

**CITY OF SAINT PAUL
HERITAGE PRESERVATION COMMISSION STAFF REPORT**

FILE NAME: 214 Fourth Street East
DATE OF APPLICATION: April 3, 2013
APPLICANT: HGA Architecture and Engineering
OWNER: Ramsey County Regional Rail Authority
DATE OF REVIEW: April 25, 2013
HPC SITE/DISTRICT: Union Depot/Lowertown Historic District
CATEGORY: Pivotal
CLASSIFICATION: Sign Permit
STAFF INVESTIGATION AND REPORT: Bill Dermody
DATE: April 17, 2013

A. SITE DESCRIPTION:

The Neo-classical Union Depot building was constructed between 1917 and 1923. The building façade is composed primarily of a large, unadorned Doric colonnade separating identical left and right wings which reinforce the symmetrical façade. The north façade's monumental portico consists of limestone columns supporting an ornate cornice and entablature. The east, north and west elevations are limestone and the south elevation is largely brick with terra cotta sills. The concourse which extends from the Head House is a two-story steel framed wing extending over Kellogg Boulevard and supported on exposed steel columns. The Depot was designed by Chicago architect, Charles Frost. The waiting room is a great vaulted area that spanned 17 sets of railroad tracks.

According to the *St. Paul Union Depot Historic Landscape Assessment for the Approach Area* by Dennis Gimmestad dated March 4, 2009, the Beaux Arts ideal for Union Depot was further realized by including a half-block of open space with a symmetrical curving approach drive. The entrance landscape served the circulation needs of the facility, and provided room for views of the building within the urban context.

The Union Depot head house and concourse are designated as part of the Lowertown Historic District. The site is individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The associated train deck was determined eligible for listing on the National Register. The HPC has review authority over the site and exterior envelope of the head house and concourse, those areas within the local Lowertown Historic District.

The front lawn slopes away from the building's center portion toward 4th, Wacouta, and Sibley Streets.

B. CHANGES PROPOSED:

The applicant proposes to install a sign package that includes monument signs, building signs, banners and interior signs. The locations of the proposed signs include the front lawn, the head house and concourse. The application includes a full sign package for context, including some signage that is not subject to HPC review: interior signs, two monument signs (Type "A2") that are not on the locally designated portion of the property, and six banners that are also not on the locally designated portion. Items subject to review include: two monument signs (Type "A1"), four banners, a large "Union Depot" building sign, and 13 other building signs on the historic head house and concourse. The State Historic Preservation Office will review all of the signs inside and out.

Two monument signs are proposed in front of the head house adjacent to Wacouta and Sibley Streets, set back approximately 95 feet from 4th Street. The dark gray metal signs feature six tenant panels per side with “Union Depot” on top and an off-white stone base below. The signs have internally illuminated push-through acrylic letters on a dark background. The letters are white by day; by night, the letters could be either white or business colors. Design Option 1 for the monument signs involves a clock feature on top of the sign and a total height of 10’-2”. Design Option 2 lacks the clock feature, opting for a simpler rectangular design, and is 7’-8” in height. See pages 1 and 2 of the application for details.

Four stretched-fabric banners are proposed: two for the head house front elevation flanking the central section of columns, and one each on the concourse walls above Kellogg Boulevard. Each vertically oriented banner is 8’ wide by 28’ high. The banners are intended to promote special events and be changed out quarterly. The banner frames are intended to be permanently installed. See pages 4-7 of the application for details.

The applicant proposes a “Union Depot” sign in 3’-high, individual pin-mounted, dark gray letters above the central head house entrance. The letters will not be illuminated. See page 8 of the application.

Proposed building signs include tenant signs and parking/traffic signs (e.g. “Public Parking”). See pages 10-12 of the application. The tenant signs are either flag-mounted and indirectly lit with gooseneck fixtures (Types T1f and T2f) or directly mounted and unlit (Type T1w). The one proposed single-tenant sign (T2f) has dark gray metal framing and uses business colors for the letters and background. The multi-tenant signs use white letters and dark gray backgrounds, and display a maximum of six tenants.

The horizontally oriented, 12’-wide traffic signs are placed above garage doors and the carriageway entrance/exit. They are unlit and feature light gray text on a dark gray background, with white-on-dark-gray clearance bars below. The application states the traffic signs are spaced 2” from the wall; however, in more recent conversations with staff, the applicant has verbally requested that 12” spacers be allowed so as to better protect the walls in the case of impact from a too-tall vehicle.

All building signage is proposed to be attached into mortar, not stone or brick, so as to avoid damage.

C. BACKGROUND:

The Union Depot site received HPC approval in 2010 for a demolition plan. The site received HPC approval in 2011 for major rehabilitation, reconstruction, and reconfiguration throughout the site. Given federal funding, the rehabilitation work required complying with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. A Memorandum of Agreement was executed and the HPC served as a consulting party in that review process. The State Historic Preservation Office has been reviewing the rehabilitation work.

The Greater Lowertown Master Plan Summary was adopted by the City Council in 2012 and amended to the Comprehensive Plan. The following goals and strategies should be taken under consideration and relate to this current proposal:

Historic Preservation

Goal 9.2 Continue to preserve the historic character of the Historic District.

Goal 9.5 Welcome and celebrate changes and investments in Lowertown by managing them within the strong historic fabric.

Strategy 9.1 *Apply the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Treatment of Historic Properties and the local Design Review Guidelines to all repair, alteration, new construction and demolition in the Historic District.*

Land Use & Urban Design

Goal 3.4 *Welcome new investments that enhance and augment the unique qualities of Lowertown.*

Goal 3.5 *Maintain the historic character of the district and neighborhood.*

D. GUIDELINE CITATIONS:

Lowertown Historic District Guidelines (Sec. 74-112)

III. Signs and accessories.

Signs should be compatible with the character of the District, and blend with the character of the structures on or near which they are placed. Signs should not conceal architectural detail, clutter or detract from the intended facade; but rather complement the overall design of the building and the period in which it was built.

A. Materials. *Sign materials should complement the materials of the related building and/or the adjacent buildings. Surface design elements should not detract from or conflict with the related structure's age and design in terms of identification symbol (logo), lettering, and related patterns or pictures. Materials used should be the same as those used for signs during the period of the building's construction, such as wood, wrought iron, steel, and metal grill work. Newer materials such as extruded aluminum and plastics may not be appropriate.*

B. Types. *The sign type should enhance the building's design and materials. New billboards are not permitted in the Lowertown District.*

C. Location and method of attachment. *There should be no sign above the cornice line or uppermost portion of a facade wall. Signs should not disfigure or conceal architectural details. Painted signs of pedestrian scale may be permissible on glass windows and doors. The facade should not be damaged in sign application except for mere attachment. The method of attachment should respect the structure's architectural integrity and should become an extension of the architecture. Projecting signs should have a space separating them from the building. (Protection of architecture in method of attachment shall be regarded as a basis for granting variance of the normal zoning code prohibition against guy wire supports for projecting signs).*

D. Lighting. *Location of exterior lights should be appropriate to the structure. Signs should generally be lit from on the site. There should be no flashing, blinking, moving, or varying intensity lighting. Subdued lighting is preferred. Backlit fluorescent or exposed neon are generally inappropriate.*

E. Grills, exhaust fans, Etc. *Grills, exhaust outlets for air conditioners, bath and kitchen exhaust fans should be incorporated into filler panels and kept out of principal facades, if possible. They may be painted the same color as the filler panel.*

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation relating to new construction:

9. *New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize a property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size,*

scale and proportion, 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.*

E. FINDINGS:

1. The Union Depot with attached concourse and waiting room is classified as pivotal to the Lowertown Historic District and is individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Additionally, the entire train deck footprint has been determined eligible for the National Register. The Historic Structure Report (HSR) completed in 2010 as a Section 106 requirement to guide the rehabilitation of Union Depot into a multi-modal transit hub provides a comprehensive history of the Union Depot including evaluating significance of various building and site elements and recommending restoration or rehabilitation as appropriate.
2. **Monument Signs on Front Lawn:** The front lawn and drive were classified as having primary significance in the HSR under two criteria: 1. As possessing Neo-Classical architectural characteristics and 2. Representing the building as a great public early-twentieth-century structure. The HSR recommendations addressed the importance of the space, plan and symmetry and other Beaux Arts architectural ideals but recognized the many alterations that took place prior to the current rehab of the front lawn. Recommendations relating to the front lawn's rehabilitation were provided but did not specifically address signage.

The two monument signs are placed symmetrically and they are appropriately set back so as to better preserve views to the central portion of the head house from 4th Street and the nearby intersections at Wacouta and Sibley. The grade changes aid in reducing the monument signs' visual impact on the east and west wings – despite their height – especially for Design Option 2 (no clock). The monument sign Design Option 2 (no clock) *blend(s) with the character* of the head house with its simple, rectangular symmetry and does not *clutter or detract from the intended facade*. However, Design Option 1 (with clock) detracts from the intended façade due to its increased height and the introduction of a clock feature that is not typically found in this part of a train depot.

The dark metal material *complements the materials of the related building*, as do the stone monument sign bases. The metal materials are similar to that *used for signs during the period of the building's construction*. Modern materials, such as plastic or vinyl, are limited to sign lettering. The drawings showing only dark metal and lettering in white keeps the color scheme simple while still conveys a lot of information. This approach will not add clutter to the building's image or be distracting.

The signs are internally lit and backlit signs are not recommended by the guidelines, however, only the individual letters are lit and there is no blinking or varying intensity lighting proposed. The backgrounds are also opaque.

Monument signs with space for building tenants and the "Union Depot" identifier should lessen the demand for wall-mounted signs that could *conceal architectural detail, clutter or detract from the intended facade*.

3. **Head House Banners:** Fabric banners are not a traditional material nor are they located in

an area that traditionally had signage or was intended for signs. The banners are considered permanent in that the attachment into the wall and supports will remain but the banners will change and advertise special events rather than businesses within the Depot or for wayfinding. Banners are appropriately vertical in orientation so as to reinforce the architecturally dominant column features and having two reinforces the symmetry of the facade. The banners do cover the only solid stone wall space on the main façade but do not cover any unique moldings or detailing. The banners are not proposed to be lit.

4. **Concourse Banners:** Fabric banners are not a traditional material nor are they located in an area that traditionally had signage or was intended for signs. The banners are considered permanent in that the attachment into the wall and supports will remain but the banners will change and advertise special events rather than businesses within the Depot or for wayfinding. The concourse banners are vertically oriented but the concourse itself is horizontally oriented and the banners break up the horizontal lines from the concourse to the waiting room. The banners do cover solid brick wall space on the each side of the concourse but do not cover any unique moldings or detailing. The banners are not proposed to be lit. Recommending the banners at the concourse become horizontally oriented may create safety concerns extending over Kellogg Boulevard and may also make changing the banners more difficult. Scaling down the banners to extend only one level in height will not disrupt the horizontal massing of the concourse and waiting room portions.
5. **Union Depot Letters on Entablature:** Because the first Union Depot (Richardsonian) building that burned down in 1913 had individual letters on the upper portion of the façade, does not make a case for the appropriateness of installing letters at the entablature for this Union Depot (Beaux Arts) head house. Union Depot letters were not a part of the original design intent and throughout the building's use as a train station there were no letters or signs added within the entablature. The mere presence, stature and colonnaded facade often indicated the use and public nature of the building.

The Lowertown Design Review Guidelines state "*There should be no sign above the cornice line or uppermost portion of a facade wall.*" The proposed letters are not above the cornice line but are at the uppermost portion of the main façade and do not comply with the guideline.

The treatment standard for the main façade that was specified in the HSR was to *restore* it rather than *rehabilitate* it given its level of significance. The letters could be perceived as original and an element that was brought back (restored), while the fabric banners will clearly read as a new feature that is not original. SOI Standard 9 states "*New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize a property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.*"

Section details were not provided noting the amount of holes that will be required to support each individual letter or how far the 6" deep letters will project if at all. No lighting is proposed for the letters.

6. **Wall Mounted Directional Signs:** There are several wall signs proposed for wayfinding and their materials of dark metal and white lettering is compatible with the character of the structure. Their locations are near entries and are appropriately sized to direct pedestrians. All building signage will be attached only into mortar joints and complies with the guidelines.

They are either non-illuminated or light from the front with a goose-neck type light and comply with the guidelines. The guidelines state *“Projecting signs should have a space separating them from the building”* and the two projecting signs will have a 4 ¾” space.

7. This proposal will not have a negative impact on the property or the Program for Preservation in the Lowertown Historic District so long as the conditions are met.
8. The proposal will not have an adverse affect on the program for the preservation and architectural control of the Historic Lowertown Heritage Preservation District (Leg. Code §73.06 (e)) provided the conditions are met.

F. STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the findings, staff recommends approval of the permit application, with the exception of the Union Depot letters within the entablature, and provided the following conditions are met:

1. The concourse banners on each elevation will be scaled down to be approximately one level in height and final size and placement will be submitted to staff for review and final approval. Another option for consideration would be to keep the vertical orientation and size but move the banners to the south, centered at the corner where the concourse turns and becomes the waiting room.
2. Monument signs shall use Design Option 2 (no clock).
3. The proposed Union Depot letters within the entablature will not be installed.
4. The monument signs on the front lawn shall be kept to the proposed two-color scheme as panels are changed out: the dark metal background and the white letters.
5. All building signage will be attached into mortar joints.
6. Final drawings indicating the conditions shall be submitted to staff for final review and approval.
7. Any revisions to the approved plans shall be submitted to staff and/or the HPC for consideration.

G. ATTACHMENTS

1. HPC Application and plans
2. Written testimony—none received