

Marcell R. Todd, Jr.
Director
Christopher Gulock, AICP
Deputy Director

Phone: (313) 224-6225 Fax: (313) 224-4336
e-mail: cpc@detroitmi.gov

BACKGROUND

The subject property contains a former City of Detroit Public Lighting Department electrical transformer substation that was constructed as part of the City's historic municipal electric distribution system. Following modernization of Detroit's electrical infrastructure, the facility was decommissioned and has remained vacant for an extended period. Like several other former substations throughout the City, the building is a masonry utility structure that stems from a unique era of Detroit's civic infrastructure heritage.

In 2025, the City of Detroit initiated a program to market several surplus former Public Lighting substations for redevelopment through adaptive reuse. The initiative seeks to return long-vacant public infrastructure to productive use, stabilize architecturally significant buildings, encourage private investment, and promote neighborhood revitalization while preserving structures that contribute to Detroit's historic built environment.

The subject building has experienced deterioration associated with long-term vacancy, including deferred maintenance, obsolete electrical infrastructure, and structural repairs that will be necessary before occupancy. Despite these conditions, the masonry building retains its historic character and presents an opportunity for adaptive reuse that preserves an architecturally unique structure while returning the property to productive use.

PROPOSAL

The applicant purchased the building from the City and proposes to rezone the property from PD to SD1 to facilitate the adaptive reuse of the former transformer substation as the headquarters for Root of two, a Detroit-based civic design, research, technology, and arts practice. The project envisions preserving and rehabilitating the historic building while transforming it into a creative workplace, fabrication studio, civic prototyping laboratory, and flexible community gathering space. The office and fabrication studio will consolidate the applicant's existing operations into a permanent headquarters, providing workspace for staff, clients, and expanded design and fabrication activities. The civic prototyping lab will host participatory design workshops, public engagement sessions, collaborative design initiatives, and assemblies focused on public space, equity, neighborhood improvement, and community-centered technologies. Flexible interior spaces are proposed for exhibitions, lectures, educational programming, and cultural events intended to foster collaboration among artists, designers, residents, neighborhood organizations, and public agencies.

The applicant states that the project is intended to function as a private business headquarters and a community resource supporting civic innovation, creative entrepreneurship, neighborhood programming, and public engagement. The rehabilitation will include structural masonry repairs, removal of obsolete electrical equipment, environmental remediation as necessary, utility upgrades, accessibility improvements, landscaping, security enhancements, while preserving the building's historic character.

PUBLIC HEARING RESULTS

During the July 30th public hearing, seven residents spoke during public comment. One resident spoke in support of the proposal. A few residents spoke with some concern, desiring to engage with the developer. The concerns raised were related to the proposed curb cut for ingress and egress to the site, the plan for the existing property line fence, and notice that was issued for the public hearing.

Separate [issues were also raised](#) regarding what was described as noise pollution that residents said originated from the Riverview Health rehab center HVAC system. The rehab center lies on a separate property to the south of the subject substation property. Letters were received by staff detailing these complaints.

Additionally, an attorney representing the rehab center raised issue with the legal boundary dividing the substation and hospital properties.

During the hearing, the Commission discussed the history regarding the establishment of the PD district. The Commission also discussed the differences between what it would mean to establish a new PD ordinance for the site or to rezone to SD1.

ANALYSIS

Below are responses to the questions and concerns that were raised during the public hearing.

PD Ordinance History

Over the years this site has transitioned. Below is a summary of the history of this site including the PD ordinance establishment and modification:

- 1984 (Ord No 588-H) expanded PD north to Lafayette; Jennings-Blain Memorial Hospital excluding the substation
- 1987 PD expanded & St. John Detroit Riverview Hospital opened
- 1999 the Hospital PD was modified (Ord No 20-99)
- 2007 Hospital closed
- 2011 converted to a long-term skilled nursing & rehab

Ord. 20-99 is a PD amendment that allowed a modified proposal for a 5,800 square foot one story addition to the emergency room of the Detroit Riverview Hospital. The addition required a 14-foot-high wall in front of the hospital's heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems. This is relevant due to the complaints regarding noise emissions during the public hearing.

Noise Pollution of Riverview Health (separate project)

Although a 14-foot-high wall was built as a condition of the PD for this site, neighbors have still complained that noise is emitting from the HVAC equipment.

CPC staff have held discussions with the City's Buildings, Safety Engineering and Environmental Department (BSEED) regarding this matter. BSEED has shared that it recently visited the site to monitor the noise emissions based on complaints.

Chapter 16, Environment, of the City Code lists regulations for the City's general noise standards. The controlling general provision is §16-1-12, which makes it unlawful to create, permit, or continue an "unreasonably loud or disturbing noise" that annoys, disturbs, injures, or endangers the health, peace, safety, or welfare of others. The City Code is subjective in its language, therefore BSEED has used other municipalities standards as a baseline to gauge noise pollution, including the standards from cities such as Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, and Los Angeles County. Generally, these cities allow for a noise level in the range of 55-70 DBA¹.

According to BSEED, there have been conversations and other enforcement actions taken regarding the Riverview Health rehab center to bring resolution to the noise complaints. BSEED has shared with

¹ DBA A weighted decibel- a unit used to measure sound levels that adjusts for how the human ear hears.

CPC staff that noise levels have been reduced and that during the most recent random decibel testing of the Riverview Health site, the facility is currently in compliance with the City Code and internal policy maintaining below a 70 DBA. According to the department these levels are an improvement from the baseline since monitoring first began. BSEED enforcement division has committed to on-going monitoring of the site.

Law Department Response to Property Legal Description Dispute

A legal representative of Riverview Health spoke during the public hearing regarding the property boundary. The attorney raised concerns regarding the property boundaries and ownership between the substation properties to be rezoned and Riverview Health.

Since then, CPC staff and the development team have been in contact with the Law Department. There have also been conversations with the Riverview Health attorney. Ultimately, the Law Department has weighed into the matter and confirmed that the property included in the proposed legal description for the subject rezoning, is property that is not owned by the hospital. The hospital does not own the property that the City is selling and some of the fence improvements encroach onto the City's property. Therefore, the Law Department has confirmed that the land in question is clear to be acted upon. The department has provided this in writing and is also prepared to speak to the issue.

New Curb Cut and Traffic

Traffic on E. Lafayette Street at the intersection of Townsend Street is posted at 25 mph. The street has an annual average daily traffic count of 1,628 and a commercial annual average daily traffic count of 46. The Department of Public Works (DPW) Traffic and Engineering Division has been working with the development team in identifying options for the curb cut that would be needed to access the site. Based on the low number of trips proposed to be generated since this will serve 2-3 cars, no issues have been raised about traffic patterns. The main guideline that has been shared by DPW Traffic and Engineering staff is that the curb cut should be located away from the intersection based on city guidelines. The development team can finalize plans with DPW and other departmental staff further into the process.

PD Planned Development vs. SD1 Special Development District, Small-Scale, Mixed-Use

Commissioners raised the question of whether this matter would have to be re-noticed for a new public hearing, in order to consider establishing a new PD specific to this project. The practice that the CPC has established with the Law Department is that when the notice does not entail a proposed zoning district that may be up for consideration, then the matter must be re-noticed. So yes, it is possible to establish a PD for this site, but it would have to be re-noticed for a new public hearing which would also greatly impact timelines.

It should also be taken into consideration that the Commission has taken up a project to begin to rezone the 200-plus PDs in the city to base districts as PDs have been over-utilized in the past and caused certain practical issues. The approach has been adopted in recent years, to rezone away from PDs as much as possible and to only establish new ones when there is no base district that will address a particular need and/or special circumstance to be served.

Planned Development District

The regulations of the district are designed to accomplish this by permitting flexibility in overall development while ensuring adequate safeguards and standards for public health, safety, convenience, and general welfare and, where applicable, encouraging historic preservation. Developers are advised to confer with the Planning and Development Department (P&DD) or the

City Planning Commission to ensure compliance with this Code before investing large amounts of time and energy in preparing plans and proposals.

SD1 Special Development District, Small-Scale, Mixed-Use

The SD1 Special Development District is designed to encourage a complementary mixture of small-scale pedestrian and transit-oriented uses that are compatible in a neighborhood setting. intended to ensure a neighborhood character and place a proper balance of activities within walking distance of one another while serving the day-to-day needs of residents.

ADDITIONAL OUTREACH & SUPPORT

The following letters of support were submitted to the CPC regarding the project:

- Lauren Hood, West Village Resident
- Nate Wallace, Indian Village Resident
- Ellie Schneider, Islandview Resident
- Annemarie Strassel, West Village Resident
- Bill Swanson, West Village Resident
- Matt Robertson, Resident within the Villages
- LaTrice McClendon, Detroit Director John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

Since the public hearing, the petitioner has engaged residents to discuss the proposal more in-depth in addition to their original outreach. The applicant conducted outreach with nearby residents, businesses and neighborhood organizations, including the Church of the Messiah, West Village Association, Jefferson East, the Villages CDC, Riverview Health, Moses Field Center and adjacent condominium representatives. Meetings, phone calls, emails, mailers and a neighborhood presentation were used to introduce the project and gather feedback. On-going engagement is scheduled with the West Village Association in October.

ZONING MAP AMENDMENT CRITERIA

Recommendations and decisions on a zoning map amendment shall be based on consideration of the criteria below found in Section 50-3-70 of the Zoning Ordinance. CPC staff comments are provided following each criterion:

1) Whether the proposed amendment corrects an error or meets the challenge of some changing condition, trend, or fact.

The proposed amendment responds to changing conditions that have occurred since the property was developed as a municipal electrical transformer substation. The building no longer serves its original public utility function and has remained vacant following modernization of the City's electrical infrastructure. The City has initiated a broader effort to dispose of surplus Public Lighting Department substations through adaptive reuse. The proposed rezoning facilitates the productive reuse of a vacant historic structure while responding to current market conditions, neighborhood reinvestment trends, and the City's redevelopment objectives. This proposal would allow a building that would otherwise remain vacant or be demolished, to be repurposed into an asset for the area.

2) Whether the proposed amendment is consistent with the Master Plan and the stated purposes of the zoning code.

The proposed SD1 zoning better aligns with the intended office, studio, and community-oriented uses than the existing Planned Development designation and advances the purposes of the Zoning Ordinance

by encouraging compatible mixed-use development, adaptive reuse, and efficient utilization of existing infrastructure. P&DD has submitted a letter stating that the rezoning is **consistent** with the Master Plan, as the area of the rezoning is quite small, not changing the character of the larger area, and on a site this size, many of the uses permitted in the SD1 district are neighborhood-scale.

3) Whether the proposed amendment will protect the health, safety, and general welfare of the public.

The proposed amendment is expected to promote the public health, safety, and welfare by facilitating the rehabilitation and occupancy of a long-vacant structure. The redevelopment includes structural repairs, removal of obsolete electrical equipment, environmental remediation as necessary, utility upgrades, accessibility improvements, landscaping, lighting, and security enhancements. Occupancy and ongoing maintenance are expected to reduce blighting influences and return the property to productive use, making it a contributing resource to revitalization efforts.

4) Whether the city and other service providers will be able to provide adequate public facilities and services to the subject property, while maintaining adequate levels of service to existing development.

The site is already established with existing public sewer and electrical infrastructure. The proposed office, fabrication studio, and community programming are not anticipated to generate demands far beyond the public infrastructure or municipal services that were required for the prior substation.

5) Whether the proposed rezoning will have significant adverse impacts on the natural environment, including air, water, soil, wildlife, and vegetation and with respect to anticipated changes in noise and regarding stormwater management.

CPC staff do not anticipate significant adverse environmental impacts resulting from the proposed rezoning. The proposal consists primarily of the adaptive reuse of an existing building rather than new site development, minimizing disturbance to soils and reducing construction-related impacts. The proposed uses are low-intensity and are not expected to create significant increases in noise, emissions, stormwater runoff, or other environmental impacts.

6) Whether the proposed amendment will have significant adverse impacts on other property that is in the vicinity of the subject tract.

CPC staff do not anticipate significant adverse impacts on surrounding properties. The proposed office, fabrication studio, civic prototyping laboratory, and community programming are compatible with the surrounding mix of residential, institutional, and commercial development. Rehabilitation of the vacant structure is expected to improve the appearance of the property and contribute positively to continued neighborhood investment.

7) The suitability of the subject property for the existing zoning classification and proposed zoning classification.

The existing PD zoning was established to accommodate the property's former municipal utility use and no longer reflects the intended redevelopment of the site. The proposed SD1 Special

Development District is better suited to accommodate the adaptive reuse of the building while maintaining compatibility with surrounding development.

8) *Whether the proposed rezoning will create an illegal 'spot zone.'*

The amendment does not create an illegal spot zone. The proposed SD1 zoning is consistent with surrounding development patterns, supports the adaptive reuse of an existing historic structure, and advances broader City planning objectives rather than conferring an isolated zoning benefit inconsistent with adjacent land uses.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

CPC staff has reviewed the issues pertaining to this matter that were raised during the public hearing. Much of the ire regarding this project seems to stem from the noise issue pertaining to HVAC equipment serving the hospital. It is understandable that residents desire resolution if there are noise issues. The City is actively working to resolve those issues with the hospital. Those issues should be viewed apart from this proposal.

This is a proposed adaptive reuse of a building that once served a more intensive purpose and will be kept in the City's building stock if able to be repurposed, instead of being demolished. The building is planned to serve 3-4 people, mainly the couple that are petitioning for the use. They also reside in the community within walking distance. As a part of the City's effort to retain these buildings instead of losing another asset similar to the many school buildings that have been razed, this is an attempt to put the building to productive use.

The SD1 district was designed to have uses that compliment a neighborhood setting. The proposed use for the building is one of the least abrasive uses that could be proposed, as there should be no outside disturbance as proposed.

The petitioner is a member of the community, the project saves a historic building, the use is one of low intensity that supporters have attested to contributing to the City of Detroit. For these reasons, **CPC staff recommends approval** of the request for rezoning as the petitioner continues to work with community members.

Attachment

cc: Dara O'Byrne, Deputy Director, P&DD
Greg Moots, P&DD
David Bell, Director, BSEED
Conrad Mallett, Corporation Counsel
Bruce Goldman, Law Department
Bryan Coe, Law Department
Daniel Arking, Law Department

