

**STAFF REPORT:** FEBRUARY 07, 2024, REGULAR MEETING

**PREPARED BY:** T. BOSCARINO

**APPLICATION NUMBER:** HDC2024-00025

**ADDRESS:** 1942 GRAND RIVER

**HISTORIC DISTRICT:** G.A.R. (GRAND ARMY [OF THE] REPUBLIC) BUILDING

**APPLICANT:** 1942 GRAND RIVER LLC

**PROPERTY OWNER:** 1942 GRAND RIVER LLC

**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION:** NOVEMBER 28, 2024

**DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT:** JANUARY 24, 2024

**SCOPE:** INSTALL WALL SIGNS AND AWNINGS



*The southwest (Grand River) façade of the Grand Army of the Republic Building. January 2024 photo by staff.*

## **EXISTING CONDITIONS**

This Richardsonian Romanesque building, built in 1899, is noteworthy for its triangular plan with prominent facades on all three sides of the building. The principal entrance faces southwest onto Grand River Avenue, consisting of a two-story, iron entryway recessed beneath an arched opening. The west and east corners of the four-story building are anchored by crenellated towers. Narrower, engaged towers, beginning above the first floor, divide each façade into three distinct masses. A pronounced belt course separates a limestone first floor from sandstone upper floors. Alterations to the building exterior are minimal.

Signs currently on the building include a relatively small business sign on the fourth floor, northwest façade, and several window decals that appear to be in the process of being removed. Staff found no record of Historic District Commission approval of the existing signs.

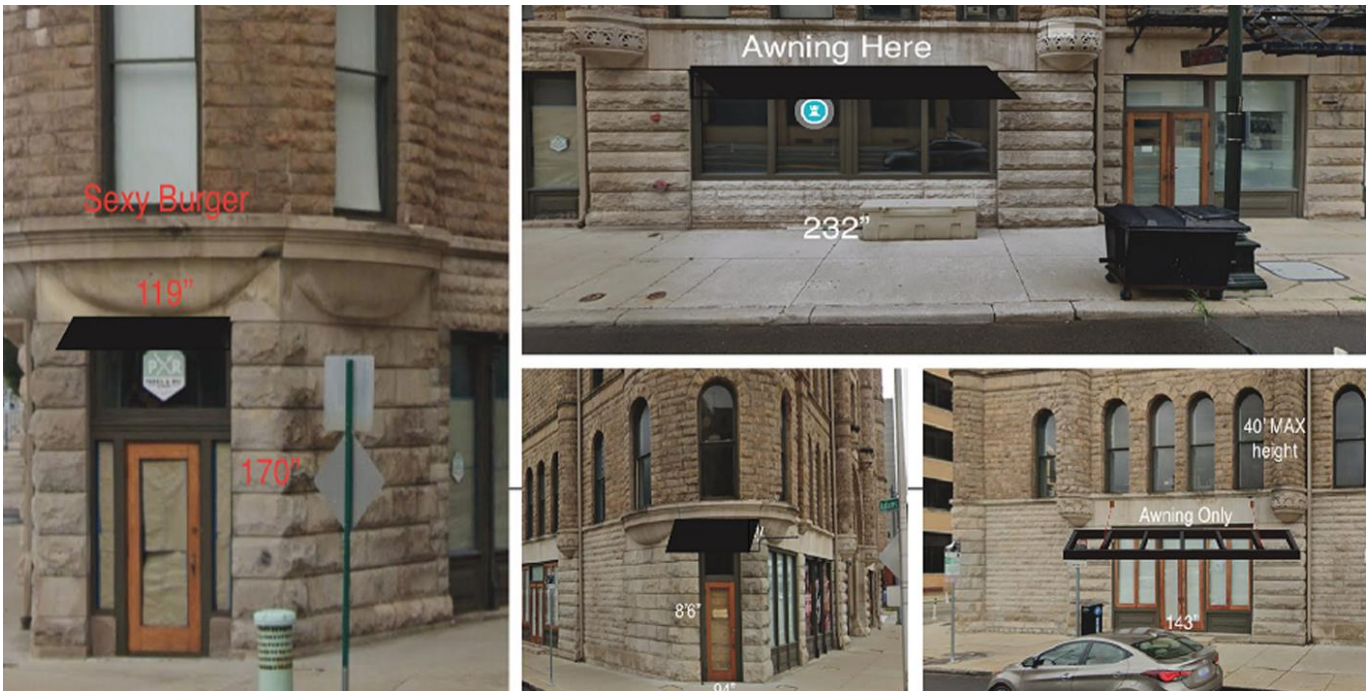
**PROPOSAL**

The applicant proposes to install three wall signs: an 18’x3.5’ sign mounted on a projecting, flat, aluminum awning within the recessed main entrance on Grand River (the southwest façade); a 10’x2’ wall sign on the Adams (northwest) façade; and a 10’x1.5” sign mounted atop the stone belt course on the east corner of the building. The signs would be LED-illuminated, acrylic-faced channel-letter signs.

Four additional awnings are proposed: 10’ wide triangular (in section) awnings are proposed for entrances at the building’s east and west corners. A 19.3’ wide triangular awning is proposed for a historic storefront location on the Cass (northeast) façade. A flat awning is proposed for a secondary entrance on the Adams (northwest) façade. The exact placement and installation of these awnings is unclear from the application materials (See “Issues,” below).



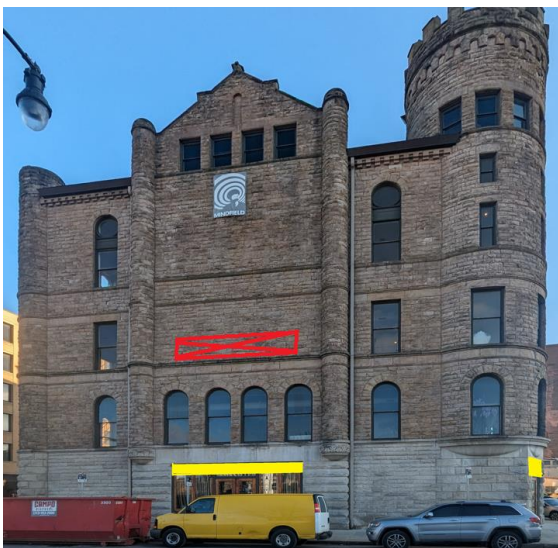
Proposed signs, left to right: 18’x3.5’ sign on Grand River (southwest) façade; 10’x2’ sign on Adams (northwest) façade; 10’x1.5’ sign at east corner entrance. Note that the Grand River sign projects forward on an aluminum awning.



Four additional proposed awnings, clockwise from left: east corner entrance, Cass (northeast) façade, Adams (northwest) façade, west corner entrance. Image from application documents.



*Approximate location of Grand River (southwest) façade and east corner signs (red) and awnings (yellow). Sketch by staff.*



*Approximate location of Adams (northwest) façade and west corner signs (red) and awnings (yellow). Sketch by staff.*



*Approximate location of Cass (northeast) façade awning (yellow). Sketch by staff.*

## STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The G.A.R (Grand Army Republic) Building Historic District was established by the City Council in 2001. (The eponymous organization was the Grand Army *of the* Republic, the lack of the words “of the” as the district is named in the City Code appears to be an error.) The Historic Designation Advisory Board Final Report states the period of significance is from 1899 to 1973. The Elements of Design emphasize the importance of the building’s stone details and overall form but do not provide specific guidance on signs and awnings.
- Historical photos of the G.A.R. Building show that signs were generally small in scale during the period of significance. Compatible new signs would have a similar character.



*Left: Circa 1900 photo. Right: Undated photo, but likely within the period of significance (Detroit Historical Society). Both show signs that are small in scale and set within (rather than overlapping) iron mullions within the primary entrance.*

- Signs and awnings were historically uncommon on Richardsonian Romanesque buildings.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that new signs and awnings should be subdued in nature to avoid distracting from the architectural character of the building.
- A lack of dimensioned drawings make it unclear if the proposed Grand River (southwest façade) sign will be wider than the opening to which it is affixed. The renderings provided (see page 2, above) make it appear that the lettering will overlap the decorative stone surround.
- The proposed Adams (northwest) and east corner entrance signs are consistent with the *Sign and Awning Guidelines* and placed in a location that does not cover, distract from, or damage architectural features).
- Guidance for awnings is provided by *Preservation Briefs 44: The Use of Awnings on Historic Buildings* (National Park Service, 2005). A paragraph on adding new awnings to historic buildings reads:

On both commercial and residential buildings, awnings were only wide enough to cover the

window openings that they sheltered; a single awning rarely covered two or more bays. On storefronts, they were not higher up on the building facade than was necessary to shade the entrance and display window. Thus, it is important when installing new awnings on historic buildings to ensure that the covering not obscure the building's distinctive architectural features. Also, new awning hardware should not be installed in a way that damages historic materials.

## ISSUES

- The primary (southwest-facing, Grand River) entrance to the building is, in staff opinion, extremely important to the building's character. Adding a projecting, flat awning adds an overwhelming horizontal emphasis that is out of place in an opening that is otherwise defined by its vertical character. Further, the historic character of the opening is recessed, while the proposed awning and sign would project forward (the degree of projection is not known as a section drawing is not provided in the application materials). Finally, the size of the proposed sign is too large in that it would overlap iron muntins within the opening and stone details surrounding the opening. Together, these issues result in an "alteration ... of spaces that characterize a property," contrary to Standard #2 of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.<sup>2</sup>
- The application does not provide enough information to evaluate the appropriateness of the four proposed awnings (staff has requested additional information). The renderings suggest that the awnings may overlap onto the surrounding stone façade. It is also not clear how the awnings are to be mounted. Obscuring any part of the stonework surrounding the openings would be contrary to Standard #2 and the guidance of *Preservation Brief 44* as quoted above. Damaging any part of the stonework, such as by fastening to stone, rather than mortar joints, would be contrary to Standard #9: "exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property."<sup>3</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION

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

Staff recommends that the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for the proposed work as it meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, subject to the following conditions:

- The proposed sign on the Grand River façade will be reduced in area, the proposed awning on the Grand River façade will be reduced in depth or eliminated altogether; these will be placed to avoid obscuring any architectural details, subject to review by staff.
- The awnings will be set entirely within the existing door and window openings, rather than overlap onto the building's stone façade, subject to review by staff.

---

<sup>1</sup> See W. Hawkins Ferry, *The Buildings of Detroit: A History*, pages 147–166.

<sup>2</sup> "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."

<sup>3</sup> "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."