

Resolution Regarding the Revised Meridian Redevelopment Proposal
HPA #15-205

Whereas, the project team for Meridian International Center (“Meridian”)/Streetscape Partners (“Streetscape”) Project has submitted redesigned plans to HPRB for review of concept, height, and massing of a new residential structure and Meridian conference space proposed for the portion of Meridian International Center’s property closest to 16th Street NW (hereinafter “The Project”);

Whereas, the Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1C (“ANC1C”)’s Planning, Zoning, and Transportation (“PZT”) Committee held a duly noticed public meeting on February 18, 2015 with over 50 residents present. At that meeting the Streetscape team presented their proposal and numerous residents shared their unanimous opposition to the proposal. The PZT passed a recommendation that the full ANC1C send a resolution to the HPRB urging significant changes to the proposals as discussed below;

Whereas, ANC1C held a duly noticed public meeting of the full Commission on March 4, 2015 where the full ANC1C voted unanimously (7-0) to approve a resolution to the HPRB urging significant changes to the proposals because it is incompatible with the historic nature and character of the Meridian Hill Historic District, the two historic houses, and the neighborhood, and fails to comply with the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines (“ANC1C March 4, 2015 Resolution”);

Whereas, the White-Meyer House and the Meridian House properties are jewels designed by renowned architect John Russell Pope, who designed the Jefferson Memorial, the National Gallery of Art (West Building), and the National Archives;

Whereas, the White-Meyer House and Meridian House buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and are listed at the “National level” of significance, and accordingly deserve the highest level of protection by HPRB;

Whereas, the Project is to be located within the Meridian Hill Historic District which is listed in the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites as an historic district;

Whereas, the historic district designation recognizes, and HPRB is legally required to preserve, the special architectural and landscape characteristics of the area;

Whereas, District of Columbia Historic Preservation Guidelines call for compatibility of new construction, with particular attention to setback, alignment with front facades of neighboring

buildings, height, width, proportions, rhythm of doors and windows, roof shape, ornamentation, projections, and landscaping;

Whereas, the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines require that “particular attention should be paid to siting, massing, size, scale and materials”;

Whereas, the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines require that “...alterations and new construction [be] designed with extreme sensitivity” and “[t]he mansions and churches of Meridian Hill represent the most significant aspect of the neighborhood’s built environment and should be treated with the highest standards of sensitivity and care”;

Whereas, the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines state that: “Meridian Hill Park is the centerpiece of the neighborhood. Its physical and visual centrality necessitates that alterations to surrounding buildings take into consideration views to and from this nationally significant urban garden”;

Whereas, the Project’s proposed scale, massing, and height exceed that of the adjacent residential and historic buildings (Beekman Place, Meridian Crescent, the 17th St row houses, 1661 Crescent Place, White-Meyer House, and Meridian House);

Whereas, this Project must be reviewed in context of the historic district, the two historic buildings, Meridian Hill Park, and the grand boulevard that is 16th St;

Whereas, there are significant concerns among ANC1C residents about the Project regarding the height, total massing, setbacks on all sides of the lot, and elimination of green space and landscaping;

Whereas, the Project’s revised setbacks on Belmont Street are insufficient to preserve the views of White-Meyer House and Meridian House as one enters Belmont Street from 16th Street and from Meridian Hill Park;

Whereas, on March 19, 2015, the staff at Rock Creek Park, an unit of the National Park System, that maintains administrative jurisdiction over Meridian Hill Park (U.S. Reservation 327) submitted a comment letter to the HPRB raising concerns with the incompatibility of the Project to the historic Meridian Hill Park (“National Park Service Letter”);

Whereas, the National Park Service Letter states: “The infilling of the historically open space just across 16th Street, NW from the 16th Street Terrace Overlook, will alter the existing open vegetated spatial character of this external view. What has historically been a filtered, distant view of the historic White-Meyer House at 1624 Crescent Place, NW (built in 1912) will become

a truncated view that creates a hard edge terminus to the axial vista running west across the Terrace Overlook.”

Whereas, the National Park Service Letter states: “In addition, the Beekman Place townhouses that replaced the former Henderson mansion (demolished 1959) located just south of the project area on the west side of 16th Street, NW, are low in scale and do not impede the views to the southwest. Combined with the open character of the White-Meyer property, the lack of large street-facing buildings along this stretch of 16th Street allows visitors to Meridian Hill Park to experience how the park’s designers took advantage of the elevation and sloping topography to create excellent distant views toward downtown Washington, D.C. Looking southwest from the Upper Park, the low scale and openness in the area south of Crescent Place allows park users to perceive the way the natural land drops off to the south and southwest of the park and demonstrates why the park’s designers selected this site for parkland – for the views. Furthermore, the White-Meyer House appears to be the only property that retains the open character of the estate type development that dominated this side of the park at the time it was designed.”

Whereas, the National Park Service Letter concludes: “The National Park Service would prefer that any development on the White-Meyer House property (1624 Crescent Place, NW) be lower in scale and be sited and designed to avoid truncating the views from the park’s overlooks.”

Whereas, there are significant concerns about the Project from neighbors regarding quality-of-life concerns relating to traffic, and other disturbances arising from a significant expansion of conference activity. Though these quality-of-life concerns are expected to be addressed through a zoning process, they also directly related to the massing, scale, and height of the Project that is the subject of HPRB review;

Whereas, on April 2, 2015, the HPRB held a hearing on this Project;

Whereas, at the April 2, 2015 HPRB hearing, HPRB Members Davidson and Metzger raised concerns regarding the height and mass of the Project;

Whereas, the HPRB Action Summary for the April 2, 2015 hearing states that the HPRB approved the HPO Staff Report. In the HPO Staff Report, the Staff states: “Find that the height and mass, the relationship of the building to 16th Street, the design and materials, and the architectural and landscape treatment of the area between the house and the apartment building should continue to be evaluated and revised to improve the compatibility of these elements as suggested above.”

Whereas, the HPRB Action Summary for the April 2, 2015 hearing states that: “The entrance, detailing, penthouse of the new building, and the design of the Meridian meeting rooms and parking court were among the elements identified as needing modification to improve the proposal’s compatibility with the historic district.”

Whereas, the revised Project proposal fails to address the important concerns raised by ANC1C in the ANC1C March 4, 2015 Resolution and by the HPRB at the April 2, 2015 hearing;

Therefore, it is the view of ANC1C that the Project, as currently re-proposed, is still incompatible with the historic nature and character of the Meridian Hill Historic District, the two historic houses, and the neighborhood, Meridian Hill Park, and fails to comply with the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines;

Therefore, ANC1C calls on HPRB to:

I. Require that the height be reduced. The Project as re-proposed is the same jarring height as previously proposed. The Project is still taller than all of the adjacent buildings and out of character and context with the neighboring structures in the Meridian Hill Historic District.

ANC1C notes that the heights of the existing buildings in the Meridian Hill Historic District follow the natural downward slope of Meridian Hill. However, the Project, as currently proposed, would be taller than the building up the hill from it (the Envoy), and would then extend that height southward creating a cliff-effect with respect to the next property down the hill from it (Beekman Place) and with the adjacent White-Meyer House. This presents an incongruous transition on 16th St with the rest of the block and breaks the natural downward slope of structures that is a feature of 16th St as it runs towards downtown;

Additionally, there are architectural approaches that can be introduced to reduce the height of the Project, particularly from the ground and from the neighboring and historic structures such as: removing multiple floors from the building, further tiering the building, minimizing and/or modifying the penthouse/mechanical structure to minimize its role in obstructing views and off-setting balance (e.g., by centering its location on the roof, maximizing its setback location, locating certain mechanical structures partially within floors below the roof, use of screening/surface material, and limiting its height in accordance with the new penthouse regulations), and reducing the height of the building as one moves towards the periphery of the structure.

The Project’s height should be substantially reduced. HPRB should insist that the setbacks be increased, particularly on Crescent St., 16th St., and Belmont St., to avoid a “wall” that would block vista views from the Meridian Hill Park’s Grand Terrace. As National Park Service

explained, the Meridian Hill Park's designers took advantage of the elevation and sloping topography to create excellent distant views toward downtown Washington, D.C. from the park that would be permanently lost if this structure's height is not substantially reduced. This inhibits an important view shed.

A significant reduction in the height of the Project is warranted.

II. Require that the scale and massing be reduced. ANC1C notes that the Project, as re-proposed, is not proportional to other neighboring buildings. It is incompatible in character with the components of the historic district, will result in the irretrievable loss of the view of the White-Meyer House and the Meridian House, and generally impairs and intrudes upon the White-Meyer House.

Though HPRB found the Project to be a new construction, the design still must be deferential to the historic buildings as well as the historic district. This proposal must be reviewed under a heightened level of scrutiny and the project must mitigate any impacts on both the White-Meyer House and the historic district generally. Notably, the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines require that "connections should be minimal and preferably reversible, enabling the mansions to retain their freestanding character." The Project encroaches upon the White-Meyer house, eliminates its freestanding character, and is incompatible with its design. It appears the White-Meyer house is being burdened by this Project.

III. Require that the materials be further revised and enhanced. The re-proposed design is visually incongruous with its neighboring contributing elements of the Meridian Hill Historic District. The Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines note that "[t]he buildings of Meridian Hill survive largely intact and exhibit a high quality and integrity of design, materials, workmanship, setting and place. The district's buildings should be preserved, and alterations and new construction designed with extreme sensitivity."

IV. Require a clearly defined central entrance on the 16th Street facade. The re-proposed design, though better, still only provides only a small and visually insignificant entrance at the corner of 16th Street and Belmont Street. It leaves the building feeling separated and aloof from 16th Street. This is in direct contrast to the other large buildings in the Meridian Hill Historic District which have clearly defined central entrances in their primary facades at the same grade as the streets they face. The developers have asserted that DDOT will not permit a vehicular driveway along the 16th Street facade of this building. However, even if that turns out to be the case, a central pedestrian entrance should still be possible. Such an entrance should utilize architectural and landscape hardscape and softscape elements that celebrate and are compatible with the Beaux-Arts classicism that defines 16th Street and Meridian Hill Park.