

**STAFF REPORT: 3/8/2023 REGULAR MEETING**

**PREPARED BY: D. RIEDEN**

**APPLICATION NUMBER: #23-8238**

**ADDRESS: 2200 (2600) EAST ATWATER**

**HISTORIC DISTRICT: ARETHA FRANKLIN AMPHITHEATER/CHENE PARK**

**APPLICANT/ARCHITECT: DAVID M. ZANLEY (HAMILTON ANDERSON), BRAD GABLE (WCI CONTRACTORS)**

**PROPERTY OWNER: CITY OF DETROIT, GENERAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT**

**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 2/13/2023**

**DATES OF STAFF SITE VISITS: 2/20/23, 2/23/23, 3/2/23**

**SCOPE: INSTALL SIGNAGE, ALTER LANDSCAPE**

## **EXISTING CONDITIONS**

The Aretha Franklin Amphitheatre/Chene Park is located on the East Riverfront, along the Detroit Riverwalk, about 1.25 miles east of downtown. Consisting of a single 9.3-acre parcel, the site contains a covered amphitheater and stage, seating and an adjacent multi-level pavilion. The Detroit firm Schervish, Vogel and Merz was awarded the contract to design the park and the firm's basis of design was to treat the park as an environmental sculpture. Groundbreaking took place in 1982; the site opened in 1984. The architectural and historic description below is taken from the Historic Designation Advisory Board's (HDAB) Final Report:

“Overall the park has an organic sculptural feeling. Circles, semicircles and wave patterns are used to connect the river to the land. The landscape architects' vision of linking the park from the Renaissance Center to Belle Isle suggest its past relationship to an industrial landscape and a new connection to modern architecture of the Renaissance Center. Walkways curve and flow around the property allowing for visitors to pause for scenic vistas of the interplay of the property landscape, artworks, and views of the Detroit River and Canada beyond. A semicircular pond covers approximately two-thirds of the frontage with East Atwater Street making the connection to Bloody Run Creek that once flowed into the Detroit River nearby, but has since been enclosed and incorporated into the modern sewer system.

The asymmetrical multi-level pavilion is directly adjacent and north of the amphitheater and consists of a series of circular and semicircular concrete structure segments. It is arranged with multiple stacked round silo-shaped structures with exterior gray rough texture concrete finishes and houses the concession stands, restroom facilities, private event space and mechanical operations. Between the period of 1984 and 1990, the pavilion was expanded from three-levels to five-levels with four new concession and two new restroom facilities that extended the original accommodations seven-fold. The pavilion pattern slopes up and over the crest of the hill with hardscape areas of solid rough textured cylinders resembling piers that slope down to the pond framing the landscaped area.”



*Site Photo 1, by Staff February 20, 2023: (North) Front elevation, showing evergreens to be saved from demolition to the right.*



*Site Photo 2, by Staff March 2, 2023: (East) Pavilion entrance showing pylon #11 and distinctive character-defining concrete surface finish treatment that complements the architectural composition of the site.*

This property has the following Certificates of Appropriateness (COA) on the Detroit Property Information System (DPI):

- July 2020 COA: Capital improvements, repairs to concrete, railings, grading
- Nov 2020 COA: Replace concession counters and shelves, soffits in bathroom
- April 2021 COA: Erection of new building to include restrooms and ADA seating
- July 2021 COA: Replace light poles - historic and non-historic
- July 2021 COA: Replace (8) existing internally illuminated signs with non-static LED signs, add 2 additional non-static LED signs



Figure 1 by Applicant: Signage Site Plan, showing totals and locations for proposed installation and removal of the four signage types.

## PROPOSAL

The proposed work consists of two areas of work: installation and replacement of signage, and renovation of the landscape. Each area of work has its own site plan, schedule of drawings and details attached.

## SIGNAGE

The signage proposal is throughout the entire property but is focused on the following sign types:

1. Refurbishment of existing signage as described in HDC Sign Guidelines for those signs that are located at seating areas and original historic signs cast in walls as marked in the site plan.
2. Removal of signs as indicated in the site plan.
  - a. Removal of 4 concrete pylons indicated on the site plan as (#2, #5, #7, #11)
  - b. Remove 3 flat restroom signs
  - c. Remove 6 concession and VIP lounge signs
  - d. Remove 2 wall mounted restroom signs
3. Installation of new signs as indicated in the site plan

- a. Install 11 new pylons as indicated on the site plan.  
New pylon signs are 7' high, 16" diameter, with 10" wide banner 9" from the top of the exposed aggregate concrete material. The deep lagoon color sign will be either painted metal or composite with raised lettering to match existing site colors and elements. (See attached drawings.)
- b. Install 3 new flat restroom signs  
The 10" high by 10' long flat signs are painted metal or composite, color deep lagoon with raised letters to match existing site colors and elements.
- c. Install 3 concession flat or blade type signs over concession openings  
The 1" thick metal or composite sign is two-faced, 2' 5" diameter, with black metal 6" support between the sign faces. Color to be deep lagoon with raised letters to match existing site elements. These will be mounted above concession venues as shown in the sign plan.
- d. Install 2 wall mounted restrooms signs  
Door/wall mounted signs are 8" by 9" in size painted metal or composite, color to be deep lagoon with raised letters and braille to match existing site elements. To be placed at pedestrian information scale as shown in the sign plan.

### LANSCAPE ALTERATION

The landscape proposal has a demolition and planting plan that illustrates the proposed work. The scope includes removal of all dead, damaged and invasive plant and landscape material as indicated in the site plan, installation of new plant and landscape material and removal of concrete elements as described above.



Figure 2, by applicant, illustrative proposed planting plan. Note that some of the existing evergreens at the top of the hill, marked "lawn" near the northwest side of the amphitheatre, have since been marked to be retained since staff met with the applicant this past week. This plan has not yet been updated to reflect this. (See site photo 1)

## STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Aretha Franklin Amphitheater/Chene Park Historic District, established in December 2019, consists of a 9.3-acre parcel, and is owned by the Detroit Services Department.
- According to the HDAB report, the lead landscape architect, David Schervish, “treated this park as an environmental sculpture”. The site and its buildings exhibit characteristics of “Brutalist” architecture, which prioritizes raw materials and structural expressiveness, exposed in their bare minimalist form, rather than finished or traditionally decorative surfaces. In this case, for both structures and site elements, poured concrete was generally left unfinished and sometimes given a rough surface. The amphitheater, pavilion structures, retaining walls, on down to the break walls and the pylons all share an unfinished vertical striated surface that is distinctive and unique to this site and ties all the elements together.
- As noted in previous staff reports concerning this site, the integrated landscape roots the structures into a larger context for the entire site. The unadorned and vertical striations of the concrete, along with areas of smooth occurrences such as those along the roof support structures, offer a strong static backdrop to the organic forms of tensile structure and the landscape as they age over time and move through the seasons. Staff has the opinion that preserving many of the older grown evergreens and older trees was an important effort in an earlier version of the proposed landscape plan, as well as maintaining the distinctive character defining elements of the concrete work, such as the existing pylons, as they too are important elements to the composition of this “environmental sculpture”, as Mr. Schervish described it. Character defining features of this site are not only specific to structures or landscape elements (such as a tree or a pylon), but it is staff’s opinion, that the integration and interdependence of this composition of the built and natural form together are equally important, thus allowing all elevations and views, including vantages towards the park or towards the river be character-defining features.
- Upon review of the initial application, the planting plan called for removal of nearly all evergreens along the west and northwest areas of the property. During the site visit, staff, the applicant and city staff studied the health of these trees and determined that a large population of the evergreens (Austrian pines and blue spruce) along the west edge of the property has communicable disease and were dying of needle cast and diplodia blight. However, towards the top of the hill, closer towards the more public vantage of Atwater, the stand of larger Austrian pines are



*Site Photo 3, by Staff March 2, 2023: (East) near restrooms showing pylon #7 and how the striating concrete is aging like the surrounding concrete walls and complements the patterns of the surrounding landscape.*



*Site Photo 4, by Staff March 2, 2023: (West) Pavilion entrance showing pylon #2 and evergreens in the background that are proposed to be replaced due to disease.*

in a location that has yet remained healthy, and the team has determined that these can remain. Adjustments to maintenance and irrigation, along with removal of the infected trees should help in the retention of these trees. While the planting plans have been updated to reflect this, some of the illustrations, have not yet been updated. (See site photo 1) As a result of this collaboration, Barry Burton of the General Services Department produced a “Site Assessment and Landscape Review for Plans Submitted by Hamilton Anderson Associates Inc.”. Staff has recommended that the planting plan adapt these changes and the current planting plan has been modified with these recommendations. A copy of Barry’s report has been added to the applicant review material.

## ISSUES

- It is staff’s opinion that the removal of the 4 concrete pylons (#2, #5, #7, #11) conflicts with the Elements of Design:
  - **7) Relationship of materials.** “The building materials are generally composed of concrete... Landscape elements, including sidewalk, planters and retaining walls, are concrete. Lighting fixtures outside the amphitheater area, benches, signage, and trash receptacles are metal mounted on concrete bases.”
  - **8) Relationship of textures.** “The ticket booth building displays an overall smooth texture. The merchandising building has a slightly textured upper surface rising from an approximately two foot base with a heavier textured vertical-oriented pattern found on the surface of the pavilion and on many of the landscape retaining walls and stair risers and is intentionally similar to the surface of the Renaissance Center (General Motors Building). The pavilion consists of the same heavily textured vertical concrete surface resembling the texture of the Renaissance Center. The heavily textured vertical concrete surfaces are found on the concrete planters incorporated into the pavilion and the facing of the stairway risers.”
  - **10) Relationship of architectural details** – “Irregularly arranged, repetitive cylinder shape details of various heights are found throughout the property, especially along the riverfront and cascading from the top of the pavilion to its base where a water feature was once installed. Cylinder shapes are arranged in an asymmetrical modern style spare of details. The primary façade (north elevation) of the pavilion is dominated by rough-textured concrete with vertical-textured design elements. Concrete stair risers repeat the same vertical textures. The amphitheater design intent is to allow the audience views of the Detroit River and the stage is located near the edge of the river with the entertainers facing away (north) from the river. The administrative building utilizes a vertically-laid stack bond that emphasizes a vertical architectural element.”
  - **12) Walls of continuity.** “Landscaped planters and retaining walls are of the same vertically-oriented textured concrete as the walls of the pavilion and integrated into the landscape to provide a wall of continuity. The vertical light standards, fencing, and planted trees, where they exit, result in expressions of continuity.”
  - **13) Relationship of significant landscape features and surface treatments** “...Mature trees are found on the east elevation and surrounding the amphitheater. Mature shrubbery are located



Site Photo 5, by Staff March 2, 2023: (North) entrance showing pylon #5.

throughout all elevations along the building footprint and paved walkways. The Entry Plaza, Mall and Festival Plaza, and sidewalks along the pond are flanked with grass. The hill beyond the fixed seating of the amphitheater is covered with grass. Collections of low-level multi-height cylinder shaped landscaping features are arranged along the riverfront and within the landscaped areas and some include the vertical texturizing found on the outside of the pavilion and stair risers...

- **19) Degree of complexity within the facades** “A low degree of complexity is found at façade openings...and administrative building main entrances; door and window openings throughout are unadorned. A subtle but high degree of complexity is found in the architectural details of the pavilion due to the stacked nature of the cylinder shapes that create a tower of cylindrical elements with vertical texture.”
  - **20) Orientation, vistas, overviews** “The primary orientation of all buildings, amphitheater and stage structure, and objects are designed to maximize views of the Detroit River...The pavilion openings provide frames for viewing the mature landscape and water features. The amphitheater provides patrons vistas of the Detroit River and is the backdrop for the stage. The parcel was designed to engage and connect people with the natural beauty of the riverfront with the City of Detroit as its backdrop by placing mature trees into the landscape.”
  - **21) Symmetric or asymmetric appearance** “The arrangement of buildings, structures, and objects are asymmetric, being consciously designed by the landscape architect to maximize views of the Detroit River and landscape.”
  - **22) General environmental character** “The district consists of a multi-building entertainment venue that's interrelationship [sic] is to enjoy the entertainment complemented within its natural environment. Walkways are organically arranged to invite people to meander and stop to enjoy views of the water and landscaping elements. ...provide a consistent link of riverfront parks connected by a pathway to be utilized by the public.”
- Staff has no issue with the proposed remaining elements of the signage plan or planting plan.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

### Section 21-2-78, Determination of Historic District Commission

#### Recommendation #1: Removal of the concrete pylons (#2, #5, #7, #11) per the applicant's landscape plan

Staff finds that the removal of the concrete pylons (#2, #5, #7, #11) per the applicant's landscape plan does not meet the Secretary of Interior Standards and conflicts with the Elements of Design for the following reasons:

- The pylons are integrated elements in the composition of the historic landscape and are contributing to the rhythm of and patterns of distinctive concrete features that are repeated and represented throughout the park, which are evident in from the largest architectural features down to the cylindrical break wall features, which together create a legible pattern language that as a whole is a key site design element.
- The materiality of the striated concrete at each pylon is characteristic of the architecture of this period and is also a distinct character defining feature.

Staff therefore recommends that the Commission issue a Denial for the proposed window replacement, as it does not the district's Elements of Design nor meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, specifically Standards:

- 2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.*
- 5. Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property shall be preserved.*
- 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.*

Recommendation #2: Install signage, renovate landscape.

It is staff's opinion the remaining proposal for the signal and renovation of the landscape is appropriate. Staff therefore recommends the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for the work as proposed because it meets the Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation.