

**MEMORANDUM**

To: Historic Preservation Commission

From: John Liebertz, Cultural Resource Planner III, Countywide Planning and Policy Division, Montgomery Planning

Date: November 30, 2022

Re: Weller's Dry Cleaning, 8237 Fenton Street, Addition to the Master Plan for Historic Preservation

Staff Recommendation:

That the HPC recommends that the Planning Board:

1. list Weller's Dry Cleaning in the *Locational Atlas & Index of Historic Sites*; and,
2. recommend in its transmission to the County Council that the Weller's Dry Cleaning be listed in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

Background:

In 2002, Montgomery Planning contracted Potomac-Hudson Engineering, Inc. to conduct an architectural survey of 205 resources in Silver Spring. The results of that investigation are included in the *Historic Sites Survey Report: Silver Spring Central Business District (2002)*. The report noted that Weller's Dry Cleaning should be evaluated for the National Register of Historic Places (upon passing the 50-year threshold) and for the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. In 2015, Claire Lise Kelly, then architectural historian for Montgomery Planning, featured Weller's Dry Cleaning in her publication *Montgomery Modern: Modern Architecture of Montgomery County*. She noted that the space age, Google-design of the building and sign served as a gateway to the Fenton Street shopping center.

The recently adopted *Silver Spring Downtown & Adjacent Communities Plan (2022)* called for the evaluation of Weller's Dry Cleaning for listing in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. The recommendation stemmed from an architectural survey of the property by EHT Traceries (a cultural resource management firm) who found the resource potentially eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

After the recent closure of the business and adoption of the SSDAC Plan, Historic Preservation staff undertook further survey, research, and documentation of the site to determine whether the property satisfied the designation criteria listed in §24A: Historic Resources Protection of the Montgomery County Code and submitted the staff recommendation to the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) to list the property to the *Locational Atlas & Index of Historic Sites Designation*. On September 21, the HPC held a duly advertised public hearing and worksession. The commission concurred with staff's recommendation and unanimously moved: 1) that the Weller's Dry Cleaning met two designation criteria as outlined in §24A-3: Historic Resources Protection of the Montgomery County Code; and 2)

recommended that the Planning Board list the property to the *Locational Atlas & Index of Historic Sites*. The *Atlas* protects resources from demolition or substantial alteration until review of the property for listing in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

The Planning Board scheduled a public hearing and worksession for Weller's Dry Cleaning on October 27, 2022, but the hearing was delayed. In early November, the property owners and/or new tenants painted the exterior of the building off-white and altered the sign. Updated photographs of the property are attached to this memorandum, but the designation report remains unchanged.

Designation Criteria:

As noted in Section I of the Designation Report, staff finds that the subject property satisfies two designation criteria (2.A and 2.E) listed in §24A-3 of the Montgomery County Code.

2.A Architectural and design significance. The historic resource embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction.

The Weller's Dry Cleaning building represents the characteristics of Googie design, a subset of the Modern Movement of architecture. The humorous and playful space-age architecture appealed to the broader public and captured the sense of technological optimism permeating the country. Purveyors of the style designed dramatic forms, celebrated new materials, contrasted natural and textured forms with glass openings, and accentuated these elements with bold colors to use architecture as advertisement. Architect Ted Englehardt relied on these elements to create a landmark building in downtown Silver Spring. He successfully contrasted the solid, red and pink striped porcelain enamel box with a stone veneer and lighter, projecting section featuring expansive windows and a cantilevered awning that floated in the air. The roof form permitted greater visibility as the floor-to-ceiling windows allowed motorists and pedestrians to view operations of the business. All of these features combined to create a playful and quirky building that engaged the everyday consumer with a modern and popular architecture in lieu of the high-style austerity of the International, Brutalist, and Expressionist styles.

The Weller's Dry Cleaning business featured a distinctive Googie-styled sign that embodied commercial architecture in the mid-twentieth century. The original, double-sided sign oriented travelers on Fenton Street and harmonized with the design of the building. The sign served as a visual landmark with a scale and composition that attracted motorists and pedestrians to the store. The colorful design consists of three distinctly shaped and illuminated metal-framed sign boxes stacked on two metal poles anchored in the sidewalk. The shapes (rectangle, triangle, and circle) are offset from one another and slightly separated which creates a whimsical appearance and suggestion that these elements float in defiance of gravity. The upper component of the sign includes a circular operational clock inspired by the works of George Nelson and offset towards the property. The clock features a white face, black clock hands, and rectangular, multi-colored rectangles in place of numerals.

2.E Architectural and design significance. The historic resource represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community, or county due to its singular physical characteristic or landscape.

The Weller's Dry Cleaning is a rare example of Googie commercial architecture in Montgomery County. Many of these architectural resources have been lost to demolition throughout the country. *Montgomery Modern* (2015), a chronicle of mid-century modern architecture in Montgomery County, documented three commercial Googie-styled buildings.

The Weller's Dry Cleaning building and sign represent the continued suburban development of Silver Spring and the area's importance as a vital transportation route in the mid-twentieth century. Googie-styled buildings relied on nearby high-volume traffic to attract motorists to the futuristic design. Weller's Dry Cleaning addressed the car-oriented populace but remained successful at the pedestrian scale. The illuminated sign overhanging the sidewalk anchored the building at the intersection and beckoned customers to return with its physical presence on the street. The roadside architecture serves as a tangible link between the community and its past, providing a sense of continuity, orientation, and place.

Conclusion:

The subject property satisfies the designation criteria listed in §24A-3 of the County Code and the HPC should recommend that the Planning Board lists Weller's Dry Cleaning in the *Locational Atlas & Index of Historic Sites* and recommend in its transmission to the County Council that the Weller's Dry Cleaning be listed in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

Updated Photographs (November 2022):



Figure 1: View of the front elevation from across Fenton Street, November 2022.



Figure 2: View of the sign (with a new sign face and removed sign face) and the building in the background, November 2022.