



**PLANNING AND
DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT**

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SR-2 – ADVISORY STAFF REPORT (09-04-2026) REVISED 9/8/2026

This advisory report, prepared by staff, represents the opinion and advice of professional staff, and does not represent nor direct the separate review and decision of the Historic District Commission. This report serves as an addendum to SR-1, an objective staff summary of the proposal and property.

ADDRESS 2900 ST. ANTOINE & 679 WILKINS

HISTORIC DISTRICT: BREWSTER-WHEELER RECREATION CENTER

MEETING DATE: 09-09-2026

APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2026-00492

ADVISORY STAFF REPORT PREPARED BY J. ROSS

SCOPE PHRASE: ERECT PERIMETER FENCE

STAFF OBJECTIONS TO APPROVAL:

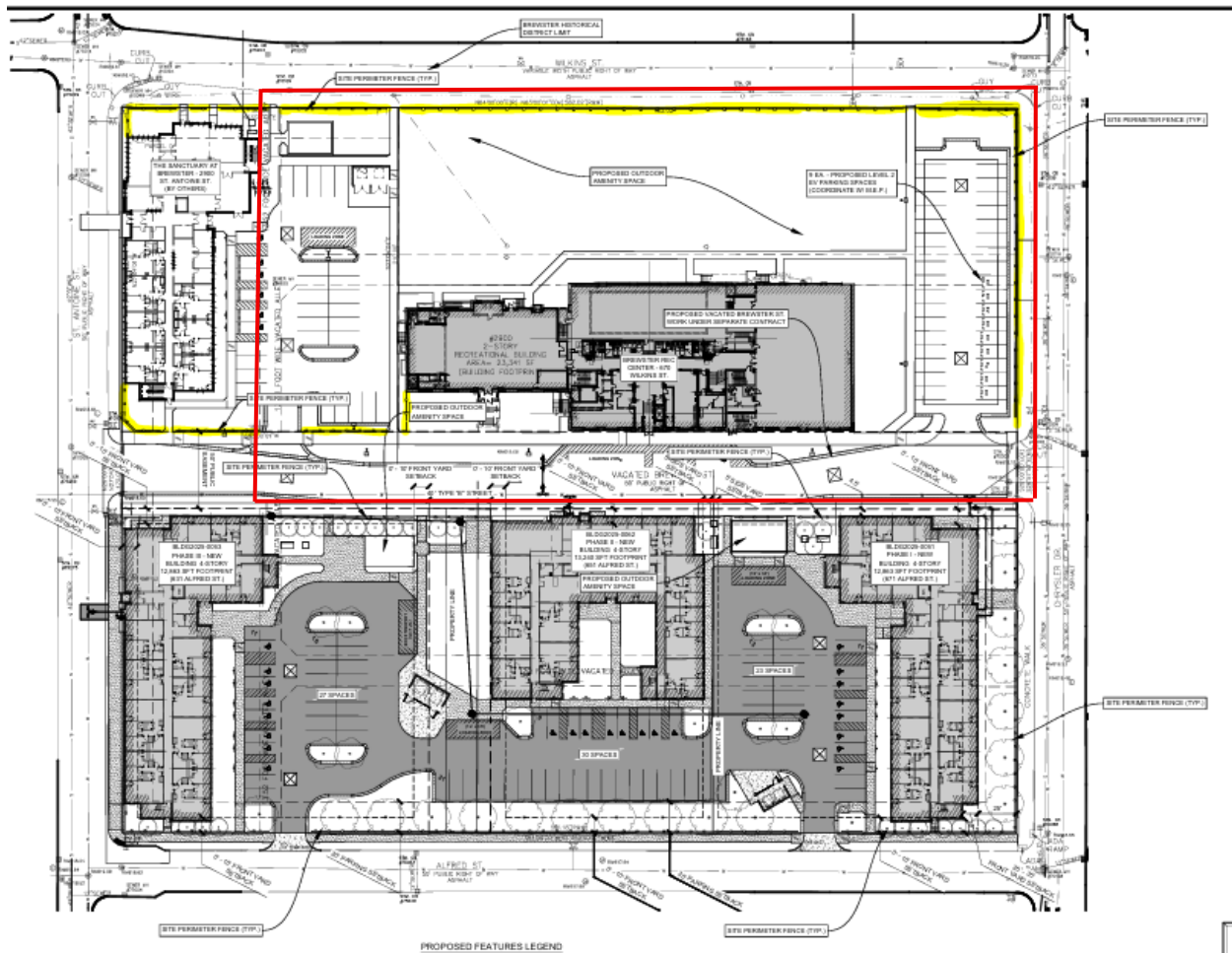
This first section describes itemized conclusions/concerns, which, in staff's professional opinion, would prevent the issue of an unconditional Certificate of Appropriateness (COA). "None" means staff has no objections and believes a COA is warranted, with no conditions. The Historic District Commission is not required to accept staff opinions or recommendations.

- None

STAFF ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

This second section expands on the reasoning and analysis leading to staff's conclusions given in the first section above. The Historic District Commission is not required to accept staff opinions or recommendations.

- The applicant is seeking to erect a new, ~~6'-0"~~ 5'-0" high, aluminum picket fence (see below) to enclose the entire block within which the historic district sits and a newly erected multiple-family building that is located outside of/to the west of the district boundaries. See the below plan which indicates the proposed location of the new fence. Staff notes that the applicant is in the process of rehabilitating the historic Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center as well as the erection of three new multiple-family dwellings at adjacent parcels in support of a wider development project, known as The Sanctuary, Phases I-IV. The Commission approved an application for the rehabilitation of the Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center at their March 2024 regular meeting and the construction of a new parking lot within the district's boundaries at their February 2025 regular meeting.





Aerial photo of the site, provided by the applicant. The location of the proposed fencing is outlined in yellow.

- As noted in the March 2024 staff report for the applicant's proposed rehabilitation of the Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center, the original portion of the building was erected in 1917 as the Ginsburg Library to serve the nearby Jewish community (see the below photo). Per the below Sanborn Map, the library's nearby surrounds were dominated by detached single-family houses and low to medium scale multiple-family and commercial buildings during the initial decades of the 20th century, prior to the erection of the 1929 recreation center addition.



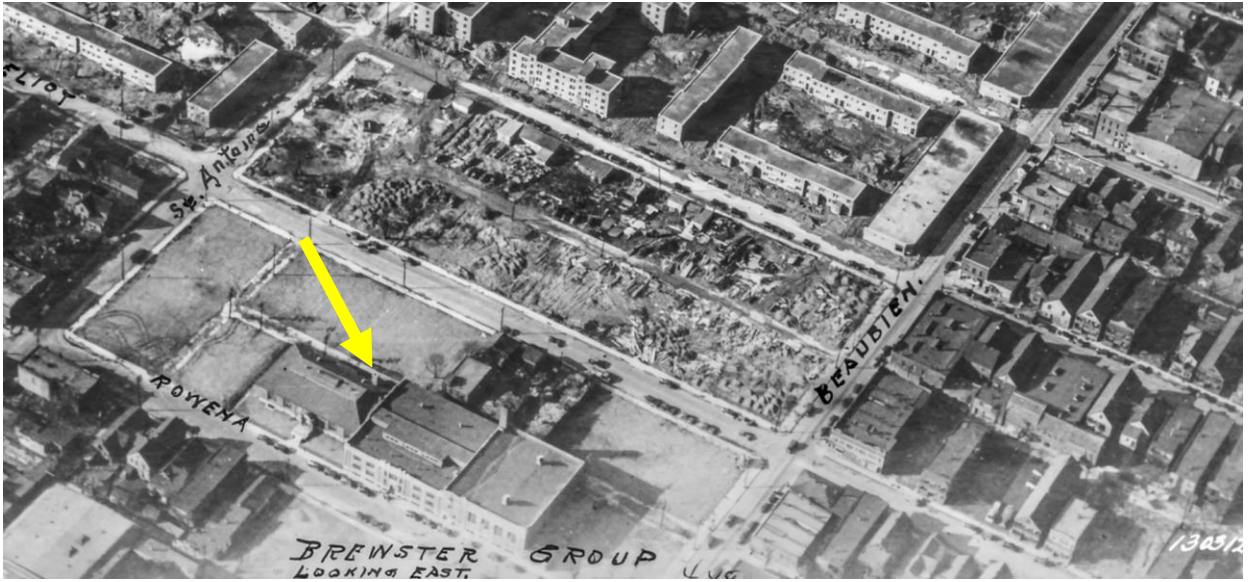
Ginsburg Library, 1917. Note fence at sidewalk/perimeter of the parcel



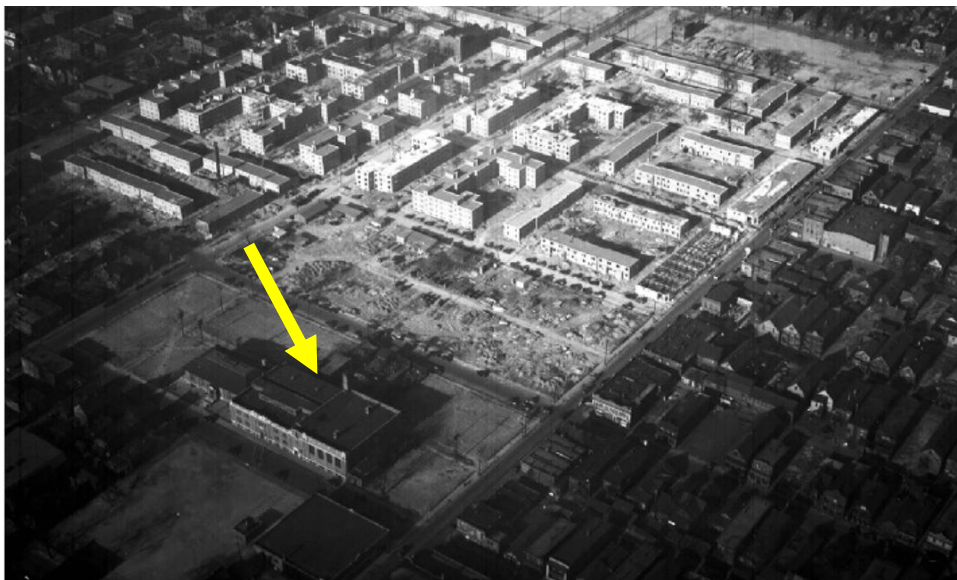
Sanborn Fire insurance Map, 1921. 2900 St. Antoine/the Ginsburg Library is outlined in red. Note that the neighborhood was densely populated by detached single-family houses and low to medium scale multiple-family and commercial development

- The library was closed by 1927 and the ownership of the building was subsequently transferred to the Detroit Parks Department so that it might be repurposed for use as a community/recreation center to serve the nearby growing African American community. At the close of 1929, the Parks Department had completed a conversion of the library building's interior space to an auditorium. A new two-story addition which included classrooms, a swimming pool, boxing ring, and basketball courts was appended to the original building's east side. Upon its completion, the newly renovated building was renamed the Central Community Center.
- In 1935, the Detroit Housing Commission initiated the construction of new multiple-family housing to the north of the new Central Recreation Center, on the north side of Wilkins Street. The housing, known as the Brewster Project, was funded with Works Progress Administration funds and was the nation's first federally funded public housing development for African Americans. Construction on the development ended in 1941. A year later, construction began on the Frederick Douglass Apartments, which were located immediately to the south of the west of the Recreation Center property. The last of the Douglass housing was completed in 1955. Upon completion, the Brewster-Douglass neighborhood could house up to 10,000 residents.

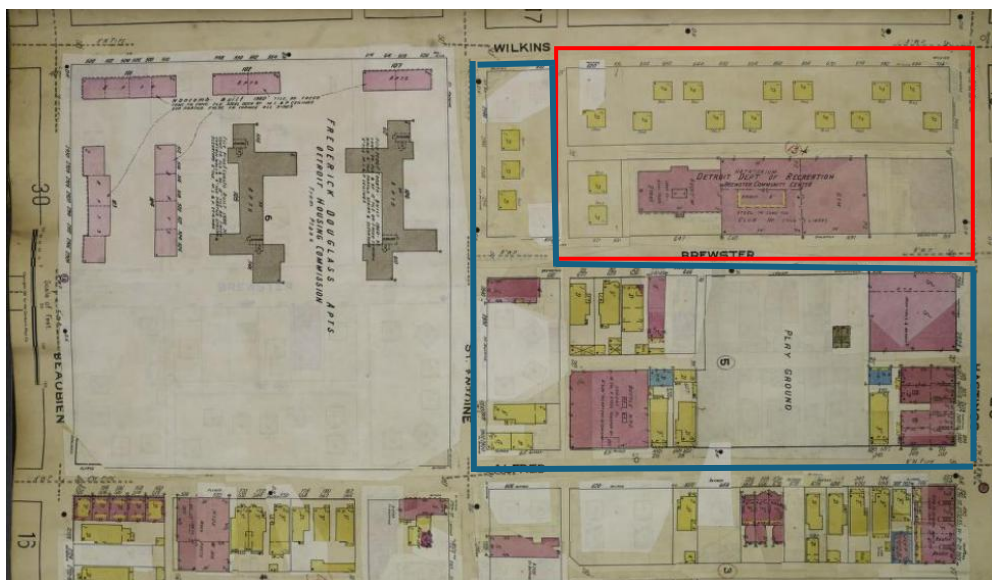
- A review of Sanborn Maps and historic images of the area indicated that the dense, early 20th century residential and commercial development which existed within the near vicinity of the boundaries of the current historic district in 1921 had been replaced by an extensive collection of multiple-family apartment buildings by 1955 as the result of substantial urban renewal projects which transformed the area. The recreation center was closed and vacated in 2006. By 2014, all of the structures which had been erected in the early 20th century within the Brewster Douglass neighborhood had been demolished.



Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center in 1936 (yellow arrow). Note that much of the neighborhood to the north had been demolished and new multiple-family apartment buildings had been erected. Source, Wayne State Library



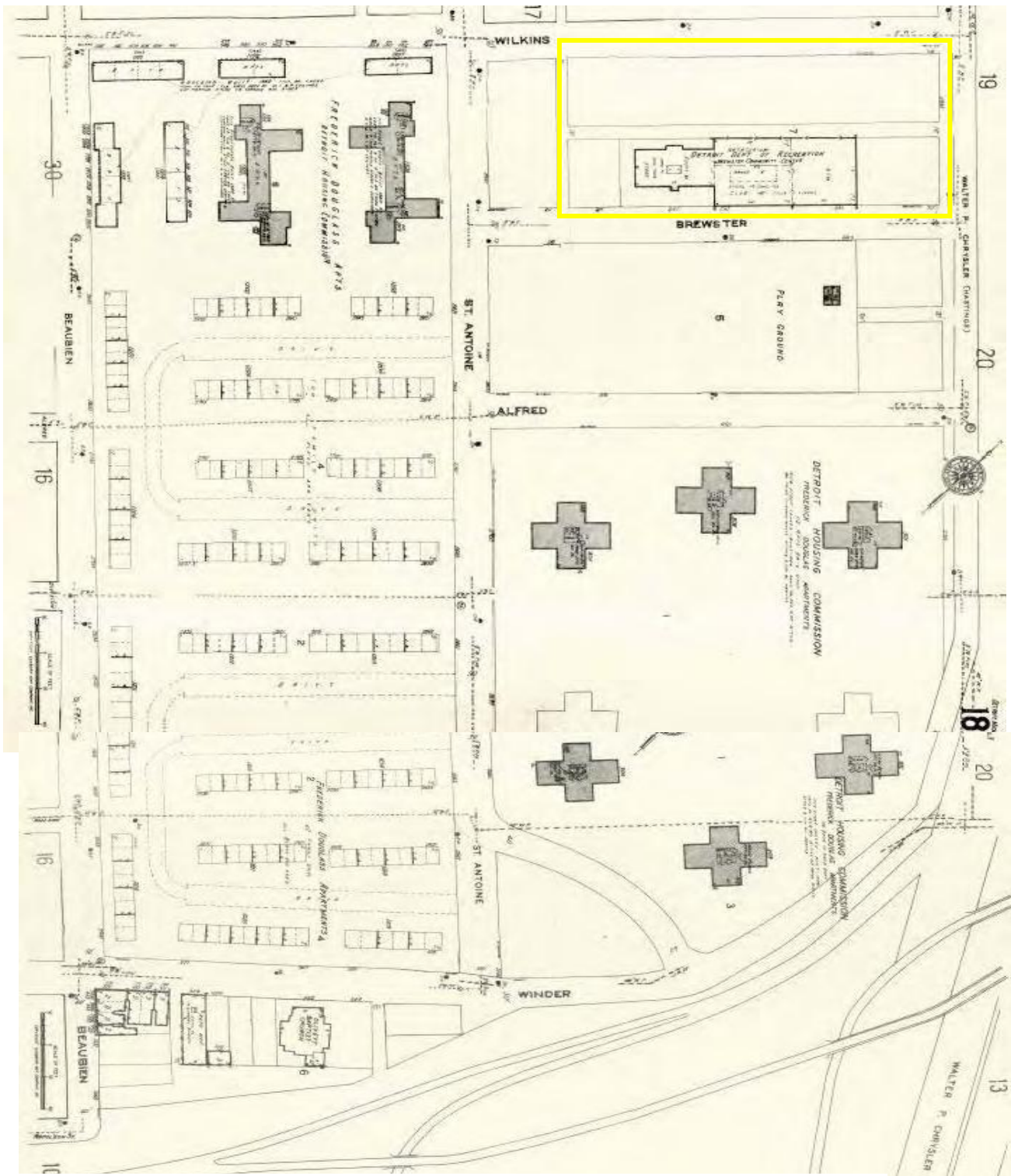
Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center in 1939 (yellow arrow). Note that much of the neighborhood to the north had been demolished and new multiple-family apartment buildings had been erected. Source, Wayne State Library



Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1950. Current Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center HD boundaries outlined in red. Area outlined in blue indicates the location of the current development project that is located outside of the district boundaries

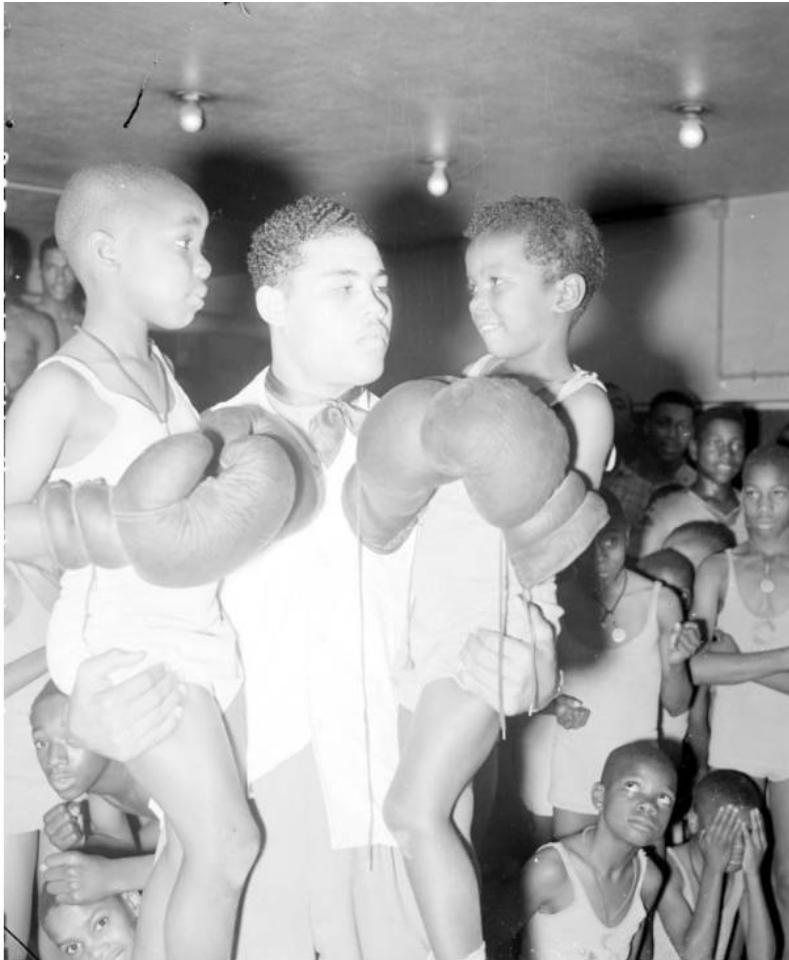


Brewster-Douglass neighborhood. West end of the Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center (yellow arrow) outlined in orange. Aerial photo taken in 1955. Compare to the 1921 Sanborn Map on page 4 and the photos from the 1930s on page 6 to note the extensively altered character of the area, now featuring superblocks, and large buildings set among open landscapes. This era is included in the district's Period of Significance.



Brewster-Douglass neighborhood. Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center historic district boundaries outlined in yellow. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1977. Again, note the marked change in density and block coverage from the earlier urban context seen in the 1921 Sanborn Map on page 4.

- The HDAB designation report for the district does not provide a Statement of Significance or define a Period of Significance for the property. In their March 2004 report, HDC staff therefore recommended that the building is significant for the following reasons:
 - Between 1917 and 1927, the original building served as a library for one of Detroit's earliest Jewish neighborhoods
 - Beginning in 1932, the building served as a hub for social, educational, and recreational activities for the nearby burgeoning African American communities of Brush Park and Brewster Douglass
 - Famed boxing champion and Detroit resident Joe Louis trained at the recreation center in the early 1930s
 - The original library wing and the 1929 addition both remain as excellent examples of early 20th century civic/public architecture



Joe Louis (center) in the basement at 2900 St. Antoine, 1930s.

- In their March 2024 report, staff recommended that the district's Period of Significance begins in 1917, which is the date of the building's original construction, and ends in 1955, the date the last building within the Brewster-Douglass neighborhood was completed. Staff currently supports that recommendation.
- As previously noted, the area within the Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center is located was a dense, mixed-use neighborhood with traditional street grids of walkable blocks in the early

20th century/during the initial decades of the district's Period of Significance. Staff typically would not recommend a perimeter fence which encloses an entire city block in this context. However, beginning in the 1930s, the character of the neighborhood began to transform and by 1955/the end of the district's Period of Significance, the area was dominated by multiple-family apartment buildings and associated open areas/parking lots and parks within urban superblocks. It is staff's opinion that the proposed new fencing is compatible with the historic character of the district as it appeared in the 1930s-1955. Staff therefore recommends approval of the proposal. Finally, staff also notes that a review of Google Streetview a chain link fence had been present at the location of the proposed new fence in 2007. By 2014, the year of the district's designation, fencing had been removed, likely the result of scrapping and/or deterioration, but the posts remained.



Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center, 2007 (yellow arrow). Note perimeter fencing. Google Streetview



Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center, 2007 (yellow arrow), with the new demolished Frederick Douglass Apartments to the right/west. Note perimeter fencing. Google Streetview



Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center, 2013 (yellow arrow) with the new demolished Frederick Douglass Apartments to the right/west and south. Google Streetview. Note perimeter fencing has been removed but posts remain.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:’

This third and final section takes staff’s itemized “objections” identified in the first section, and presents them in the form of “conditions” in support of a proposed approval recommendation or “reasons” in support of a proposed denial recommendation, in the form required by Section 21-2-78 of the City Code. The Historic District Commission is not required to accept staff opinions or recommendations.

Section 21-2-78, Determinations of Historic District Commission

Recommendation 1 of 1, Certificate of Appropriateness

Staff recommends that the proposed work will be appropriate according to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and the Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center’s Elements of Design.