

MONTGOMERY COUNTY HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
STAFF REPORT

Address:	6939 Laurel Ave., Takoma Park	Meeting Date:	2/21/2024
Resource:	Outstanding Resource Takoma Park Historic District	Report Date:	2/14/2024
Applicant:	Ruth Brown	Public Notice:	2/7/2024
Review:	HAWP	Tax Credit:	No
Case No.:	1057051	Staff:	Chris Berger
Proposal:	Sign installation		

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends the HPC **approve with one condition** the HAWP application with final approval of all details delegated to staff:

1. The sign shall be mounted into mortar and not into brick.

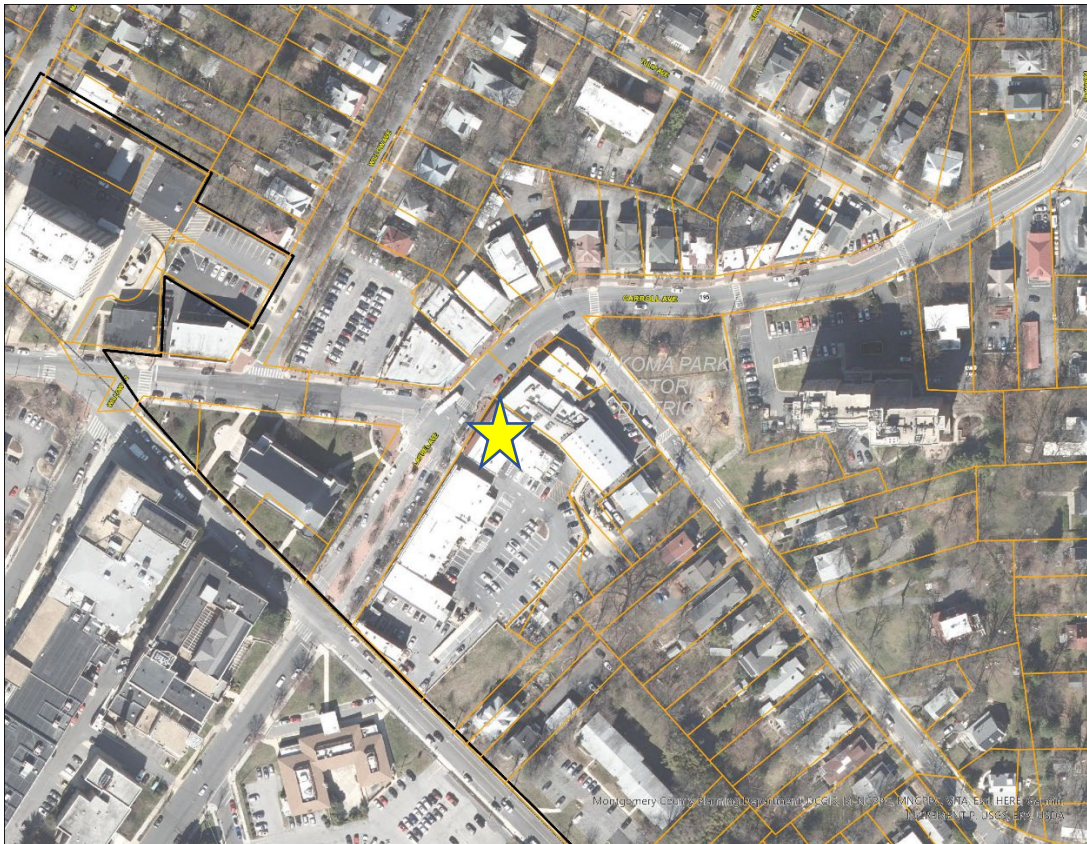


Figure 1: The Outstanding Resource at 6939 Laurel Ave. is indicated with a star. The black line is the Takoma Park Historic District boundary.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

SIGNIFICANCE: Outstanding Resource to the Takoma Park Historic District
 STYLE: Spanish Colonial Revival
 DATE: circa 1910s

This commercial space is the center element of a long two-story brick commercial building in Takoma Old Town (6931-6939 Laurel Avenue). Previous tenants include Park Pharmacy, VideoAmericain, Summer Delights ice cream, and Republic Restaurant.

The building is buff brick with a ceramic tile roof. The first floor includes the Motorkat restaurant, where the sign will be placed, and Truist bank. There are individual doors between projecting shopfront window bays along the entire facade leading. These doorways lead into either the shops or a stairwell up to second story space. The second story windows are 6/6, roughly paired over the shopfront windows on the five projecting bays.

The base of the stores is black tile. The shopfronts were renovated in 1983, at which point a continuous decorative fascia board in a Post-Modern mode was added. The metal chevrons were added to the fascia when VideoAmericain opened circa 2000 after the approval of HAWP #37/3-99K in 1999.¹

PROPOSAL

The applicant proposes to install a 35-square-foot double-sided blade sign. The sign will be 8 feet tall and 4 feet, 8 inches wide. It will be 1-foot thick. The sign will be located under the roofline and above the shopfront bays, 11 feet above the ground. It will project 1-foot off the building face and extend 5 feet, 4 inches, from the building face. The sign will be irregularly shaped; it will have diamond shape on top with the words “Motorkat” and an arrow shape at the bottom that points to the building with the words “Eat” and “Good Times.” The letters and the edge of the sign will be lined with neon lights. The sign will be affixed to a steel bracket and mounted to the wall with four bolts.

APPLICABLE GUIDELINES

When reviewing alterations and new construction within the Takoma Park Historic District several documents are to be utilized as guidelines to assist the Commission in developing their decision. These documents include the historic preservation review guidelines in the approved and adopted amendment for the *Approved and Adopted Amendment to the Master Plan for Historic Preservation: Takoma Park Historic District and Carroll Manor/Douglas House (Guidelines)*, *Montgomery County Code Chapter 24A (Chapter 24A)*, and *the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation (Standards)*. The pertinent information in these documents is outlined below.

Takoma Park Historic District Guidelines

There are two general, broad planning and design concepts which apply to all categories. These are:

The design review emphasis will be restricted to changes that are at all visible from the public right-of-way, irrespective of landscaping or vegetation (it is expected that the majority of new additions will be reviewed for their impact on the overall district), and,

¹ The link to the file for HAWP #37/3-99K is available here:

https://mcatlas.org/tiles/06_HistoricPreservation_PhotoArchives/Padlock/HAR60640004/Box030/37-3-99K_Takoma%20Park%20Historic%20District_6937%20Laurel%20Avenue_05-14-1999.pdf

The importance of assuring that additions and other changes to existing structures act to reinforce and continue existing streetscape, landscape, and building patterns rather than to impair the character of the district.

Outstanding Resources in the district, such as 6939 Laurel Avenue, have the highest level of architectural or historical significance. While they will receive the most detailed level of design review, it is permissible to make sympathetic alterations, changes, and additions to them.

Ordinance No. 2592

7. SIGNS

- (a) Signage materials shall be in harmony with the rest of facade materials and be easily maintained, such as: treated fabric; natural or painted wood; metal; cut-out letters of metal, wood, or plastic; and individual painted letters.
- (b) Signs should be placed where they conceal the least amount of architectural detail.
- (c) Signs may be a maximum of thirty (30) inches high and project not more than eight (8) inches from the outside face of the exterior wall. All signs shall be designed to be harmonious with the design of the building facade and the neighboring structures. The maximum allowable sign area shall be two times the frontage of the building in feet.
- (d) Lettering applied to ground floor show windows or entrance doors shall not exceed three (3) inches in height and the text limited to identification of the business. Signs identifying the occupant shall be permitted at rear entrance doors but shall not exceed six (6) square feet in size and shall be nonluminous.
- (e) Signs may be painted on the inside surface of the shopfronts but must be designed to be compatible with the design of the entire facade. Signs painted on the facade or on the inside glass should be limited to lettering no greater than six (6) inches in height. When these signs are the only identifying sign for the property, they can use twelve (12) inch lettering. These signs shall not exceed twenty-percent of the area of the shopfront window.
- (f) Non-illuminated secondary signs shall be permitted for the identification of commercial tenants occupying the upper floors of a building. Such signs shall not project any higher than the entry door lintel to the building. These signs shall be designed to be harmonious with the facade of the building.
- (g) "Temporary" signs may be displayed within shopfront windows provided that these signs are not larger than one-fourth the square footage area of the window in which they are displayed and are on display not more than 30 consecutive days.
- (h) Only signs identifying the business on the premises shall be permitted.
- (i) When the rehabilitation work is undertaken on building fronts, all new flat signs will be erected parallel to the face of the building and shall be incorporated in the design of the shopfront. If the shopfront design includes a cornice, the sign shall be incorporated in the cornice design or shall be placed in the shop window. If a shopfront cornice is not used,

the sign shall be placed either in the shop window or on the portion of the building façade above the shop window and below the sill of the second floor windows.

- (j) Flat signs may not be luminous but may be illuminated by any acceptable method listed below in the lighting section.
- (k) Flashing or moving signs other than barber poles shall not be permitted.
- (l) Rooftop signs, above the parapet of the building, billboards, or outdoor advertising signs painted or mounted on the buildings shall not be permitted.
- (m) No signs will be permitted to be mounted at right angles to the face of the building except those which illustrate graphically or in a logo form the business within, e.g., scissors for haircutters and Boar's head for Boar's Head restaurant.
- (n) No signs painted on buildings will be permitted.

Montgomery County Code; Chapter 24A-8

- (b) The commission shall instruct the director to issue a permit, or issue a permit subject to such conditions as are found to be necessary to ensure conformity with the purposes and requirements of this chapter, if it finds that:
 - (1) The proposal will not substantially alter the exterior features of an historic site or historic resource within an historic district; or
 - (2) The proposal is compatible in character and nature with the historical, archeological, architectural or cultural features of the historic site or the historic district in which an historic resource is located and would not be detrimental thereto or to the achievement of the purposes of this chapter. (Ord. No. 9-4, § 1; Ord. No. 11-59.)

Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation

- 2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.
- 9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportions, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.
- 10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

STAFF DISCUSSION

Staff supports the proposed blade sign and recommends approval. The subject property is part of a two-story commercial building designated as an Outstanding Resource to the Takoma Park Historic District in Takoma Old Town. The Spanish Colonial Revival style building has a brick exterior with Post-Modern inspired detailing applied in a 1980s renovation.

The traditional sign design will both provide a signature advertisement element for the restaurant and improve wayfinding for pedestrians and drivers in search of its location along the commercial corridor. The traditional design is appropriate for Takoma Old Town, where neon signs were common in the 20th century. At 5 feet, 4 inches, from the building face at its widest point, the sign will have a notable horizontal project. However, staff notes that the building has a wide roof overhang and a projecting circa 1983 shopfront addition, so the sign's extension off the building will not be out of character for the façade. The sign's minimalist steel frame and perpendicular projection will be sympathetic to the Outstanding Resource's architecture by not covering up the building face. Staff finds the sign's placement

directly above the door and off-center between a pair of windows on the second floor to also be an appropriate location. Staff also supports the sign's 35-square-foot size and finds it to be appropriately scaled for the building.



Figure 2. The existing façade, left, and proposed sign for the Motorkat restaurant at 6905 Laurel Ave.

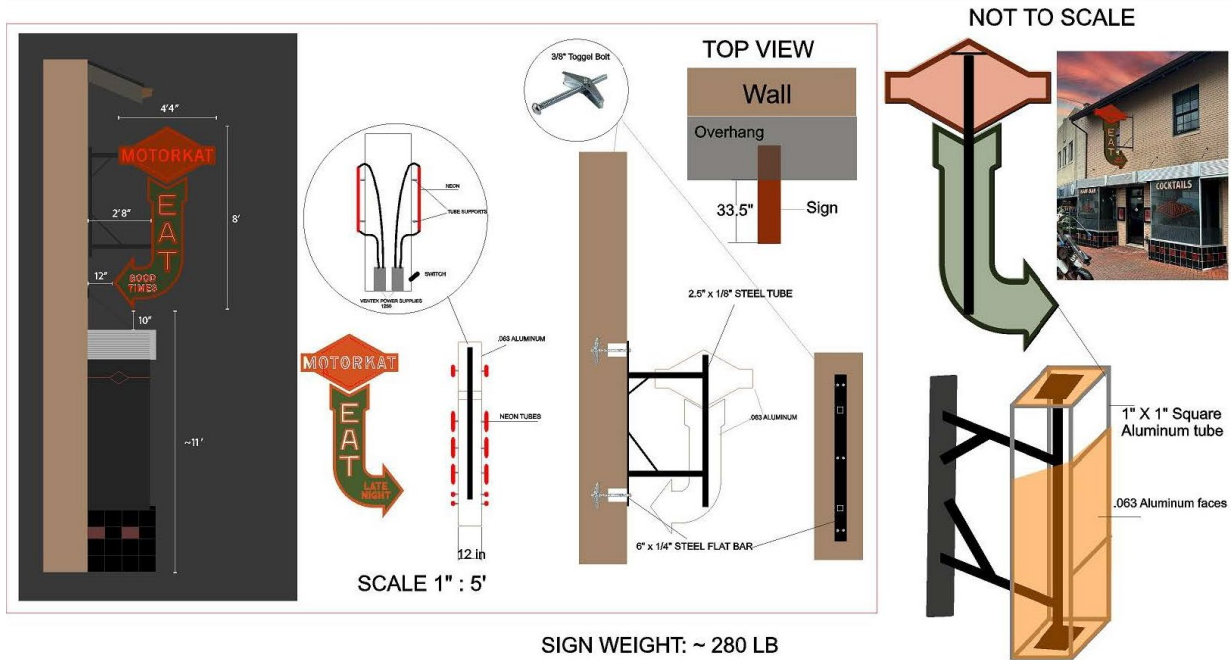


Figure 3: The specifications for the proposed sign.

There is longstanding precedent for a projecting neon signs on the building. The Park Pharmacy, open from 1919 to 1998, had a neon building sign with raceway set forward approximately two feet from the brick façade.



*Figure 4. This circa 1980 photo shows the Park Pharmacy in the space now occupied by Truist Bank. The neon sign is clouded in red.
Courtesy: Historic Takoma*



Figure 5. This circa 1995 MNCPPC file photo shows the Park Pharmacy in the space now occupied by Motorkat.



Figure 6. The lit Park Pharmacy sign is partially visible in this circa 1995 MNCPPC file photo.

The VideoAmericain neon sign was approved with HAWP # 37/3-99K in 1999.² That sign measured 14 feet long and 22 inches tall for a total of 26 square feet.

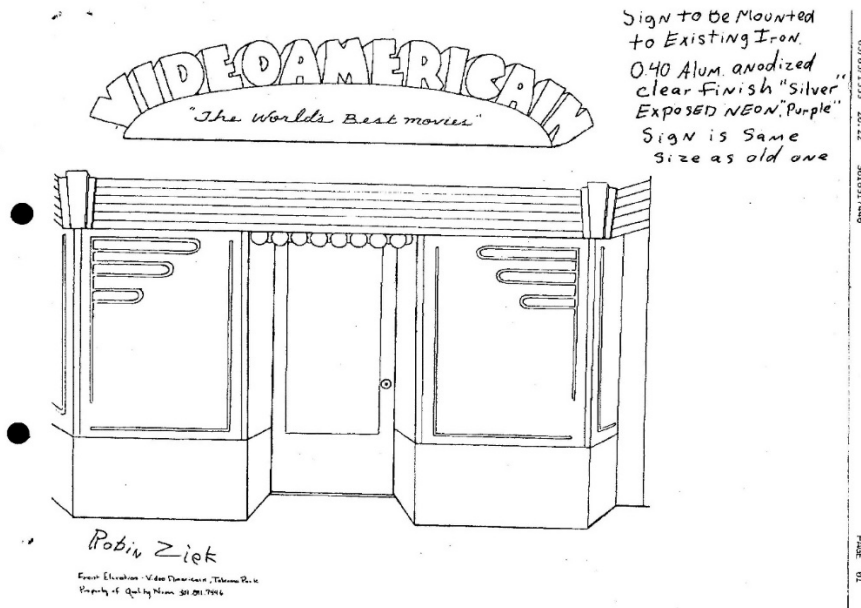


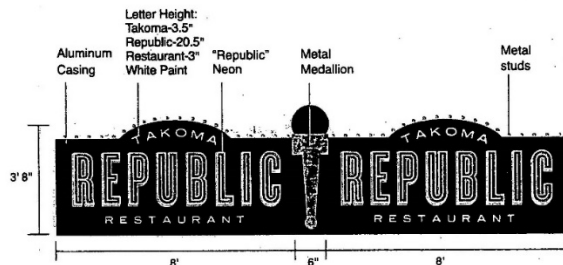
Figure 7. The plans for the VideoAmericain neon sign which was located at 6939 Laurel Ave. and approved as part of HAWP # 37/3-99K in 1999.

² The link to the file for HAWP #37/3-99K is available here: https://mcatlas.org/tiles/06_HistoricPreservation_PhotoArchives/Padlock/HAR60640004/Box030/37-3-99K_Takoma%20Park%20Historic%20District_6937%20Laurel%20Avenue_05-14-1999.pdf

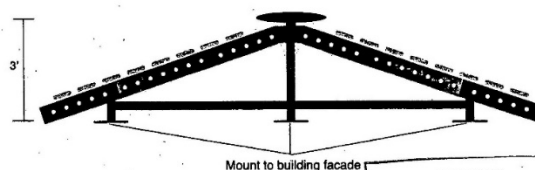
In 2013, the HPC approved HAWP # 37/03-13H for the projecting neon sign for Takoma Republic Restaurant.³ The sign consisted of two panels measuring a total of 16.5 feet long and 3 feet, 8 inches, tall to total 60.5 square feet. The panels joined to form a triangle that projected 3 feet off the building face.

Takoma Republic Restaurant
Exterior Signage
6937-9 Laurel Ave
Takoma Park, MD

The project proposes replacing the current neon signage with two 8' by 3'8" panels of Navy Blue aluminum casing. In white lettering painted on the face of the sign would be "Takoma Republic Restaurant". "Republic" to be repeated in exposed neon lettering, similar to other local establishments. At the meeting of the two panels there will be a torch medallion. The panels will extend only 3' as to not project over the sidewalk.



Top View



Black Restaurant Group
7752 Woodmont Avenue
Suite 201
Bethesda, MD 20814
phone 301.215.6397

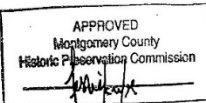


Figure 8. The plans for Republic Restaurant sign which was located at 6939 Laurel Ave. and approved as part of HAWP # 37/3-13H in 2013.

In accordance with the Guidelines for Outstanding Resources, the neon sign is a sympathetic alteration to the front of the building. Its projection off the façade and minimalist frame will limit its presence on the Outstanding Resource.

The sign does not meet sections of the City of Takoma Park's Ordinance No. 2592, which are included in the Guidelines, in regard to signage height and allowable graphics; however, staff notes that Takoma Park no longer enforces the ordinance, and the guidelines are merely advisory.

The sign meets Chapter 24A-8(b). Its minimalist frame affixed to the building by four bolts will not substantially alter the building's exterior features, and as noted, will limit the visual impact on the building's façade. Further, it is compatible in character with the traditional Main Street where neon signs were once common and a horizontal element is already present with the wide roof overhang and shopfront addition.

³ The link to the file for HAWP # 37/03-13H is available here:

https://mcatlas.org/tiles6/06_HistoricPreservation_PhotoArchives/HAWP/HAWP_Archive/3703-13H_TAKOMA%20PARK%20HISTORIC%20DISTRICT_69376939%20LAUREL%20AVE.%20TAKOMA%20PARK_03212013.PDF

In conformance with the Standards, the historic character of the property will be retained and preserved with the sign's installation. Staff seeks to avoid damage to the historic brick and seeks a condition that the sign is only bolted into the mortar, which likely has been repointed multiple times since the building's construction, and not the historic brick. The exterior alteration will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property, and the sign will be differentiated from the historic façade. Finally, as with all the other signs that have preceded it in this location, the proposed sign can be removed in the future and the essential form and integrity of the historic property will be unimpaired.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Commission **approve with one condition** the HAWP application:

1. The sign shall be mounted into mortar and not into brick.

under the Criteria for Issuance in Chapter 24A-8(b)(1) and (2) and Chapter 24A-8(d), and the *Takoma Park Historic District Guidelines*, having found that the proposal will not substantially alter the exterior features of the historic resource and is compatible in character with the district and the purposes of Chapter 24A;

and with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation* #2, 9, and 10;

and with the general condition that the applicant shall present an electronic set of drawings, if applicable, to Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) staff for review and stamping prior to submission for the Montgomery County Department of Permitting Services (DPS) building permits;

and with the general condition that final project design details, not specifically delineated by the Commission, shall be approved by HPC staff or brought back to the Commission as a revised HAWP application at staff's discretion;

and with the general condition that the applicant shall notify the Historic Preservation Staff if they propose to make **any alterations** to the approved plans. Once the work is completed the applicant will contact the staff person assigned to this application at 301-495-4571 or chris.berger@montgomeryplanning.org to schedule a follow-up site visit.



**APPLICATION FOR
HISTORIC AREA WORK PERMIT**
HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
301.563.3400

FOR STAFF ONLY:
HAWP# 1057051
DATE ASSIGNED _____

APPLICANT:

Name: Ruth Brown
Address: 101 Liberty Dr.
Daytime Phone: 215-338-4101

E-mail: brownexpediting@gmail.com
City: Bensalem, PA Zip: 19020
Tax Account No.: _____

AGENT/CONTACT (if applicable):

Name: _____
Address: _____
Daytime Phone: _____

E-mail: _____
City: _____ Zip: _____
Contractor Registration No.: _____

LOCATION OF BUILDING/PREMISE: MIHP # of Historic Property 6905 Laurel Ave

Is the Property Located within an Historic District? Yes/District Name Laurel (?)
No/Individual Site Name _____

Is there an Historic Preservation/Land Trust/Environmental Easement on the Property? If YES, include a map of the easement, and documentation from the Easement Holder supporting this application.

Are other Planning and/or Hearing Examiner Approvals /Reviews Required as part of this Application? (Conditional Use, Variance, Record Plat, etc.?) If YES, include information on these reviews as supplemental information.

Building Number: 6905 Street: Laurel
Town/City: Takoma Park Nearest Cross Street: _____
Lot: 53 Block: A Subdivision: _____ Parcel: _____

TYPE OF WORK PROPOSED: See the checklist on Page 4 to verify that all supporting items for proposed work are submitted with this application. Incomplete Applications will not be accepted for review. Check all that apply:

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> New Construction | <input type="checkbox"/> Deck/Porch | <input type="checkbox"/> Shed/Garage/Accessory Structure |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Addition | <input type="checkbox"/> Fence | <input type="checkbox"/> Solar |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Demolition | <input type="checkbox"/> Hardscape/Landscape | <input type="checkbox"/> Tree removal/planting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grading/Excavation | <input type="checkbox"/> Roof | <input type="checkbox"/> Window/Door |
| | | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other: <u>SIGN</u> |

I hereby certify that I have the authority to make the foregoing application, that the application is correct and accurate and that the construction will comply with plans reviewed and approved by all necessary agencies and hereby acknowledge and accept this to be a condition for the issuance of this permit.

Ruth E. Brown 10/10/23

Signature of owner or authorized agent

Date

HAWP APPLICATION: MAILING ADDRESSES FOR NOTIFYING
[Owner, Owner's Agent, Adjacent and Confronting Property Owners]

Owner's mailing address
Urciolo Properties
6935 Laurel Ave., #100
Takoma Park, MD 20912

Owner's Agent's mailing address
Brown Expediting Services
101 Liberty Dr.
Bensalem, PA 19020

Adjacent and confronting Property Owners mailing addresses

7001 Carroll Avenue, Takoma Park 20912

11161 New Hampshire Ave. Silver Spring
20910

6845 Eastern Avenue, Takoma Park 20912

6951 Carroll Avenue, Takoma Park 20912

Description of Property: Please describe the building and surrounding environment. Include information on significant structures, landscape features, or other significant features of the property:

Restaurant, brick facade

Description of Work Proposed: Please give an overview of the work to be undertaken:

New projecting sign with neon lights.

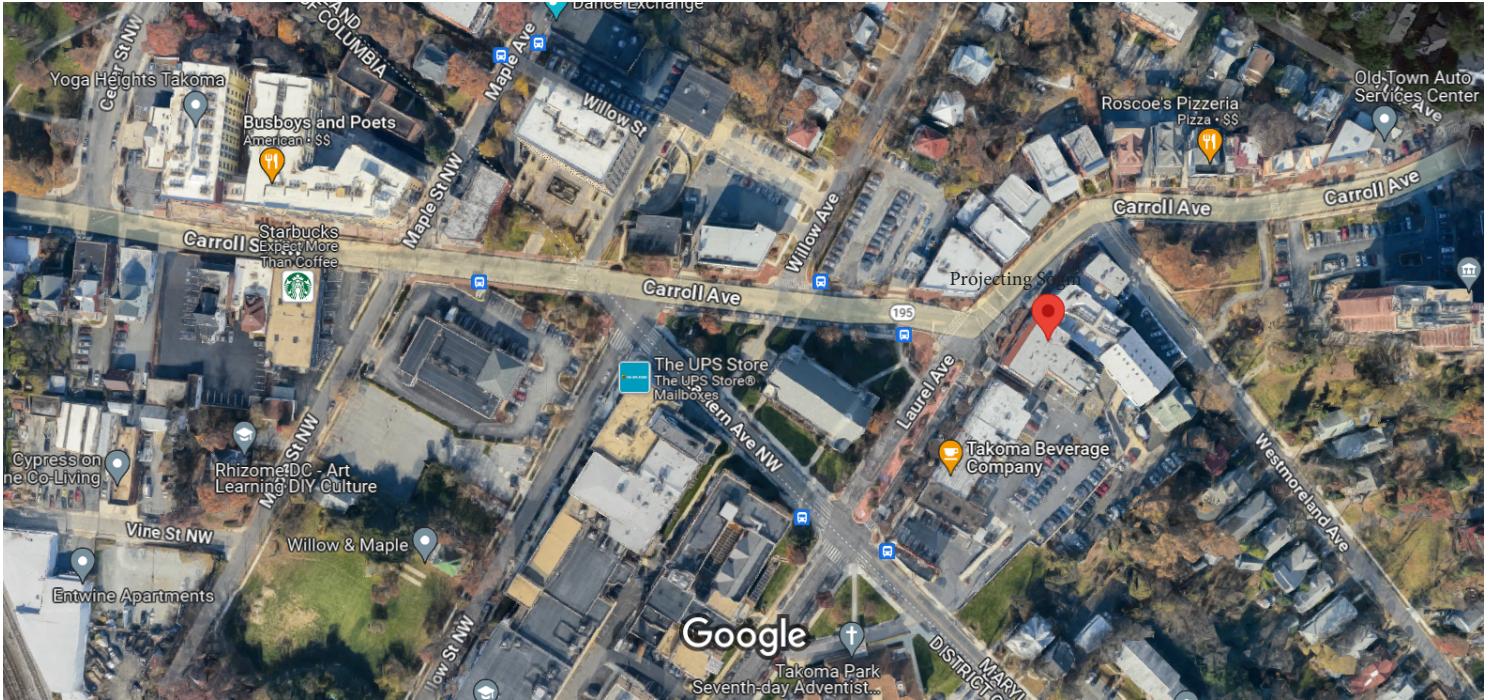
Work Item 1: _____	
Description of Current Condition: No sign	Proposed Work: new sign with neon lights

Work Item 2: _____	
Description of Current Condition:	Proposed Work:

Work Item 3: _____	
Description of Current Condition:	Proposed Work:

**HISTORIC AREA WORK PERMIT
CHECKLIST OF
APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS**

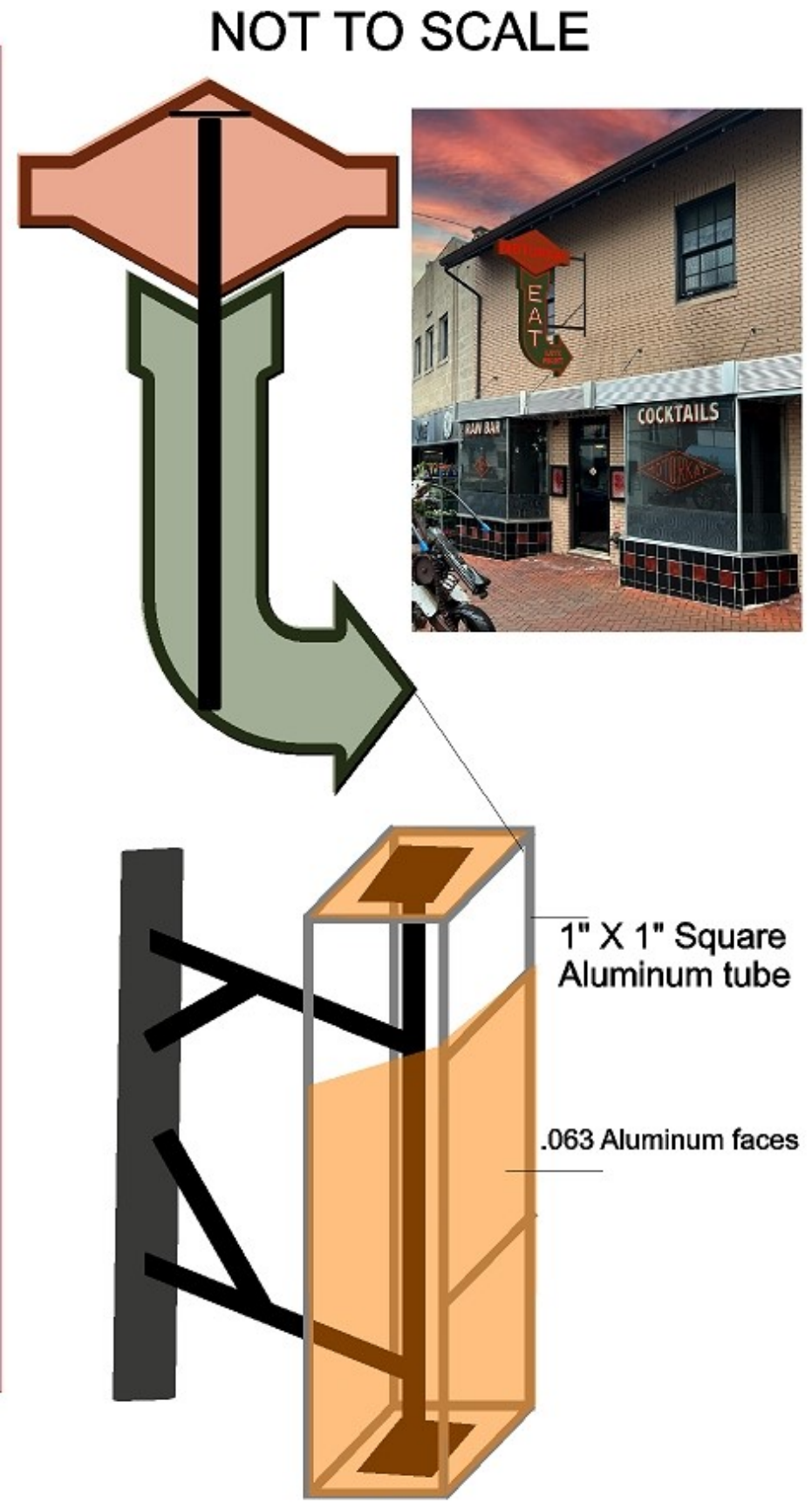
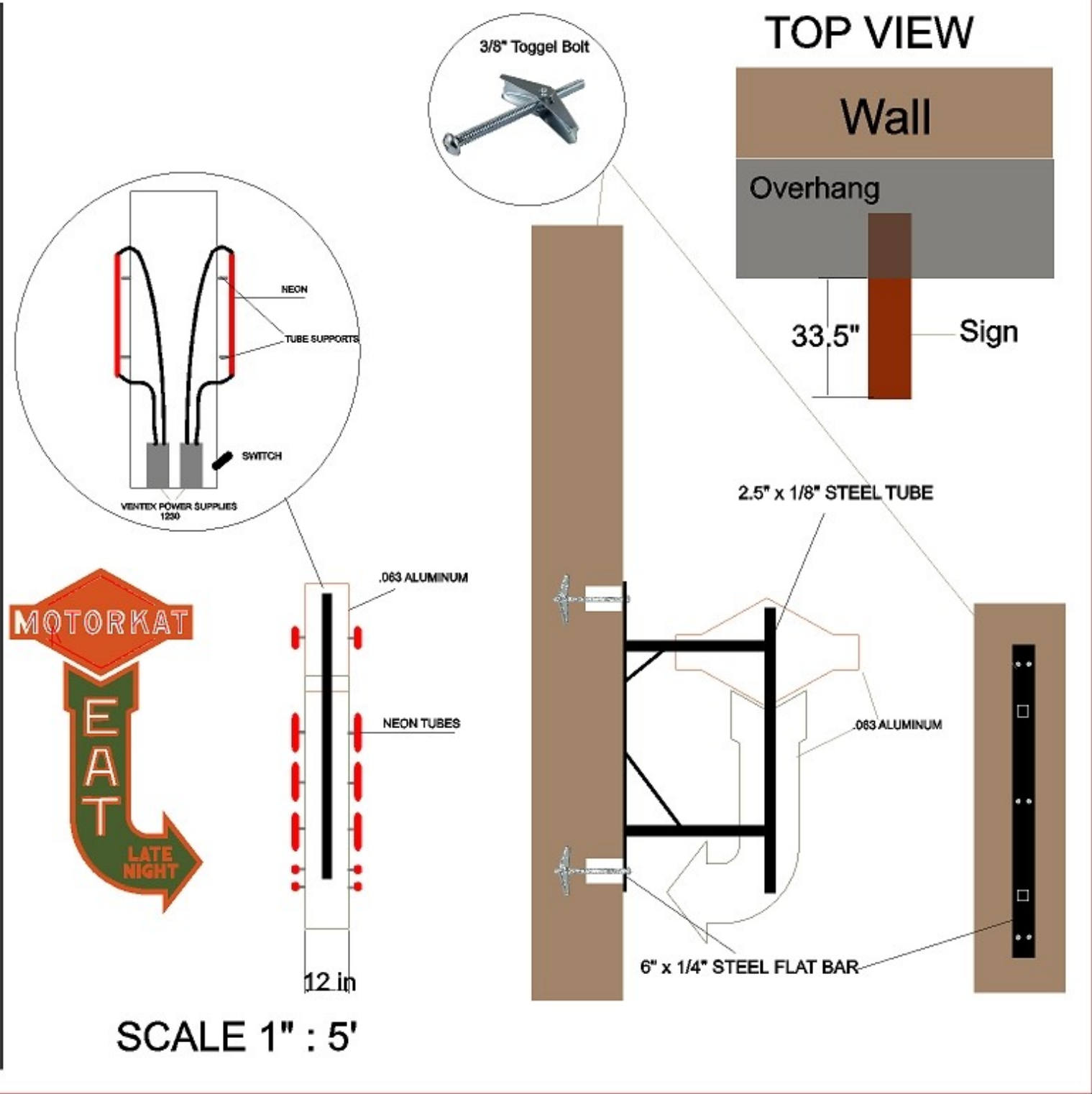
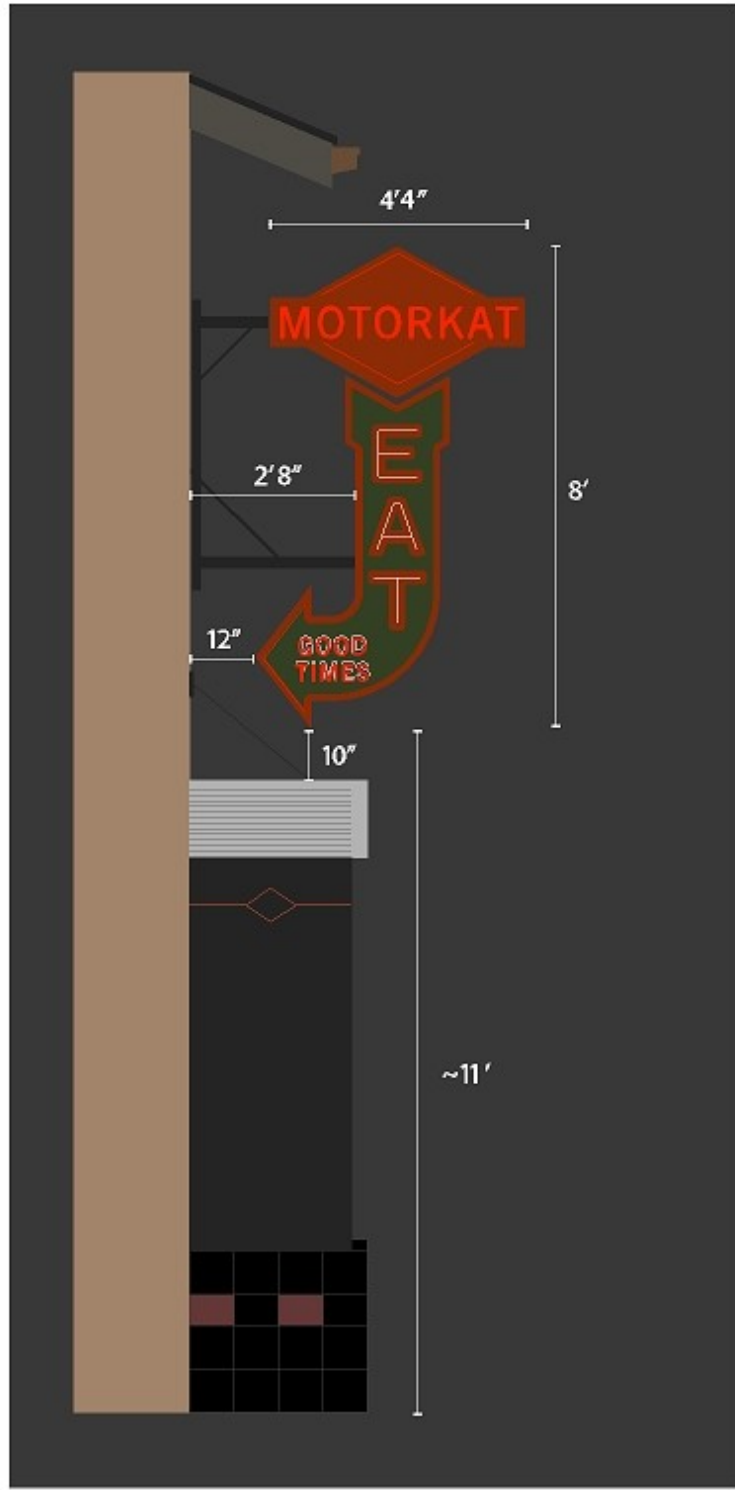
	Required Attachments						
Proposed Work	I. Written Description	2. Site Plan	3. Plans/ Elevations	4. Material Specifications	5. Photographs	6. Tree Survey	7. Property Owner Addresses
New Construction	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Additions/ Alterations	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Demolition	*	*	*		*		*
Deck/Porch	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Fence/Wall	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Driveway/ Parking Area	*	*		*	*	*	*
Grading/Excavation/ Landscaping	*	*		*	*	*	*
Tree Removal	*	*		*	*	*	*
Siding/ Roof Changes	*	*	*	*	*		*
Window/ Door Changes	*	*	*	*	*		*
Masonry Repair/ Repoint	*	*	*	*	*		*
Signs	*	*	*	*	*		*



EXISTING
FACADE







SIGN WEIGHT: ~ 280 LB

Customer:	
Contact:	
Address:	
City:	State/ZIP:
Phone:	Fax:
Customer Email:	

Description:

.063 Aluminum box painted with neon tubes attached on both sides all connected with GTO Silicone wires in to Ventex electronic transformer with ground fault protection.the box will be mounted with 2.5" x 1/8" still tubes welded to flat bar 6" X 1/4" for wall mounting. The sign will be attached to the wall with 3/8" Toggel bolts.

From: [Lorraine Pearsall](#)
To: [Berger, Chris](#)
Cc: [Ashley Flory](#)
Subject: 6939 Laurel Avenue
Date: Wednesday, February 7, 2024 5:04:57 PM

[EXTERNAL EMAIL] Exercise caution when opening attachments, clicking links, or responding.

Hi Chris,

The addresses 6931, 6935 and 6939 Laurel Avenue are located within our only Spanish Colonial commercial building in the District, it is a c.1910 Outstanding Resource. The space located at 6939 Laurel Avenue is the subject of this signage proposal.

Upon close review, it is clear that the proposal in its current form simply doesn't work. The signage above storefronts in Old Town is horizontal in form. There is simply no vertical signage above storefronts, or vertical signs inserted between two second floor windows.

Our tenet is: always respect the architecture when proposing changes. Not only is the sign verticality an issue, its insertion between two second floor windows would detract from the architecture of the resource itself, the row of six windows, and impair the view of the front facade of the resource from the street.

The sheer beauty of our architecture in Old Town, with its feelings and associations, derives from our lovely and unique low commercial buildings with horizontal signage above the ground floor storefronts and a second floor with windows. We even have a row of storefronts with no second floor. Each building is a special gem. So getting this design right is important.

WHAT WILL WORK: Looking at the storefront elevation of the previous Republic sign that you provided clearly shows the wonderful balance with windows, doors and the sign. The sign style and placement do not fight with the architectural elements, rather they enhance them. The magic here is that this horizontal sign design with slanted sides can be centered perfectly below the three windows and above the two doors (as was the Republic sign), and projects only 3 feet from the building. Motor Kat could be on both sides of the sign as was Republic. The form would work beautifully as it did before.

A flat horizontal sign will also work at this location, also centered below the middle window on the second floor as was the old Republic sign.

I am separately sending you a photo of the building. On the left side facing the building is where Motor Kat now is and Republic once was. On the right side is where the bank "Truist" is, and you see the flat sign for Truist above. Importantly, the windows remain unobscured across the length of the entire building.

I hope these thoughts are helpful.

Lorraine Pearsall, Vice President
Historic Takoma, Inc.

From: [Lorraine Pearsall](#)
To: [Berger, Chris](#)
Subject: 6939 Laurel Avenue
Date: Wednesday, February 7, 2024 5:16:11 PM

[EXTERNAL EMAIL] Exercise caution when opening attachments, clicking links, or responding.

Hi Chris, this shows a photo of the entire building, with unobscured windows.
Lorraine



Sent from my iPhone