

STAFF REPORT 11-12-2025 REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG

APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2025-00669

ADDRESS: 1 EAST JEFFERSON AVENUE (AKA SPIRIT PLAZA)

HISTORIC DISTRICTS: HISTORIC DETROIT FINANCIAL DISTRICT

APPLICANT: THERESA MCARLETON/GENERAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: JOHN DeRUITER, PLA/GENERAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT

OWNER: CITY OF DETROIT

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 10-28-2025

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISITS: 10-29-2025

SCOPE: ALTER PLAZA



View of Spirit Plaza, after the start of construction activity in late October. Visible at center is the United Way torch. Dominating the right side of the image, and the plaza itself, is Minoru Yamasaki's MichCon building, now known as One Woodward Avenue. View to the southwest (towards the river). Staff photo, October 29, 2025.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Spirit Plaza, the former Woodward Avenue right-of-way between Jefferson and Larned, is a new public space currently closed for renovation. Prior to the recent activity, the plaza was a gathering place featuring a playground, tables/outdoor furniture, a temporary stage, and space for events and food trucks.

The historic district bisects the center of the plaza along the former Woodward right-of-way centerline. The only existing element in the Plaza at present is the United Way Torch sculpture, which exists on the district boundary.

City of Detroit Parcel Viewer



View Revisions



Parcel viewer



Search by: address

Parcel ID: 01004086.000

Address: 1 E JEFFERSON AVE

PRE %

0

NEZ

Usage & classification

Property Class 201 - COMMERCIAL-IMPROVED

Property Use

-

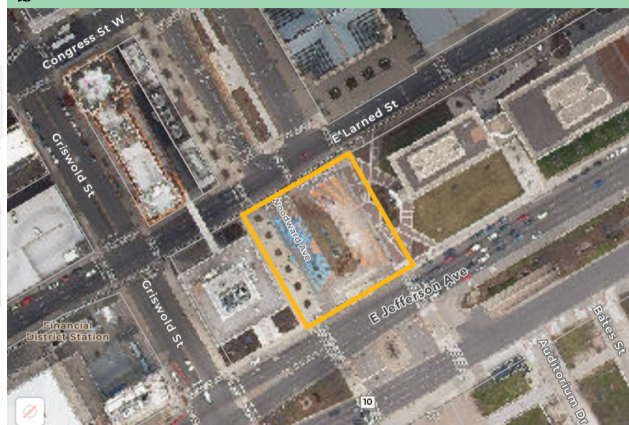
Zoning

PCA

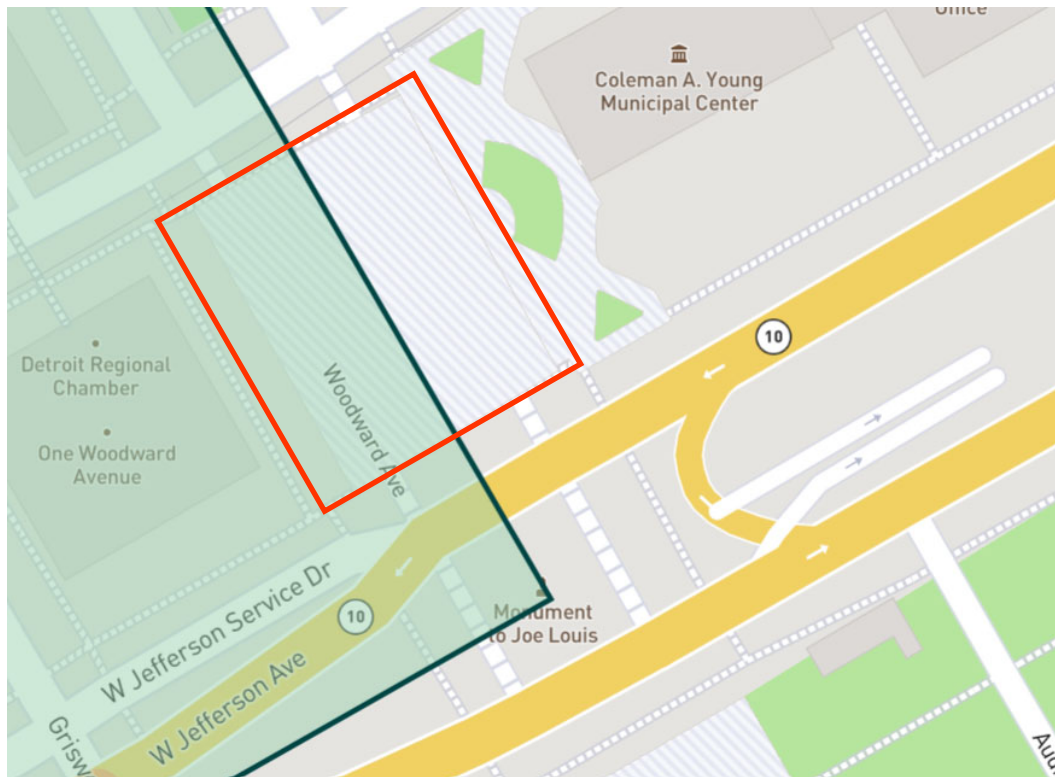
of Buildings

Historic Designation

Financial District



The recently created parcel at 1 East Jefferson Ave., i.e., Spirit Plaza. Note that the parcel's attributes indicate Historic Designation (Financial District) and PCA (public center adjacent) Zoning.



The extents of the Detroit Financial Historic District (2011) are depicted in green with black outline. The district covers the western half of what is now Spirit Plaza (red box, diagrammed by staff), formerly the Woodward Avenue right-of-way. Note that the plaza was established in 2019, eight years after the district, and is thus a non-contributing resource.



View of Spirit Plaza, looking north up Woodward. This portion is within the district. Staff photo, October 29, 2025.



View of Spirit Plaza, looking northeast towards CAYMC and the Spirit of Detroit. This portion is within the district. Note how the United Way torch sculpture dominates the plaza. Staff photo, October 29, 2025.



View of Spirit Plaza, looking southeast towards John Portman's landmark Renaissance Center. This portion is within the district, taken from the sidewalk of One Woodward (MichCon building). Staff photo, October 29, 2025.



View of Spirit Plaza, view directly "south" along Woodward towards Hart Plaza/the riverfront. This portion is within the district. Staff photo, October 29, 2025.

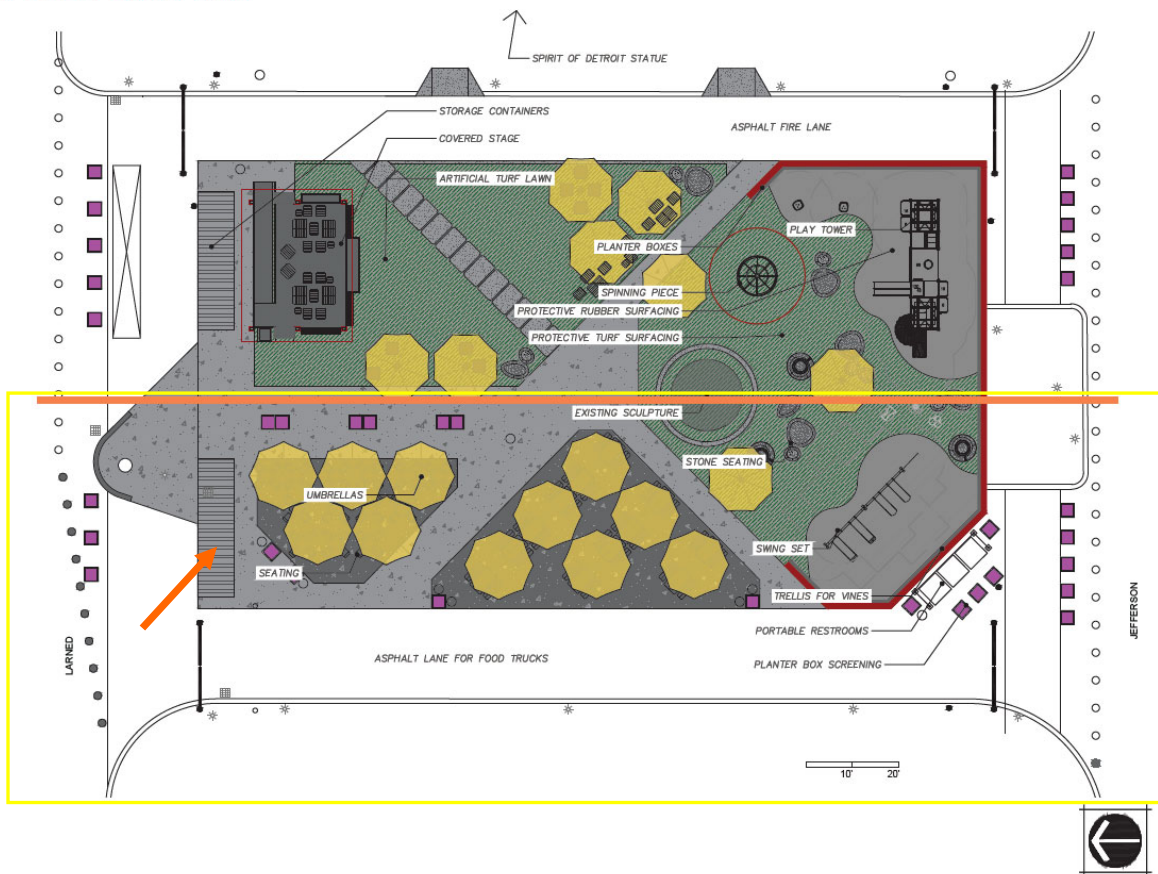
PROPOSAL

The city's General Services Department (GSD) in their application to the Commission, writes that the proposed project "is an update to the existing site amenities at Spirit Plaza. Within the Historic District, umbrellas and furniture are being replaced, and the playground is being updated with new equipment. The half of the plaza not inside the Historic District will have a covered stage, larger green space, and a new playground tower." The design intent is "to replace the existing site amenities with newer and more durable pieces, to allow for more programming opportunities."

The submitted site plan for review is depicted below. Specific changes within the boundaries of the historic district include:

- Removal of existing playground (western portion)
- Removal of all existing street furniture/elements
- Removal/replacement of pavement/turf surface including an asphalt lane for food trucks
- Installation of new elements and amenities per submitted documents and drawings, including tables/umbrellas, stone seating, a trellis, portable restrooms, planter screening, and a swing set

PROPOSED SITE PLAN



Proposed site plan. The portion within the historic district is the BOTTOM half of this image (yellow box). Note that the large play tower and covered stage are in the top half, outside of the historic district. Within the district are a combination of paving and turf surfaces, swing set, umbrellas/tables, stone seating, and a storage container (red arrow) at the northern (Larned) side.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS & ANALYSIS/BACKGROUND

- The Historic Detroit Financial District HD was designated by City Council in October 2011. When designated, the section of Woodward now known as Spirit Plaza was a divided boulevard with the west half subject to HDC jurisdiction (divided along the ROW centerline). The United Way (United Foundation) torch, by sculptor Dario Bonucchi and dedicated in 1969, is at the center of the plaza and at least partially in the historic district, though it goes unmentioned in the designation report.



View of the United Foundation/United Way Torch by sculptor Dario Bonucchi, installed in 1969. Photo by Andrew Chandler taken in 2004 showing the Woodward right-of-way seven years prior to historic designation and fifteen years prior to the alterations creating Spirit Plaza. Sourced from Detroit1701.org

- In spring 2019, the General Services Department, supported by the administration and other city departments including PDD, proposed to close Woodward between Larned and Jefferson to create the so-called “Spirit Plaza,” named after the Marshall Frederick’s *Spirit of Detroit* monument, which faces the area. The famous sculpture, cast in bronze in 1958, bookends the west end of city hall.
- The proposed plaza was bisected by the historic district. As such, in April 2019, the Historic District Commission reviewed and approved the initial changes in the historic district portion to create the first iteration of Spirit Plaza. The plaza has operated as a public space more or less continuously since that time, hosting many community events and serving as a lunchtime gathering place for workers and visitors to nearby buildings, including the Coleman A. Young Municipal Center. The plaza has also served as an important public space supporting pedestrian circulation and attraction space for events like the Detroit Grand Prix and the NFL Draft. The 2019 plan also included a playground along Jefferson, extant until the recent work.
- At an undetermined time between the initial approval and today, the former Woodward Avenue right-of-way was transformed into an assessed parcel, addressed as 1 East Jefferson Avenue. Because of the absorption of right-of-way sidewalk at 1 Woodward (i.e., Minoru Yamasaki’s 1962 MichCon Building), slightly more than half of the new “Spirit Plaza” parcel is in the historic district.
- In late October 2025, Historic District Commission staff received complaints about work underway in Spirit Plaza. HDC staff advised GSD that no approval was in place for work in the historic district portion of the plaza. Work was immediately stopped, and an application was received from GSD later that same day, the subject of this review.
- The Elements of Design for the Historic Detroit Financial District (Section 21-2- 218 of the 2019

Detroit City Code) give statutory guidance to the Commission regarding features “significant” to the district’s appearance. As excerpted, emphasis by staff:

(13) Relationship of significant landscape features and surface treatments. Throughout the district, sidewalks are concrete and roadbeds are asphalt with the primary exception of brick-paved areas around Campus Martius at the northeast corner of the district. ***Street furniture is abundant throughout the district; planter boxes for trees are positioned along the public sidewalk on the west side of Woodward Avenue and the north side of West Fort Street, and in-ground trees line the east side of Griswold Street within stylized metal grates reflecting the geometric designs of the Guardian Building at 500 Griswold Street. ... Old ornamental poles exist along Washington Boulevard south of Michigan Avenue; the modern steel pole mounted variety is seen elsewhere. ... Slender black, metal kiosks with directional information and a map are strategically placed at some prominent corners.*** Surface parking lots are few and provide intrusions to the otherwise dense concentration of buildings where they exist. Concrete columns supporting the Detroit People Mover are situated in the public rights-of-way on West Larned Street as well as Cass Avenue. ***A bronze sculpture is positioned at the plaza in front of 1 Woodward Avenue; another is positioned at the extreme southeast boundary of the district at Woodward Avenue and Jefferson Avenue; another is positioned in the space between 201 and 211 West Fort Street. A plaza with raised planting beds exists in front of the Annex of the Federal Reserve Bank at 160 West Fort Street. The curbed, landscaped median on Woodward Avenue marks the foot of Detroit's major thoroughfare.***

(20) Orientation, vistas, overviews. The Historic Detroit Financial District is a densely built up district of commercial and governmental buildings in Detroit's Central Business District on lower Woodward Avenue and west of Woodward Avenue. ***Its proximity to Detroit's Civic Center, the Detroit River, the Washington Boulevard and Capitol Park Historic Districts, Cadillac Square, and Campus Martius provide dramatic views and vistas. Detroit's skyline is composed of silhouettes of the tallest buildings in the district, while West Congress Street, as a relatively narrow street, provides a cavernous quality.***

- As a non-contributing resource not in existence when the historic district was designated, alterations to the plaza are limited only by compatibility with the larger district, though staff would recommend that the United Way torch be considered a contributing resource distinct from the plaza itself (the currently proposed work does not alter or affect the torch). In staff’s opinion, the plaza remains compatible by keeping its historic character as a public open space with limited vertical construction/obstructions, recalling its historic role as a public corridor with a median marked by the torch, consistent with the codified excerpts above.
- However, the proposed plan includes steel shipping containers to be used for storage at the northern end of the space along Larned. There are two shipping containers in the overall project; one in the district, one not. As such, the Commission only has jurisdiction over the placement of the west shipping container. Staff finds that the proposed shipping containers lack refinement and are incompatible with the high quality and modern design vocabulary of the historic district, and thus, contrary to Secretary of the Interior Standard #2, alters the features and spaces that characterize the district. It’s placement athwart the former southbound Woodward traffic lanes is also at odds with preserving some vestige of the location’s former open character and views.
- PDD’s Design Review comments are included under Staff Reports on the website for the Commission’s information.

ISSUES

- The raw expression of the proposed shipping container lacks architectural refinement and is thus incompatible with the high quality and modern design of resources in the historic district. The location of the container will potentially detract from historic southbound views across this space, contrary to *Element 20, Orientation, vistas, overviews.*

RECOMMENDATION

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

Recommendation, Certificate of Appropriateness

Staff recommends that the proposed work should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and the Historic Detroit Financial District's Elements of Design, with the condition that

- the shipping container(s) are removed from the project scope. If storage is programmatically required, it can be relocated outside of the historic district, or redesigned with compatible screening or a new design/location that integrates successfully with the refined, high quality modern architectural context of the historic district and the historic southbound views across the space, subject to the joint approval of both HDC staff and PDD Design Review staff.