

ADDRESS: 2900 ST. ANTOINE

APPLICATION NO: HDC2025-00004

HISTORIC DISTRICT: BREWSTER WHEELER RECREATION CENTER

APPLICANT: DON TILIKI/MHT CONSTRUCTION

OWNER: THE SANCTUARY AT BREWSTER LDHA, LLC

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 1/28/2025

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 1/21/2025

SCOPE: CONSTRUCT PARKING LOT AND ASSOCIATED LANDSCAPE

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The historic district boundaries include the Brewster Wheeler Recreational Center building, a concrete parking lot, located east of the building, and expansive open lawn areas to the north and west of the building. The vacated Brewster Street, which now functions as a parking area, forms the district's southern boundary while Wilkins Street serves as the district's north boundary. The building was constructed in two phases to include the original Ginsburg Branch Public Library wing, which was built in 1917, and a 1929 addition which was erected when the building's use was converted from a library to a community/recreation center. Specifically, per the Detroit Historic District Advisory Board:

1917 (Ginsburg Branch, Public Library) Wing

The original 1917 library is a one-story frame building with a brick veneer. The building has a rectangular footprint and sits on a raised concrete foundation. Originally green Ludowici tile, the hipped roof is now covered with asphalt shingles. The building's front facade consists of five bays, five bays on the rear, and is two bays deep. The formal entrance is centered on the facade on the southeast elevation of the building. This entrance projects from the building and is framed with stone pilasters and is topped with a stone elliptical hood. A denticulated cornice runs along the hood and along the sides of the entrance. The hood also includes cornice returns. The porch cornice is also denticulate. A secondary entrance is located on the rear of the building. An exterior chimney is on the rear (northwest) of the building and projects slightly past the roofline.

Exterior brickwork consists of the English Cross Bond- alternating courses of headers and stretchers with the stretchers moved over half a length of brick so they do not line up vertically-on all elevations. A stone water table is present between the basement and first story. All windows in the building have been completely filled in the brick. When built, the original window openings included one large one-over-one sash and a smaller sash to either side. The arched window above consisted of a two-part fanlight. Narrow window openings to each side of the entrance were originally four-over-four light sashes. All window openings are framed with a border of decorative brick with the narrow windows having flat stone arches. An original skylight on top of the roof has been completely enclosed.

1929 Addition

To the northeast of the 1917 library branch building is a two-story, steel frame brick veneer addition. Completed in 1929, the building exhibits elements of the Art Deco and Jacobethan styles with cast stone and trim details. The structure sits on a raised concrete foundation, has a stone water table, and a flat roof with stone coping. The building's front and rear elevations are ten bays wide and are asymmetrical. The northeast elevation is symmetrical and is five bays deep. Brick pilasters frame all window openings and the primary entrance. These pilasters are capped by decorative stonework which extends beyond the roofline. The northeast half of the building is approximately a half-story higher than the rest and has larger window openings. An interior chimney pierces the roof on the rear (northwest) of the building and is capped with stone.

The primary entrance is off-center on the facade on the southwest elevation of the addition. The doors have been completely removed but a decorative carved stone surround remains. This surround includes rondeau, rosettes, and an egg and dart pattern under the door entablature. The tone cornice projects slightly over the doorway above which is a stone panel inscribed "CENTRAL COMMUNITY CENTER." Directly above this is a carved wood panel reading "WHEELER." The entablature above this entrance includes a denticulate cornice and a large centered circular stone. A secondary entrance, which has been completely enclosed, is centered on the facade

and has a simple stone surround. Another secondary entrance is located on the rear of the building and is accessible by a metal fire escape.

Exterior brickwork consists of the American bond- three to nine courses of stretchers to each course of headers- on all elevations. Above the windows on the northeast and northwest elevations brick string courses run in a soldier bond. A stone string course separates the second story windows from the entablature on the facade. Symmetrically placed circular stones also appear along the entablature. All window openings have cast stone sills and brick lintels.

PROPOSAL

Per the current submission, the applicant is seeking a Certificate of Appropriateness to add new hardscape and landscape within the recently clarified boundaries of the district to include the following scope items:

- Construct a new paved/concrete parking lot to the west of the building. The parking lot will include landscaped islands, new shade trees at the southern edge and a masonry dumpster enclosure (final details/elevation drawings not available)
- To the north of the parking lot/west of the building, establish a park area, to include the erection of an open pavilion (final details/elevation drawings not available) and the addition of new shade trees
- Add new pavement within the roadbed of the vacated Brewster Street

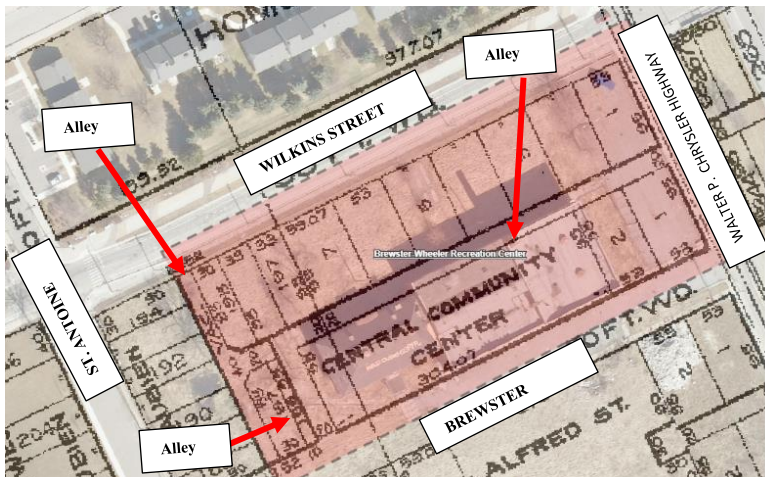
STAFF OBSERVATIONS RESEARCH

- The Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center Historic District was established in 2014
- The applicant is seeking to undertake the proposed project in support of a wider development project, known as The Sanctuary, Phases I-IV, which includes the rehabilitation of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center itself in addition to the erection of three new multi-family buildings directly adjacent to, but outside of the district boundaries. The Commission approved an application for the rehabilitation of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center at their March 2024 regular meeting.
- In April 2023, HDC staff noted that the district's boundaries were outlined in Section 21-2-229 of the Detroit City Code as such:

On the east, the center line of the southbound service drive of the Walter P. Chrysler Freeway; on the south, the center line of Brewster Street, as extended; on the west, the center line of the alley, as extended, running east-west between Wilkins Street and Brewster Street; and on the north, the center line of Wilkins Street.

The above text highlighted in red describes the district's **west boundary line** as running east/west between **Wilkins and Brewster Streets**. See the below map, provided to HDC staff by the City of Detroit Legislative Policy Division (LPD), to note the following:

- Logically, the west boundary line should run north-south, not east-west as outlined in the above description
- The map indicates that the west boundary is the westernmost alley between St. Antoine and the Chrysler Highway, running north-south between Wilkins and Brewster Streets



GIS map of district. Source, Legislative Policy Division

HDC staff noted this error in the code language and reached out LPD staff to request that they confirm the location of the district’s west boundary line and inquire about the process for correcting the language.

In response to HDC staff’s inquiry, in 2023 LPD staff submitted a resolution to City Council to clarify the location of the district’s west boundary. In October 2024, the Detroit Building Department forwarded a permit set of drawings associated with new development to HDC staff for review. When staff consulted the City code to note if the district boundaries had been corrected so that they might determine if any portion of the development/new construction fell within the boundaries, they noted that west boundary was still incorrectly described. HDC staff therefore reached out to LPD/HDAB staff a second time for clarification. LPD/HDAB staff noted that would submit a new ordinance to City Council to clearly state that the district’s west boundary is the westernmost alley between St. Antoine Street and the Chrysler Highway, running north-south between Wilkins and Brewster Streets, as indicated on the above LPD map. HDC Staff therefore determined that the new parking lot associated with the development project extends into the district’s boundaries and forwarded the scope item to the Commission for review.

- As previously noted, the original portion of the building was erected in 1917 as the Ginsburg Library to serve the nearby Jewish community (see the below photos). 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



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

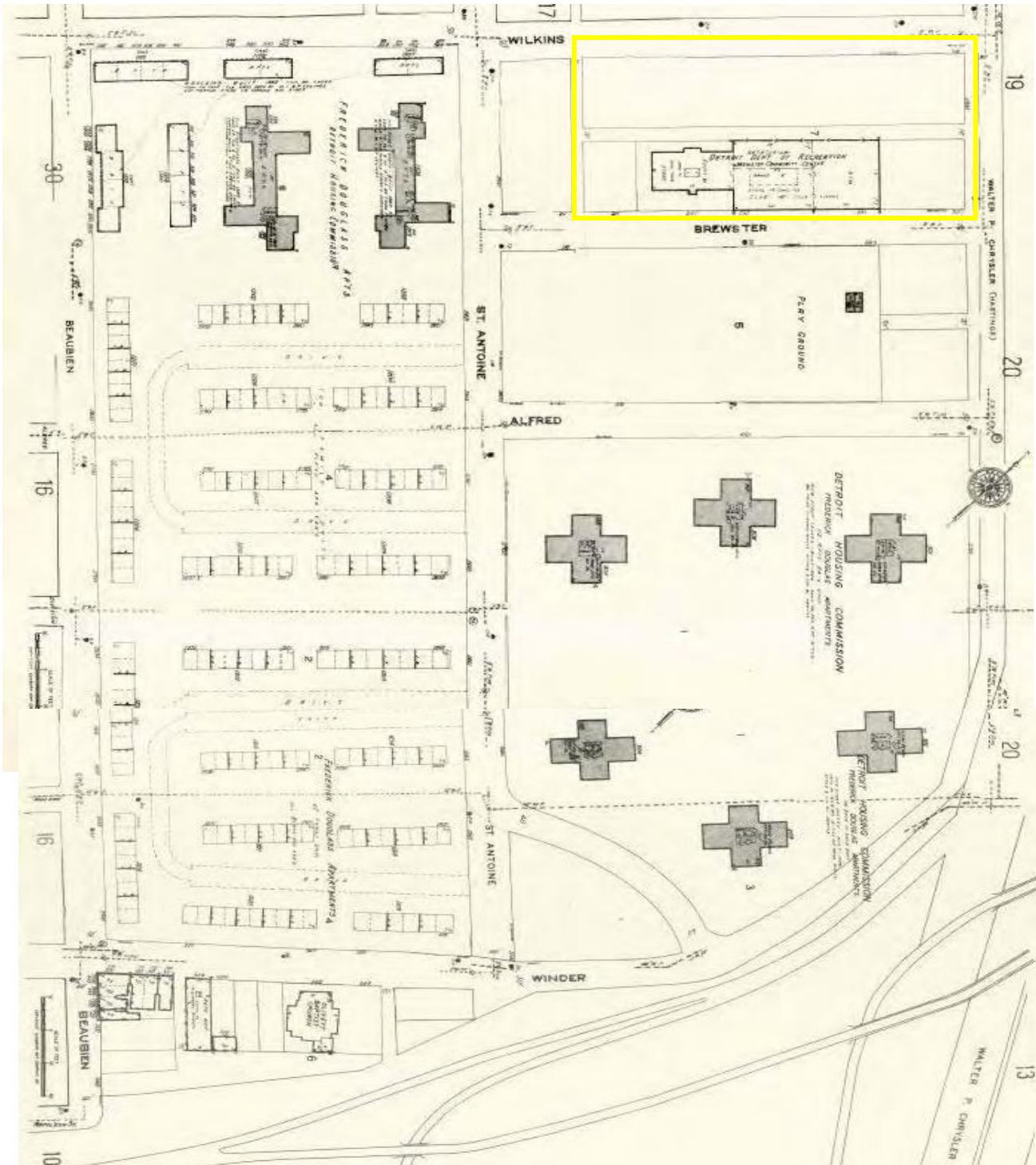
boundaries of the current historic district in 1921 had been replaced by a number of small, wood-frame, detached single-family houses by 1950, as part of substantial urban renewal projects which transformed the area. The recreation center was closed and vacated in 2006. By 2014, all of the structures which had been erected in the early 20th century within the Brewster Douglass neighborhood had been demolished.



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



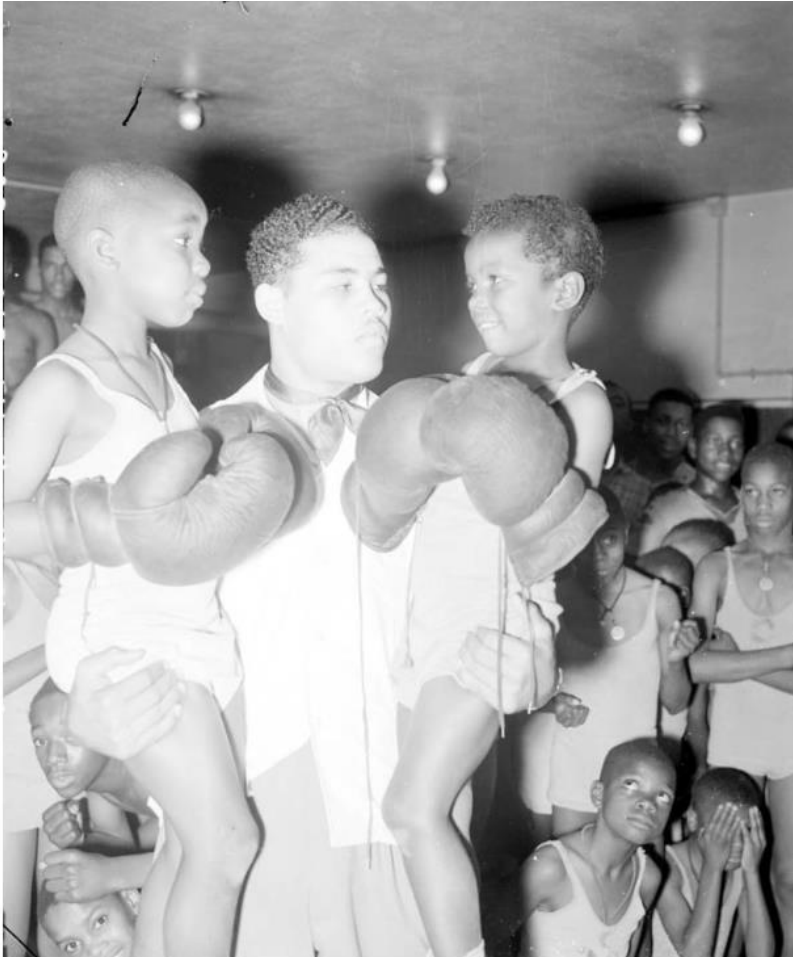
Brewster-Douglass neighborhood. West end of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center outlined in orange. Aerial photo taken in 1955



Brewster-Douglass neighborhood. Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center historic district boundaries outlined in yellow. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1977

- The HDAB designation report for the district does not provide a Statement of Significance or define a Period of Significance for the property. HDC staff therefore recommends 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.

- Staff therefore recommends that the building'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.
- A review of the above Sanborn Maps and historic photos indicates that the area within the district boundaries which is proposed for the location of the new parking lot was a dense, mixed-use neighborhood in the early 20th century/during the initial decades of the district's Period of Significance. However, by 1955/the end of the district's Period of Significance, 2900 St. Antoine/the area within the district's boundaries appeared much as it does today to include the recreation center building and open space. It is staff's opinion that the current project's proposal to construct a parking lot and establish a park area to the west of the building is keeping with the district's appearance during the latter period of its Period of Significance through the current time.
- The Elements of Design which best relate to the current project include the following:

- (13) *Relationship of significant landscape features and surface treatments.* The open space is not generally landscaped, although concrete sidewalks extend around the building as well as around the perimeter of the site; wood light poles and athletic fixtures also exist although the latter are in disrepair.
- (14) *Relationship of open space to structures.* The building is surrounded on all sides by open space.
- (18) *Relationship of lot coverage.* The building occupies approximately one-third of its lot, with a paved parking area to the east of the building, and a grassy lawn with several mature trees to the north of the building.
- (22) *General environmental character.* The district consists of one building, formerly associated with the Brewster and Frederick Douglass Apartments. Due to the demolition of these buildings, the district is now surrounded by vast open space, especially to the south and east. To the east is the Walter P. Chrysler Freeway, and to the north is multi-family housing. As Wilkins Street is one of the few streets that cross the freeway in the area, the district is visible to through traffic.

It is staff’s opinion that the scope items for which the applicant is seeking are in keeping with the above-listed Elements of Design as they will not disrupt the sense of open space which characterizes the district.

- As noted above, the current application does not include elevation drawings of the proposed new dumpster enclosure and picnic pavilion. Staff recommends that the final details for these elements be submitted to HDC staff prior to their erection.

ISSUES

- None

ADVISORY REVIEW

Per Detroit City Code, Sec. 21-2-5, Effects of Projects on Districts, the Commission is required to provide advisory comment to the Mayor and City Council as to the “demonstrable effects” of any “City-financed, licensed, permitted, authorized or contracted physical development” within or adjacent to an historic district. To reiterate, the current project proposes to construct a new parking lot within the district boundaries and the erection of four new buildings outside of/directly adjacent to the district. As project will be funded HOME funds, allocated by the City of Detroit, the work shall be defined as a City authorized physical development project in and adjacent to a local historic district and is therefore subject to HDC comment regarding any effects it might have on the district. **Please note that this comment is distinct from the permit review decision based on Section 21-2-73, above.**

Conditions under which adverse effects generally occur, as suggested by City Code Section 21-2-5:

- Destruction or alteration of all or part of a resource
- Isolation from or alteration of all or part of a resource
- Introduction of visual, audible or atmospheric elements that are out of character with the resource and its setting
- Transfer or sale of a City-owned resource without adequate conditions or restrictions regarding preservation, maintenance, or use; and
- Neglect of a resource resulting in its deterioration or destruction

As noted above, the applicant is seeking to undertake the project in support of a wider development project, known as The Sanctuary, Phases I-IV, which includes the rehabilitation of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center itself in addition to the erection of three new multi-family buildings directly adjacent to, but outside of the district boundaries. As this development project is receiving

City of Detroit support through the allocation of local HOME funds and the project will be undertaken both within and adjacent to the district boundaries, the City of Detroit Housing Revitalization Department (HRD) is seeking the HDC's advisory comment regarding any effects that the project might have on the district per Detroit City Code, Section 21-2-5, *Effects of Projects on Districts*. Per the documentation

submitted by HRD, the portion of the development project which will be erected outside of the district boundaries will include the following:

- Phase I, to be erected to the west of the district, will build a 4-story, mixed used building which will include a community space on the first floor and residential on floors 2-4. The building will house 52 apartments. Exterior walls will be clad with brick and aluminum panels and windows will be fixed composite units.
- Phases II and III, to be built to the south of the district, will each build a 4-story, mixed used building which will include a community space on the first floor and residential on floors 2-4. The building will house 52 apartments. Exterior walls will be clad with brick and aluminum panels and windows will be fixed composite units.
- Phase IV, to be built to the southeast of the district, will build a 4-story, mixed use building which will include commercial spaces at the first floor and residential on floors 2-4. Exterior walls will be clad with brick and aluminum panels and windows will be fixed composite units. The area will include parking lots and open lawn areas.

It is staff's opinion that the project will not adversely affect the district as it will result in the rehabilitation of the historic building and the maintenance of the open space within the district boundaries. The project will also contribute to the restoration of the density which characterized the area directly outside of the district boundaries.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

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

Recommendation 1 of 1, Certificate of Appropriateness: Construct a parking lot, install new landscape and hardscape, establish a park

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 Historic District's Elements of Design, with the condition that:

- HDC staff shall be afforded the opportunity to review and approve the final details for the dumpster enclosure and pavilion prior to their erection

Sec. 21-2-5, Effects of Projects on Districts

Recommendation 1 of 1: Establish a new multiple-building development with associated parking lots and landscaping

Staff recommends that the project will have no effect on the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center Historic District