant under National Register of Historic Places Criterion B: *Person*, due to a single property's relationship to Malcom X. Per the above-referenced National Park Service document, properties which are worthy of historic designation under National Register of Historic Places Criterion B, *Person* must demonstrate a strong association "...with the lives of persons significant in our past" Specifically, per the National Park Service's ***Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Properties Associated with Significant Persons*** (NRB 32), one step which must be addressed in the assessment of a property's importance in regards to its association with significant persons is a determination of "...the length and nature of a significant individual's relationship to the property under study and to other historic resources; then decide why the property is an important representation of that person's accomplishments." The report notes that Malcom X resided in the home at 18827 Keystone Street for a very short/unspecified/unknown period of time in late 1953. However, as the report does not specify the length of Malcom X's stay at the home, the strength of the association of 18827 Keystone Street and/or the Krainz Woods community with Malcom X's productive life and important achievements is unclear to staff. Arguably, the home at Wilfred and Ruth Little House at 4336 Williams Street, Inkster (listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2023) is a better representative of Malcolm X's time in the Detroit area and his early involvement with the Nation of Islam. Per the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office:

*Malcolm X arrived at the Wilfred Little House in 1952 as Malcolm Little. Malcolm was paroled and transferred into the custody and supervision of the Michigan Parole Board after completing a shortened prison sentence in Massachusetts. Prior to Malcolm's arrival, Wilfred Little, known then as Wilfred X, had*

*become the minister of Nation of Islam Temple No. 1 in Detroit, which had been established in the 1930s. Wilfred and other family members introduced Malcolm to the Nation of Islam while Malcolm was in prison. Malcolm wrote in his Autobiography that “this Muslim home’s atmosphere sent me often to my knees to praise Allah. My family’s letters while I was in prison had included a description of the Muslim home routine, but to truly appreciate it, one had to be a part of the routine.” Witnessing and taking part in these routines were transformative for Malcolm. It was also at this time that Malcolm received his “X” from Elijah Muhammad. The “X,” Malcolm wrote, “symbolized the true African family name that he never could know.” Malcolm X was named assistant minister of Temple No. 1 in the summer of 1953. Shortly thereafter, Malcolm was sent to Boston and other east coast cities by Elijah Muhammad.*

Per the National Park Service’s document entitled *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation (nps.gov)*, those properties that are worthy of designation under National Register of Historic Places Criterion C: *Architecture* are those which “... embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.” The draft designation report recommends that the Krainz Woods/Sojourner Truth Homes area is significant under National Register of Historic Places Criterion C: *Architecture* “...at the local level as a distinctive collection of residential buildings that have evolved through the years.” A review of the draft report and field visit revealed a densely-occupied, strong neighborhood that is dominated by residential buildings which date from the 1920s through the early 1970s. Residential styles/forms which predominate include Bungalow, Minimal Traditional, Ranch, and Cape Cod. Historic-age commercial, religious, recreational resources are also located within the neighborhood. Alterations to exterior cladding and fenestration are prevalent. However, despite the large number of exterior alterations, the area appears to possess architectural integrity as the homes within generally retain their original form, fenestration openings, and location to the extent that the period of development within the neighborhood (1920s-1970s) is clearly discernable. Also, the area possesses a number of individually distinctive residential, religious, and educational buildings.

However, as previously noted, it is not yet clear to staff that the neighborhood (outside of the Sojourner Truth Homes development) demonstrates a strong association “...with events that have made a **significant** contribution” within the context of “Detroit’s African American Neighborhoods.” It is also not clear how the neighborhood’s architecture in general is distinct from the neighborhoods directly adjacent to the proposed historic district or the many other residential neighborhoods within the city that date from the same period of development, and share similar historical arcs.

A final concern is the inclusion of a number of quite undistinguished commercial buildings and vacant lots lining only one side of the enclosing perimeter roads, that being East Nevada, Ryan, East Seven Mile, and Mound. No claim is made in the report concerning the significance or association of these buildings with the neighborhood, though there must have been an association. One large non-residential building, Pershing High School, is mentioned and does feature prominently in the history of both Krainz Woods and adjacent Conant Gardens, but is drawn out of the district. Staff suggests that the proposed boundary be more carefully considered based on a more specific statement of significance.

As a recommendation to HDAB, staff does note that most of three streets in the western section of the proposed district have an architectural character and integrity distinct from the eastern portion. It may be possible to demonstrate local significance under Criterion C for Sunset, Shields and Justine Streets, anchored by some of the “wide chimney” ranch houses which may have been designed by African-American architects. A district of several dozen residential houses may be supported, including the nearby park, school, and the Sojourner Truth Homes, should such association be confirmed in a revised report.

Staff recognizes the importance, reinforced by the National Park Service itself in the context of National Register nominations, of surveying, documenting, and establishing historic sites and district significant in African-American history, architecture, and culture. The establishment of protected historic properties significant in African-American history, as well as Muslim-American history, Latino heritage, LGBT history, and other previously ignored areas of inquiry is a nationwide priority in historic preservation. PDD Staff strongly supports the Historic Designation Advisory Board in such initiatives.

Also, consistent with NPS guidance on the seven aspects of historic integrity (i.e., location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association), staff notes that integrity of materials, design, and workmanship, in those cases concerning sites and districts significantly associated with historically marginalized populations, can and should be considered *less important to the expression of significance* than integrity of setting, location, feeling and association. In historic preservation practice, *condition* and *integrity* are different concepts. What this means, in practice, is that potential resources with historically inappropriate alterations, or that have suffered from deferred maintenance, do not necessarily lack the requisite integrity to express associated significance under National Register criteria (i.e., A, B, C, or D).

