



**SR-2 – ADVISORY STAFF REPORT (03-06-2026)**

*This advisory report, prepared by staff, represents the opinion and advice of professional staff, and does not represent nor direct the separate review and decision of the Historic District Commission. This report serves as an addendum to SR-1, an objective staff summary of the proposal and property.*

**ADDRESS:** 205 WATSON

**MEETING DATE:** 03-11-2026

**APPLICATION NUMBER:** HDC2026-00043

**SCOPE:** ERECT MULTI-FAMILY MIXED USE BUILDING

**ADVISORY STAFF REPORT PREPARED BY:** G. LANDSBERG

**STAFF OBJECTIONS TO APPROVAL:**

*This first section describes itemized conclusions/concerns, which, in staff's professional opinion, would prevent the issue of an unconditional Certificate of Appropriateness (COA). "None" means staff has no objections and believes a COA is warranted, with no conditions. The Historic District Commission is not required to accept staff opinions or recommendations.*

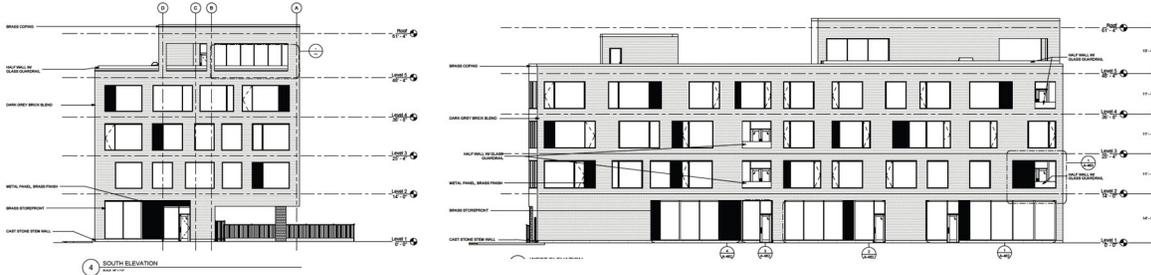
1. Additional articulation of entrance locations, in the form of canopies or other projections outboard of the building envelope, should be added.
2. The large windows should incorporate additional smaller scale texture and detail via additional subdivisions compatible with the contemporary design proposed.
3. Fence/gate types, heights, and materials are not provided.
4. Landscape design does not specify planting types/species.

**STAFF ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:**

*This second section expands on the reasoning and analysis leading to staff's conclusions given in the first section above. The Historic District Commission is not required to accept staff opinions or recommendations.*

- The Brush Park Historic District was established in 1980. Per the district map included in the Historic Designation Advisory Board report, the subject parcel was vacant at designation. The development team for this city-owned parcel was awarded the site in response to marketing effort via the Detroit Building Authority, supported by the Housing & Revitalization and Planning and Development Departments.
- In the last decade, the district has seen substantial HDC-approved redevelopment of similar vacant parcels, typically in a contemporary design inflected with contextual cues. Scale, massing, textures, and rebuilding the historic density of the district has been important to the Commission. Per NPS Guidelines and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, it is not required that new additions to a traditional historic district reproduce obsolete historic styles.
- As a guide to new construction, the Elements of Design for this district does offer the following (excerpted) relevant points:

- **Element 1, Height:** Height varies in the district from one to 11 stories...Later changes included the construction of apartment buildings among the houses, the majority of which are three stories in height... All other buildings more than four stories in height are located between Woodward Avenue and John R, and generally on or immediately adjacent to buildings on those streets.
- **Element 2, Proportion of buildings' front facades:** Buildings in the district are usually taller than wide...
- 



Watson (south) and John R (east) elevations from applicant's submission

- **Element 3, Proportion of openings within the facades:** Areas of void generally constitute between 15 and 35 percent of the total façade area, excluding the roof. Proportions of the openings themselves are generally taller than wide; in some cases, vertically proportioned units are combined to fill an opening wider than tall.



Perspective rendering (view to the NE) from applicant's submission materials

- **Element 4, Rhythm of solids to voids in front facades:** Victorian structures in the district often display great freedom in the placement of openings in the facades...In later apartments, openings tend to be very regular.
- **Element 5, Rhythm of spacing of buildings on streets:** The area between Woodward and Brush appears to have been developed in a very regular spacing...this regularity has been disrupted by the demolition of many of the houses, and the vacant land resulting...

- **Element 6, Rhythm of entrance and/or porch projections:** Most buildings have or had a porch or entrance projection...
- **Element 7, Relationship of materials:** By far the most prevalent material in the district is common brick; other forms of brick, stone and wood trim are common... Some later buildings have stucco wall surfaces...
- **Element 8, Relationship of textures:** The most common relationship of textures in the district is the low relief pattern of mortar joints in brick contrasted to the smoother or rougher surfaces of stone or wood trim...
- **Element 9, Relationship of colors:** Brick red predominates...other natural brick and stone colors are also present...
- **Element 10, Relationship of architectural details:** On the buildings of the Victorian period, elaborate detail in wood, stone, or sheet metal was common; areas included porches, window and door surrounds, cornices, dormers, and other areas. Later buildings are generally simpler, but include less elaborate detail in similar areas.
- **Element 11, Relationship of roof shapes:** Examples of many roof shapes, including pitched gable roofs, hip roofs, mansard roofs, and gambrel roofs are present. Different types are sometimes combined in a single structure...Later apartment buildings and commercial buildings generally have flat roofs not visible from the ground.
- **Element 12, Walls of continuity:** Some of the later apartments have not been set back to the same line as the houses amongst which they were built...Where buildings are continuous, a wall of continuity is created.
- **Element 13, Relationship of significant landscape features and surface treatments:** The major landscape feature of the district is vacant land, which creates a feeling that buildings are missing in the district...



Site plan from applicant's submission materials (not to scale)

- **Element 14, Relationship of open space to structures:** There is a large quantity of open space in the area, due to demolition of buildings...The feeling created is that buildings are missing and should be present.
- **Element 15, Scale of facades and façade elements:** Later apartments are in scale with

*simple but large elements near the ground and repetitive window openings above, frequently capped by a substantial cornice.*

- **Element 16, Directional expression of front elevations:** *A substantial majority of the buildings in the district have front facades vertically expressed...*
- **Element 17, Rhythm of building setbacks:** *...older houses on the east-west streets between Woodward Avenue and Brush have some setback, which varies from street to street, though generally consistent in any one block. Later apartments and commercial structures in that area often ignore the previously established setback...*
- **Element 18, Relationship of lot coverage:** *Later apartments and commercial buildings often fill a much higher percentage of the lot, sometimes approaching or reaching complete lot coverage...*
- **Element 19, Degree of complexity within the façade:** *The older houses in the district are generally characterized by a high degree of complexity within the facades...later apartments and commercial buildings tend to have more classical decorative elements of a simpler kind.*
- **Element 20, Orientation, vistas, overviews:** *The vacant land in the area, largely the result of demolition, creates long-distance views and views of individual buildings from unusual angles which are foreign to the character of the neighborhood as an intensely developed urban area. Garages and coach houses are located in the rear of residential properties and are generally oriented to the alley.*
- **Element 21, Symmetric or asymmetric appearance:** *Asymmetrical but balanced compositions are common. Later apartments are generally symmetrical.*
- **Element 22, General environmental character:** *The environmental character is of an old urban neighborhood which has undergone, and is undergoing, considerable change...*
- The applicant, in their presentation materials, discusses how they consider the proposed design meets the Elements outlined above. Staff has selected specific elements, reviewed below, for further analysis.
- For *Element 2, Proportion of building's front facades*, the Elements of Design state that buildings in the district are usually taller than wide. There are some exceptions. In this particular case, the site conditions, as argued by the applicant create two front facades (at Watson and along John R). While the Watson façade is taller than wide, the depth of the lot along John R compels a horizontal expression. Given the constraints of the site, staff agrees that this is a compatible design for this particular location.
- For *Element 6, Rhythm of entrance and/or porch projections*, the Elements of Design note that “most buildings have or had a porch or entrance projection.” The architect notes that the proposed design articulates the entrance by inverting the projected entrance into several inset entrances. While this is a reasonable contemporary approach to entrances on commercial apartment buildings, staff offers that modest canopies or other projections would improve the building’s compatibility with the historic context.
- The proposed materials, per *Elements 7, 8, and 9*, are dominated by dark gray brick, cast stone, and metal accents, and are conceptually grounded in the materials and expressions used on historic buildings in the district, or are modern analogs. Across the facades, materials, and architectural detail relationships are deployed and articulated in a manner that is appropriate for a new building within the historic context. In staff’s opinion, the robust features and deeply inset openings across the building are in general conformance with the Elements of Design.
- However, per *Elements 15 and 19*, staff does recommend that another scale or level of complexity should be added to the design to improve the building’s compatibility with its richly textured and ornamented historic context. The most helpful improvement, in staff’s opinion, would be to add additional articulation to the window openings by adding subdivisions in the windows.

- The off-street parking in the proposed design has been skillfully minimized in a “tuck under format” that greatly reduces the impact of surface pavement. The remaining hardscape is minimal and screened with landscaped beds, though specific plant varieties have not been specified. Fence type and height is not indicated on the site plan, though the renderings suggest a compatibly scaled fence. These missing details must be incorporated into the permit drawings.
- The increasing density of Brush Park directly addresses the problem of vacant land created by demolition as identified in *Elements 13, 14, and 20* by the framers of the 1980 ordinance establishing the district. This proposed project will continue that positive trend by reintroducing buildings to a vacant parcel in support of “the character of the neighborhood as an intensely developed urban area.”

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

*This third and final section takes staff’s itemized “objections” identified in the first section, and presents them in the form of “conditions” in support of a proposed approval recommendation or “reasons” in support of a proposed denial recommendation, in the form required by Section 21-2-78 of the City Code. The Historic District Commission is not required to accept staff opinions or recommendations.*

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

Staff recommends that the proposal for a multi-family, mixed-use building at 205 Watson should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the Brush Park Historic District’s Elements of Design, with the condition that:

1. Additional articulation of entrance locations, in the form of canopies or other projections outboard of the building envelope, will be added; and
2. The large windows should incorporate additional smaller scale texture and detail via additional subdivisions compatible with the contemporary design proposed; and
3. Fence/gate types, heights, and materials will be provided; and
4. Planting types/species will be provided.