

**STAFF REPORT:** NOVEMBER 8, 2023 REGULAR MEETING      **PREPARED BY:** T. BOSCARINO  
**APPLICATION NUMBER:** HDC2023-00071  
**ADDRESS:** 1200 LONGFELLOW  
**HISTORIC DISTRICT:** BOSTON-EDISON  
**APPLICANT/OWNER:** IVAN ALEXANDER  
**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION:** OCTOBER 15, 2023  
**DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT:** OCTOBER 21, 2023

**SCOPE:** ERECT GLASS DOME STRUCTURE AND FENCE (REVISION TO PREVIOUSLY APPROVED APPLICATION)

## **EXISTING CONDITIONS**

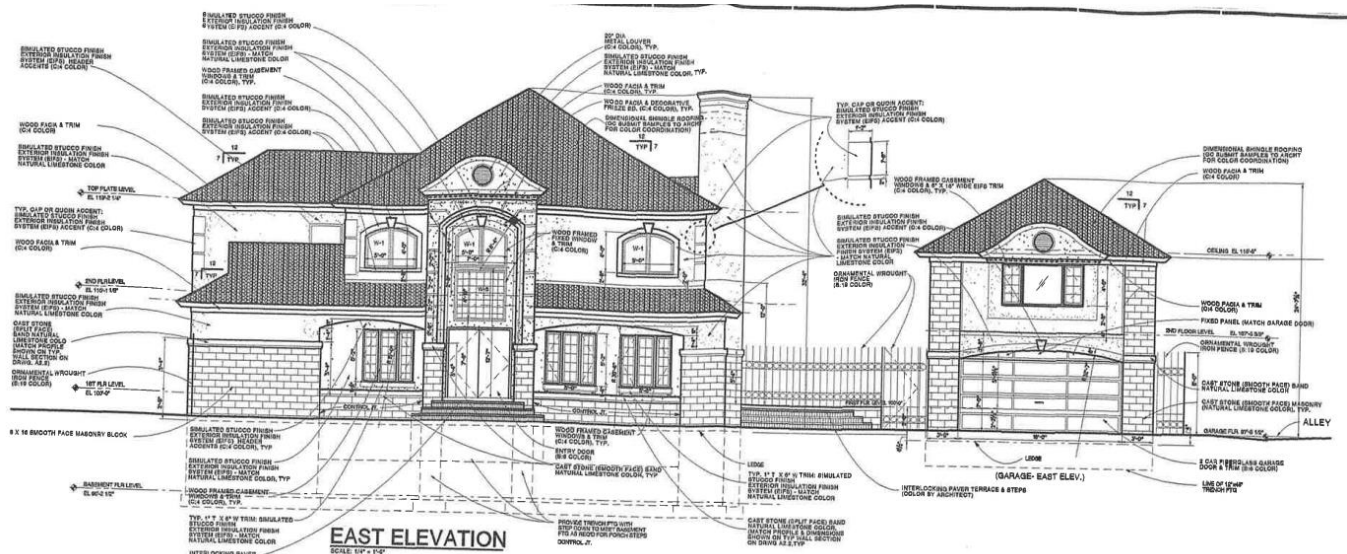
The subject property is an empty, grass covered lot, one of several in the vicinity that have never been developed. The irregularly shaped parcel is a result of the construction of the John C. Lodge Expressway and the vacation of that block of Longfellow Street in during the 1950s. Formerly, the property was at the northwest corner of Hamilton Avenue and Longfellow Street; it was subsequently enlarged with the vacation of that section of Longfellow. Despite the Longfellow address, its frontage is to the east, on Hamilton Avenue. At 0.312 acres, the parcel is more than twice the size of most other parcels on Longfellow Street in Boston-Edison.



*Left: The subject property outlined in yellow. Image from Detroit Parcel Viewer. Right: October 2023 photo by staff, looking southwest from Hamilton Avenue.*

The property is subject to several prior approvals. On June 12, 2008, the Historic District Commission issued a Certificate of Appropriateness for a proposed house and garage facing east onto Hamilton Avenue. On July 31, 2012, the Commission issued a Certificate of Appropriateness to change the previously approved garage from one to two stories.

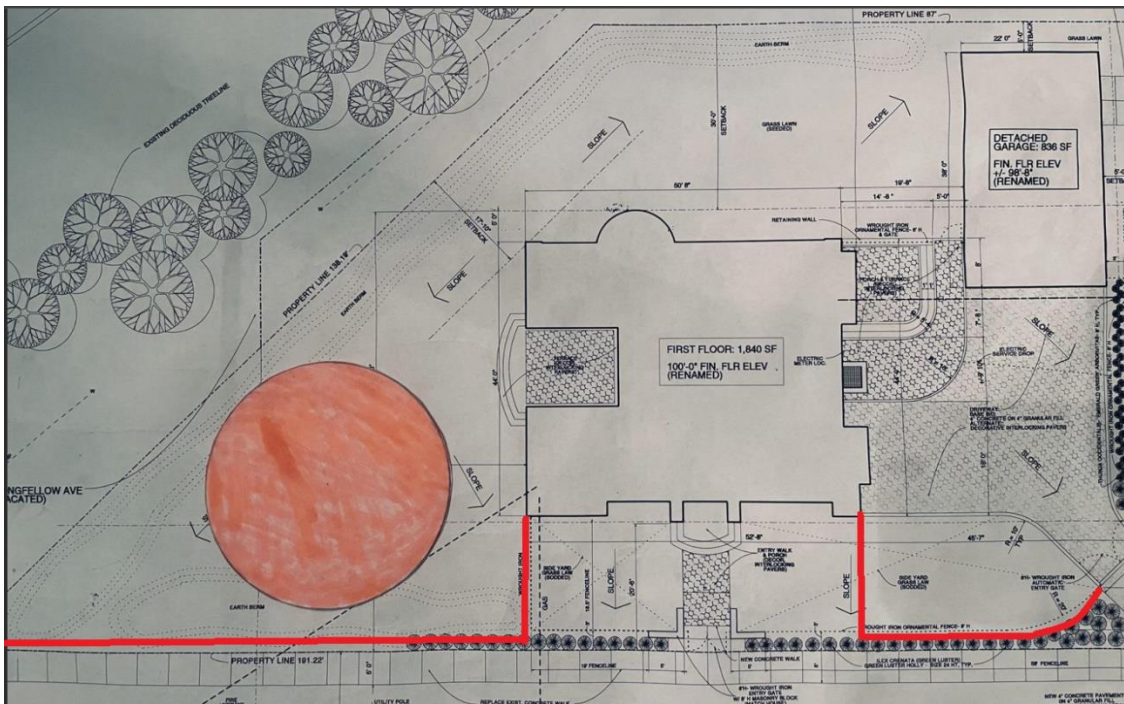
The Commission declined to approve a proposed fence, issuing a Denial for that item on June 12, 2008.



Front (east/Hamilton-facing) elevation of previously approved buildings. Note only the rear portion of the fence is shown and the fence was not approved by the Historic District Commission. Image from construction drawings submitted in 2012.

**PROPOSAL**

The applicant proposes to erect a 19’ geodesic dome with aluminum structure and glass panels. The structure would be located partially in the front yard. Also proposed is a 6’ fence of wood, possibly with brick or stucco posts.



Site plan from application documents with proposed dome shown in orange; red lines added by staff to show approximate location of proposed fence.





*Photo of example dome from submitted product brochure.*



*Rendering of dome screened by fence, submitted by applicant.*

## **STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH**

- The Boston-Edison Historic District was established by resolution of the City Council in 1974. No Final Report was prepared for the district. Elements of Design for Boston-Edison are established in Section 21-2-106 of the Detroit City Code (available at [municode.com](http://municode.com) and linked from the Historic District Commission property page for this property). Particularly pertinent to this proposal are the following:
  - “Window openings are virtually always taller than wide; however, several windows are sometimes grouped into a combination that is wider than tall. Window openings are always subdivided. The most common window type is double-hung with sashes that are generally further subdivided by muntins or leaded glass. Façades have approximately 15 percent to 35 percent of their area glazed. Sun porches, with a very high proportion of window openings subdivided by mullions and muntins, are common. (Proportion of Openings Within the

- Façade.)
- “Permanently enclosed sun porches are often placed at the side and, sometimes, at the rear of the building.” (Rhythm of Entrance and Porch Projections).
  - “The most common relationship of textures in the district is that of a low-relief pattern of mortar joints in brick contrasted with the smooth surface of wood or stone trim.” (Relationship of Textures.)
  - “Architectural details generally relate to style ... Details on “Mediterranean” style or vernacular buildings, including arched windows, door openings and porches, are often done in stone, brick, tile, and sometimes in stucco.” (Relationship of Architectural Details.)
  - “A variety of roof shapes exist in the district, depending on building style. Shallow hipped roofs with dormers, roofs with triangular gables, and steep hipped roofs predominate. A few Gambrel roofs exist. Complex arrangements of the gabled and/or the hipped types, with subsidiary or transverse roofs, are not unusual. Dormers are common. Flat roofs are present only as subsidiary roofs on residential structures. Garage roofs generally reflect the style and pitch of the roof on the main house.” (Relationship of Roof Shapes.)
  - “The major wall of continuity is created by the buildings with their uniform setbacks within the blocks. New buildings should contribute to this wall of continuity.” (Walls of Continuity.)
  - “There is a wide range in the type of fencing. Fencing within the public view was generally designed to complement the style, design material, and date of the residence.” (Relationship of Significant Landscape Features and Surface Treatments.)
  - “Side lots are not uncommon for the larger properties in the district, and a number of these form a part of the original site plan for the residence. Such side lots are usually landscaped and are often fenced at or near the setback line.” (Relationship of Significant Landscape Features and Surface Treatments.)
  - “Setbacks vary from area to area within the district, although they are generally consistent within each block or area. The varying designs of the houses, occasionally with slight setbacks in the façades, cause the houses to relate to the front setback line in different ways. This creates a slight variation in the setback line. Nevertheless, within each block or area, a wall of continuity is created.” (Rhythm of Building Setbacks.)
  - “Lot coverage ranges from approximately 40 percent to ten percent or less in the case of homes with large yards. Most homes are in the 25 percent to 35 percent range of lot coverage. (Relationship of Lot Coverage.)
  - “Where stucco or concrete exists, it usually remains in its natural state, or is painted in a shade of cream. Roofs are in natural colors (tile and slate colors, natural and stained wood colors), and asphalt shingles are predominantly within this same dark color range. Paint colors often relate to style.”
  - “Architectural details generally relate to style.”
  - “The buildings derived from Classical precedents usually have simple, rectangular façades with varying amounts of ornamentation.”

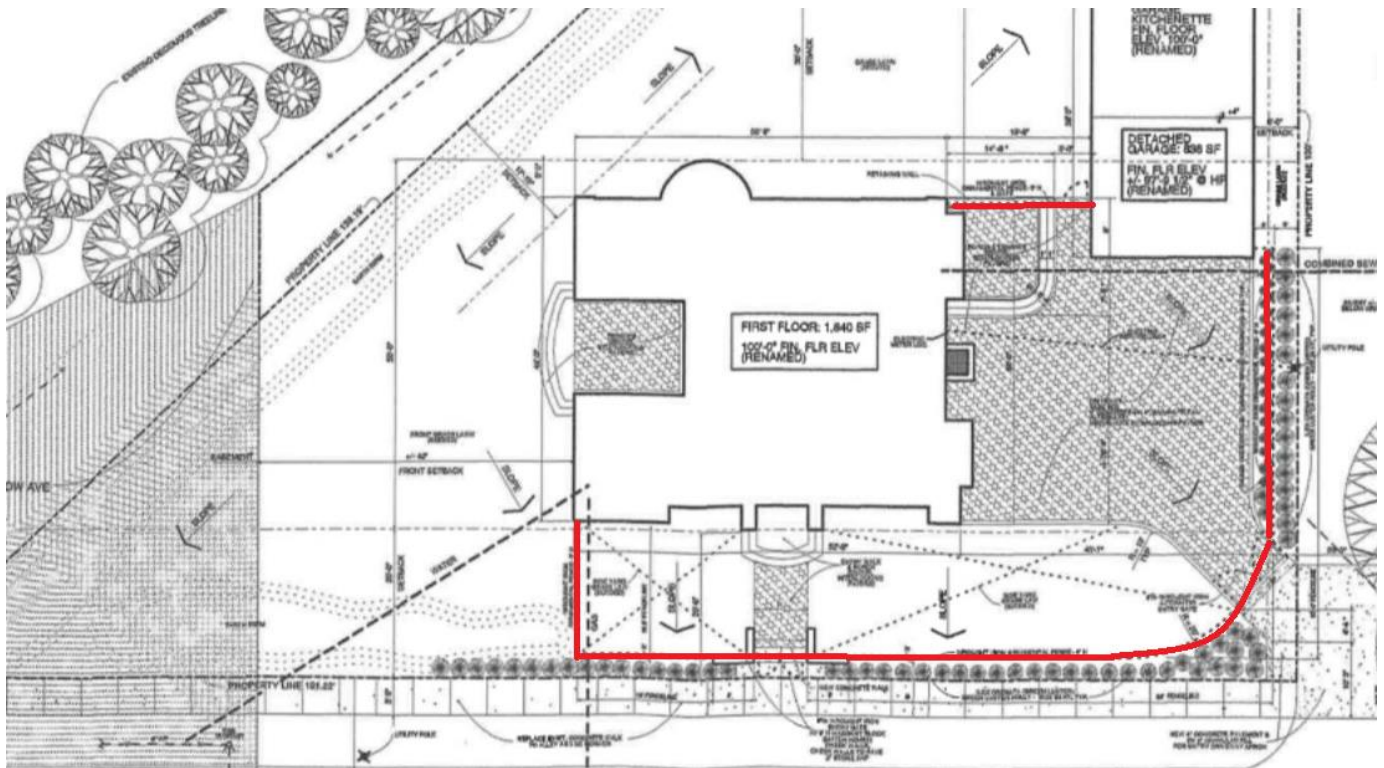
## **Dome**

- The proposed dome is largely incompatible with the architecture of the Boston-Edison Historic District (see “Issues,” below). However, buildings, structures, or additions of contrasting architectural styles are not always inappropriate, if sufficiently limited in scale and situated in a manner that does not interrupt a character-defining open space and does not distract from the architecture of the primary building or the district as a whole. Alternatively, a domed structure could potentially be appropriate as an integrated part or addition of an otherwise compatible building. Again, this would most likely be as a rear addition that did not visually compete with or distract from the architecture of the district. Given the larger-than-typical

size of the subject property, it may be possible to include such a structure or addition in an appropriate manner, especially if the design of the previously approved house and garage were altered.

## Fence

- The staff report associated with the 2008 Certificate of Appropriateness and Denial states “fences should start at the front face of the house and surround the rear yard” and opines that the fence should be no more than six feet tall. This is consistent with the Historic District Commission *Fence and Hedge Guidelines*. The 2008 staff recommendation was that the fence be approved with the condition that it be set back at the plane of the façade of the house. The Commission subsequently issued a Denial for the fence but did not specify a reason for the decision other than a finding that the proposed fence failed to meet Standard #9 of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation (quoted below).



Red line drawn by staff indicates 2008 fence proposal for which a Denial was issued. Site plan from 2008 application documents.

- Most houses in Boston-Edison face the east-west streets. A small number face side (north-south) streets, including five such houses on Lasalle, and a few elsewhere. This is often the case when the narrow dimensions of the lot would not permit the house to face an east-west street. A house at 801 Edison provides an example of a house that faces a side street and has a fence (in this case, a brick wall) which projects forward from the plane of the façade. This example indicates that such a configuration is sometimes appropriate. However, the situation at 801 Edison is different from the subject property as the degree of projection is relatively minor and the projection is visually and architecturally integrated with a masonry porch and garage, which also project. The design also retains an open front yard, even if it is a shallower yard than typical Boston-Edison properties.





House with projecting wall at 801 Edison. Google Maps image.

## ISSUES

### Dome

- The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards, namely Standard #9, require that new construction “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 its environment.” Although the proposed dome clearly satisfies the differentiation requirement, it is not compatible, especially in terms of massing and architectural features. The proposed structure introduces the massing of a dome into an environment where buildings of frame or masonry construction—with the associated planar, right-angled façade elements—are universal. Buildings are topped with hip or gable roofs rather than round surfaces. The various Elements of Design quoted above reference a design context in which the proposed structure is out of place, and therefore not “compatible” with the “environment” as required by Standard #9.
- In addition to the architectural incompatibility, the proposed dome is also partially located in the front yard, interrupting a character-defining open space and disrupting the wall of continuity that is “created by the buildings with their uniform setbacks within the blocks” and “generally consistent within each block or area” as noted in the Elements of Design quoted above.
- Further, the proposed dome location is partially within the former Longfellow right-of-way. Even if partially concealed behind a fence, it would be readily visible along the length of Longfellow to the east, and would further the disruption of the traditional street grid that began with the construction of the expressway.

### Fence

- As noted above, staff opinion has previously been provided that a front fence should generally be located at the plane of the building’s front façade, consistent with the *Fence and Hedge Guidelines*. Open, unfenced front lawns are characteristic of Boston-Edison; therefore, a fence at or near the sidewalk would not be compatible with its environment (Standard #9).



Example of open front yards on Longfellow in the vicinity of the subject property. Google Maps photo.

- Historic fences located at or near the sidewalk are occasionally found in Boston-Edison on corner lots, but the subject property is no longer a corner lot, especially as the previously approved design for the new house establishes a frontage principal frontage along Hamilton Avenue.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

### Section 21-2-78: Determinations of Historic District Commission

Staff concludes that the proposed structure does not meet the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the following reasons:

- The proposed work would introduce a structure of novel and incompatible massing, materials, and style, that does not have a historical precedent within the district, into a location where it will be readily visible from the surrounding area.
- The proposed work would place an ancillary structure in the front yard (i.e., closer to the street than the primary building), creating a situation which is not found in the district.

Staff concludes that the proposed fence does not meet the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the following reasons:

- The fence is located much further forward from the plane of the front façade than is found in other houses in Boston-Edison.

Therefore, staff recommends that the Commission issue a Denial as the proposed work fails to meet the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, in particular:

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 its environment.*