

**STAFF REPORT: 09-10-25 REGULAR MEETING**

**APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2025-00433**

**ADDRESS: 467 W. ALEXANDRINE**

**HISTORIC DISTRICT: WILLIS-SELDEN**

**APPLICANT/PROPERTY OWNER: ILMARA, INC./MOHAMMAD SADIQUALLY**

**ARCHITECT: HADLA DESIGN ARCHITECTS**

**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 08-18-2025**

**DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 08-28-2025**

**PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG**

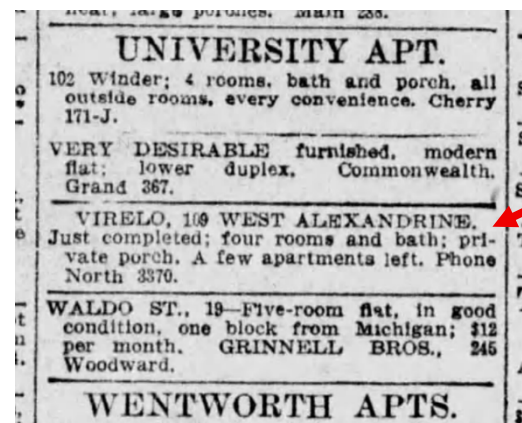
**SCOPE: ALTER AND REHABILITATE EXISTING FOUR-STORY APARTMENT BUILDING FOR MIXED USE**



*View of 467 West Alexandrine, to the southeast. Staff photo, August 28, 2025. May 1, 1915 Detroit Free Press ad below.*

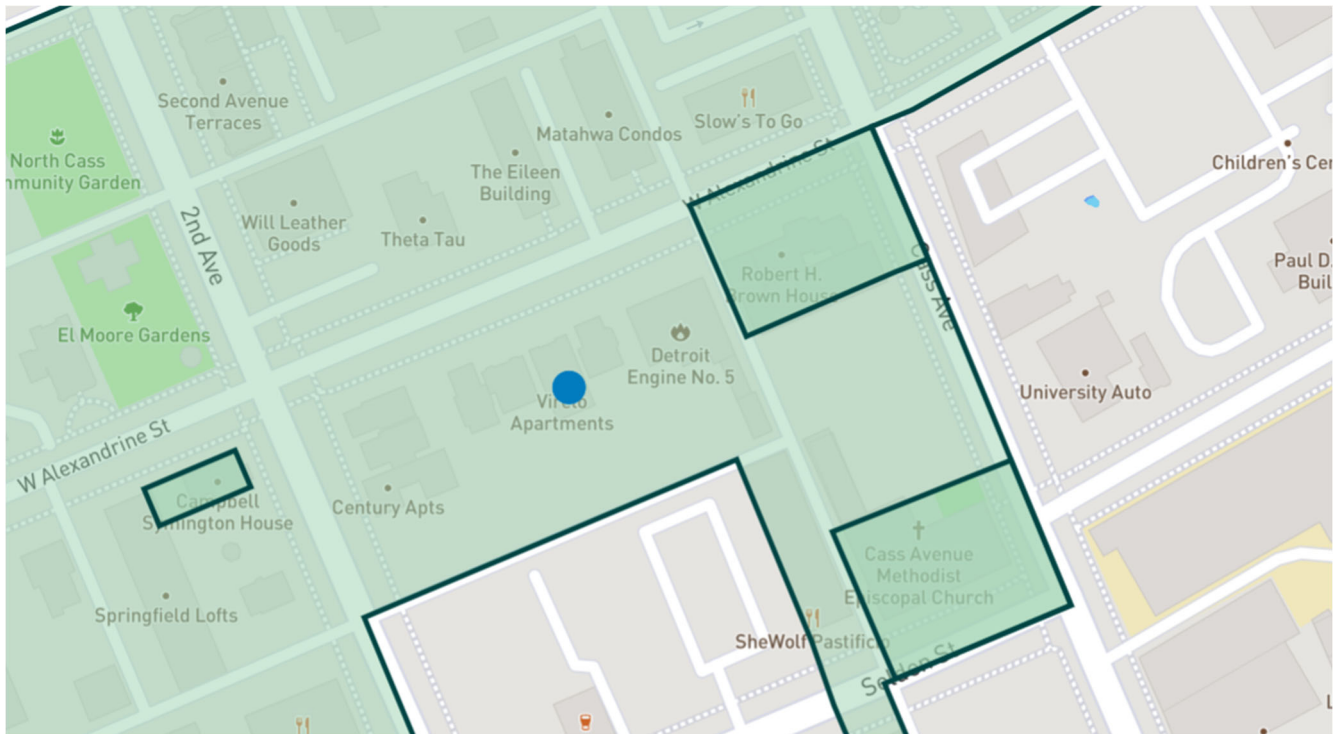
## EXISTING CONDITIONS

The subject property is a midblock parcel located on the south side of West Alexandrine Street, between Cass and Second Streets. Completed in 1915, the Virelo Apartment Building stands four stories tall including the basement level, is finished in brown brick at the front façade and features terra cotta and stone ornament. Also important are the jigsawed wood enclosures of the front-facing balconies, four (one is now missing) of which survive after work in violation replaced the two lower level examples. Aside from the front door, openings in all highly visible parts of the building were replaced with vinyl or other windows prior to district designation. The building is specifically identified as a contributing building to the Willis-Selden Historic District in the Historic Designation Advisory Board (HDAB) Report



The block context is varied, with some larger buildings, vacant lots, parking lots, and some existing 19<sup>th</sup> century

mansions adapted to commercial use. This typological and formal mix is characteristic of the Willis-Selden Historic District.



*View of 467 West Alexandrine, rear quarter view looking back towards street. Note advanced deterioration of common brick in this area. Staff photo, August 28, 2025.*



*View of 467 West Alexandrine, to the east, showing west-facing side. Note wooden windows/doors on right side (towards building rear). The ornamental face brick (brown) at front of building, wrapping around, is just visible in upper left of photo, distinguishing it from the common brick at this utilitarian side. Staff photo, August 28, 2025.*



*View of 467 West Alexandrine, current view of front façade. Staff photo, August 28, 2025.*



*View of 467 West Alexandrine, to the southeast Staff photo, August 28, 2025.*



*View of 467 West Alexandrine, to the southeast Staff photo, August 28, 2025.*



Subject site outlined in yellow. North is up. Detroit Parcel Viewer.



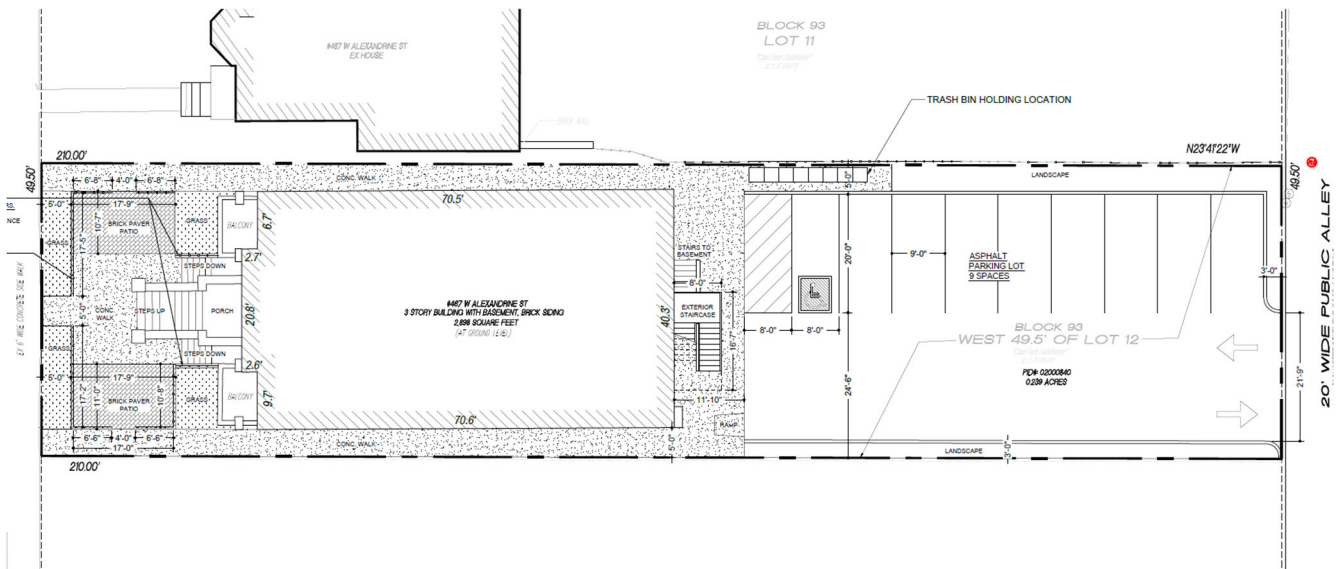
467 West Alexandrine and vicinity, 1950 (Sanborn Map). Note the mix of uses, as nineteenth-century houses were replaced with apartment and other commercial buildings.

## PROPOSAL

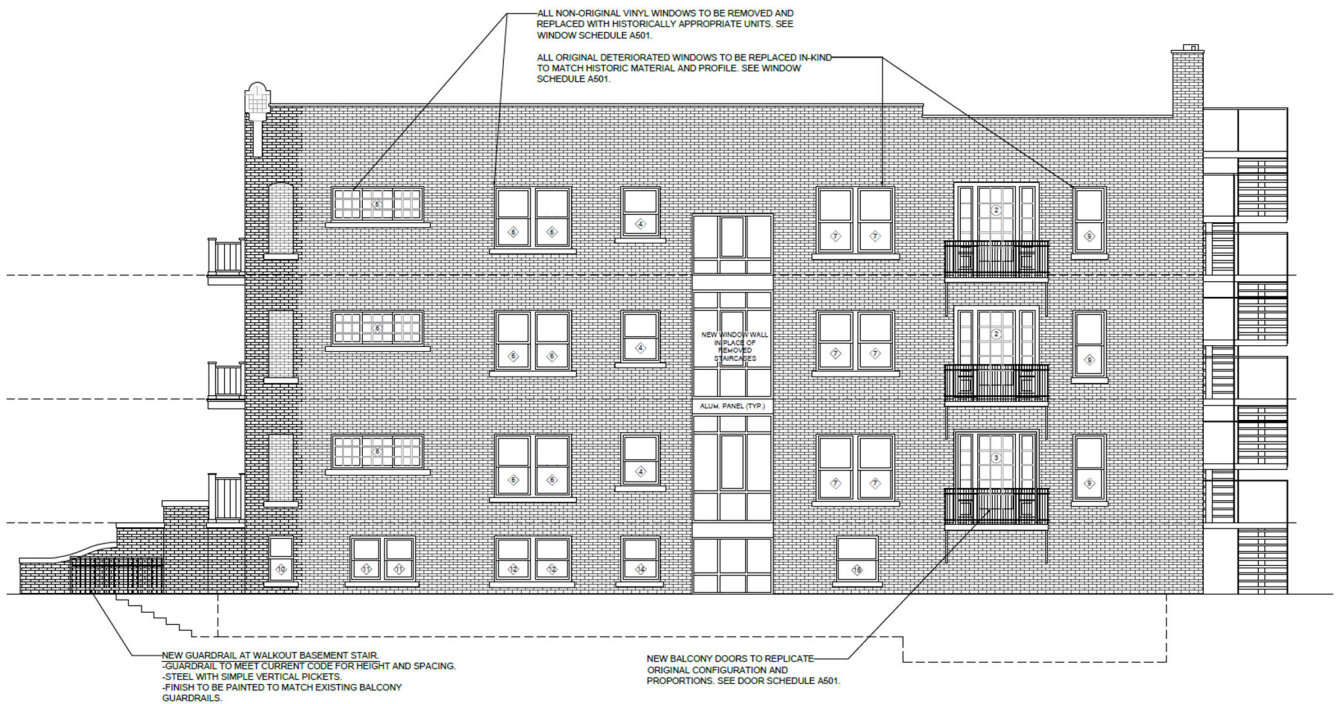
The applicant proposes the rehabilitation of an existing vacant apartment building to create 13 residential apartments and two commercial ease spaces at grade. Per the submitted drawings, documents, and scope of work, exterior scope includes the replacement of all existing windows, alterations to the front of the building's grade/basement level to accommodate commercial use (including guardrails), and alterations to the site at the front for commercial use, and at the rear for parking.



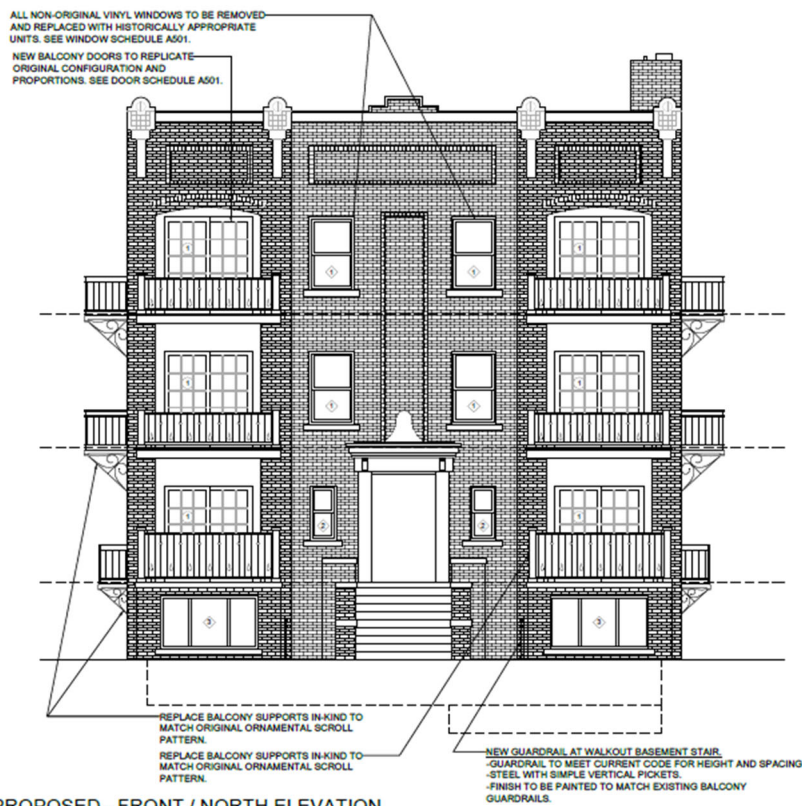
From applicant's submission: Looking northwest, primary elevations along Edmund Place/Brush Street. Note 291 Edmund Place at left.



From applicant's submission: Site plan



PROPOSED - SIDE / WEST ELEVATION



PROPOSED - FRONT / NORTH ELEVATION

1D

From applicant's submission: Front and side elevations

## STAFF OBSERVATIONS

- The Willis-Selden Historic District was established in 2011.
- Overall, the project seeks to rehabilitate and return to service a building which has suffered inattention and neglect for years, and has also been the subject of some inappropriate alteration prior to purchase by the current owner (i.e., violations). The developer team, including the architect, have met with HDC staff, PDD staff, and other city departments on several occasions as their design developed.

### MID-BUILDING STAIRWELL VOIDS

- A substantial alteration of the building is the infilling of the current mid-building egress stairwells on both sides. While the voids or indents themselves are original to the building, the wooden stair structure within them is not and appears to be several decades old. The revised interior layout of the building handles egress through the front and rear only; removing this feature will allow the creation of additional interior space necessary for the proposed apartments.



*Detail view of west side stairwell void. Staff assesses that the preservation of this opening (and the matching one on the opposite side) is not critical to the building's historic character under the Standards. Staff photo, August 28, 2025.*

- The question for staff, and then for the Commission, is the assessment of these mid-building stairwell voids as “distinctive” or “significant” historic features of the building. Recall that a feature being found “original” or of historic age does not necessarily compel its preservation; it must in fact be important to the building’s historic character and/or distinctively character-defining, per Standards 2, 5 and 6. Though such voids are a common *marker* of a pre-war apartment building, staff assesses that they are not *distinctively character-defining* in the manner anticipated by the Standards and NPS Guidelines for features that are *most important* to a building’s historic appearance. The voids are utilitarian elements in a side elevation composed of common brick that was originally hidden from public view, despite its greater visibility today. It is in the spirit of the 36 CFR 67 tax-credit Secretary of the Interior’s Standards used by this Commission to accept some substantial alterations when the cumulative effect of a rehabilitation preserves overall historic character ([link provided](#)), emphasis added by staff.

*The amount of change to features and spaces that can be accommodated within the Standards will vary according to the roles they play in establishing the character of the property. The*

*Standards use language such as “distinctive feature” and “spaces that characterize a property,” suggesting that all features and spaces do not carry equal weight in determining the character of an historic property. This does not mean that features and spaces fit into absolute categories of either “character-defining” or not. Rather, the components of a property can be seen as falling into a continuum of importance.*

*The more important a feature or space is to the historic character of a property, the less it can be changed without damaging the character as a whole. On the other hand, aspects less critical to the historic character may be altered more substantially with less effect on the character of the building as a whole. However, even when the features being changed are minor, changes that are too numerous or radical can in some instances alter the overall character of the building.*

- Moreover, the architect’s choice of a glass window-wall system to “close off” these mid-building stairwell voids is conceptually useful even if some (less than distinctive) historic character was found to be lost, as the infill wall’s transparent nature, and obvious modern expression, continue to “tell the story” of the historic building, and allow the alteration to be “read” by laypeople. Staff’s assessment would be different if this was a primary façade and the stairwells were ornamented, used high quality brick, or were somehow more spatially and distinctively critical to the building’s historic character and architectural design.

## WINDOWS

- A second major scope item is the replacement of the building’s windows, which are at present a motley collection of ill-fitting and poorly chosen vinyl and other assorted units, with a few remaining original wood installations. All or most of the existing windows predate the establishment of the historic district.
- The architect proposes a universal replacement of the existing windows with fiberglass double-hung-style units. In discussions with the developer and architect team, historic staff noted that the sliding door operating style proposed for the individual unit balcony entries at the front facade were not found (or even possible) in historic precedents and would be incompatible (particularly at this highly visible location). The proposed sliding product, while a different material, is very similar in character to the currently installed incompatible vinyl sliding doors. Given that the original window/door installations are no longer present, [National Park Service guidance for replacement windows](#)/doors prevails; that is, the new installation does not have to be a reproduction of a lost prototype, but must minimally be *compatible*. It is worthwhile to quote this section in its entirety, emphasis added by staff:

*Replacement windows for missing or non-historic windows must be compatible with the historic appearance and character of the building. Although replacement windows may be based on physical or pictorial documentation, if available, recreation of the missing historic windows is not required to meet the Standards. Replacement of missing or non-historic windows must, however, always fill the original window openings and must be compatible with the overall historic character of the building. The general type of window – industrial steel, wood double-hung, etc. – that is appropriate can usually be determined from the proportions of the openings, and the period and historic function of the building. The appearance of the replacement windows must be consistent with the general characteristics of a historic window of the type and period, but need not replicate the missing historic window. In many cases, this may be accomplished using substitute materials. There may be some additional flexibility with regard to the details of windows on secondary elevations that are not highly visible, consistent with the approach outlined for replacing existing historic windows. Replacing existing incompatible, non-historic windows with similarly incompatible new windows does not meet the Standards.*

- There is some flexibility for these front-balcony sliding door replacements that are consistent with a finding of “compatibility.” For instance, either a single in-swing door design (with sidelights) or a double-door “French”-style door design would be compatible; similar installations are found on dozens

of historic apartment buildings in Detroit. However, staff notes that a likely candidate for the original configuration already exists on the building, that being the wooden swing door and sidelite entrances found still extant on the side elevation, per the image below. Designing a new balcony entrance system on such a precedent would also be an appropriate approach, but many variants could be compatible.



*Detail view of west side “balcony” historic-age entrance system, a single 15-lite in-swing door flanked by 3-lite sidelites. Staff photo. These units are proposed for replacement by the applicant. August 28, 2025.*

- The architect has objected to in-swing doors as they would interfere with limited interior space. The Commission is required to prioritize the preservation of exterior features and historic character.
- There are some remaining wooden doors and windows clearly dating to the Period of Significance, all at mostly hidden/back-of-house locations. The front door of the building is proposed to be restored, which is appropriate. The other remaining wood windows proposed for replacement are either at the rear/side or basement levels, none at the primary façade or near the highly visible areas of the building. Given the thoroughly weathered conditions of these windows, and importantly in the overall context of the rehabilitation under cumulative effect, staff assesses that the retention of these marginally restorable wooden windows is somewhat less important in the continuum of importance for historic features in the context of the overall historic rehabilitation that will return this building to a modern and continued use.
- However, staff assesses that the “balcony” window/door systems, as pictured above, are both character-defining and not beyond reasonable repair, and should therefore be retained.

#### FRONT BALCONY ENCLOSURES

- A particularly notable and distinctive historic feature of the building is the jigsawn wooden balustrade railing enclosing four of the six front-façade balconies. A previous owner was cited for a violation for altering the two lowest balconies, by discarding the original elements in these locations and reproducing them in a taller version. This work was stopped by a Stop Work order and the building was ultimately sold to the current owners.
- The drawings are unclear on the approach to the four (4) remaining historic wooden balustrades. These should be preserved, repaired, and retained. If necessary/desirable, a less noticeable “booster rail” to extend the fall protection of the lower railings can be added behind the historic rail to maintain both the

original character-defining height and provide modern, code-compliant protection. Such booster rails are staff approvable elements.



*Note the consistent height of all the balcony enclosures, including those at the lowest level (yellow arrows), shown here in August 2009 per Google Street View. 477 West Alexandrine, the shorter apartment building to the west, is still extant in this view, showing the reduced visibility of the west-facing side of the building.*

- The two lowest balcony enclosures, per the front elevation on the drawings excerpted above, appears to accept the height created in violation and retain it. This is not appropriate. The original historically correct lower height and expression must be recreated, in wood, with a booster rail if necessary/desirable hidden behind it.

#### OTHER ITEMS

- Along with the wood window/door systems still extant on the side, ornamental wrought-iron or steel brackets are still extant supporting the steel platforms projecting out at these locations. Staff is not satisfied that the applicant has demonstrated that the brackets themselves are beyond repair. While the applicant proposes to reproduce the brackets, staff recommends that the originals be cleaned, refinished and refitted for use.
- PDD Design Review staff, along with BSEED reviewers, have informed the developer that a trash enclosure would almost certainly be required for the redeveloped property. There is no trash enclosure depicted in the drawings, which instead suggest that “curb side bins” might be permissible. Staff expects that this omission, and possibly other city parking requirements, unrelated to the Commission’s historic review may compel the construction of a brick trash enclosure convenient to the alley, and also trigger other parking lot design changes. We note that a recent application in another historic district had to return to the Commission for belated approval of a trash enclosure, which required the noticing of another Public Hearing under Section 21-2-77. Staff recommends the addition of a condition allowing the construction of a trash enclosure, location and design subject to staff approval, should such a structure be required by other departmental reviewers. This would forestall the need to return to the Commission for a second Public Hearing.
- A final substantial scope of work item is the alteration/introduction of new elements at the front of the building to accommodate the two proposed commercial units. Staff assesses that such alterations are

compatible with the commercial nature of the block and do not impact important historic character.

- Staff has no issues with the new egress stair proposed for the rear.
- Staff has no additional issues with the proposed parking lot at the rear, which directly supports the rehabilitation of the historic apartment building, a typical qualifying criterion used by staff to recommend for the appropriateness of surface parking lots, as part of a cumulative effect that returns a historic building to service. As discussed above, minor changes to the layout of the parking lot may be necessary in the final design.

## ISSUES

- Sliding doors at the front-facing balcony/unit locations are incompatible with a pre-war building, which would have incorporated either a single-swing door flanked with sidelites, or a double set of “French” doors at these locations. It is possible that the original design was similar to the historic wood entries surviving on the side elevation balconies (i.e., a single-swing door flanked by sidelites).
- The six (6) balcony enclosures/wooden jigsawn balustrades at the primary façade must be retained and repaired at their original historic height on all sides. The two (2) lowest level balustrades, removed and replaced in violation of the historic ordinance with incorrect height reproductions, must be removed and replaced with a lower height, historically correct reproduction, also in wood, exactly matching the original elements. Booster rails, mounted inconspicuously behind the historic elements to provide a modern code height enclosure, can be approved by staff.
- The six (6) surviving wood window/door systems at the rear sides be preserved, repaired, and retained in the rehabilitation design, as they do not appear to be beyond reasonable repair, and they provide important historic character. Additionally they may serve as a guideline for restoration of the lost front-facing balcony entrances at the primary facade.
- The ornamental steel or wrought-iron brackets supporting the steel balconies and other elements at the sides be retained, repaired, and refitted, as they do not appear to be beyond reasonable repair, and they provide important historic character.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Staff recommends that the proposal for a rehabilitation of 467 West Alexandrine should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the Willis-Selden Historic District’s Elements of Design, with the condition that:

- The individual unit entries at the front balconies/units be revised to incorporate historically compatible doors featuring either a single-swing door flanked with sidelites, or a double set of “French”-style doors at these locations, rather than the sliding doors as proposed, such revised design approvable by staff.
- The six (6) balcony enclosures/wooden jigsawn balustrades at the primary façade must be retained and repaired at their original historic height on all sides. The two (2) lowest level balustrades, removed and replaced in violation of the historic ordinance with incorrect height reproductions, must be removed and replaced with a lower height, historically correct reproduction, also in wood, exactly matching the original elements. Booster rails, mounted inconspicuously behind the historic elements to provide a modern code height enclosure, can be approved by staff.
- The six (6) surviving wood window/door systems (15-lite doors flanked by 3-lite windows, and all associated trim/elements) at the rear sides be preserved, repaired, and retained, as they do not appear to be beyond reasonable repair and they provide important historic character. Additionally they may serve as a guideline for restoration of the lost front-facing balcony entrances at the primary facade.
- The ornamental steel or wrought-iron brackets supporting the steel balconies and other elements at the sides be retained, repaired, and refitted, as they do not appear to be beyond reasonable repair and they provide important historic character.