

**Community Planning & Economic Development
Planning Division**

250 South 4th Street, Room 110
Minneapolis, MN 55415-1385



City of Minneapolis
*Department of Community Planning
& Economic Development - CPED*

MEMORANDUM

TO: Heritage Preservation Commission
FROM: Brian Schaffer, Senior City Planner 612.673.2670
DATE: January 17, 2012
RE: Concept Review: Proposed China Garden in Washburn Fair Oaks Park

The Applicant is seeking feedback on a proposal to construct a Northern-Style Minneapolis-Harbin China Friendship Garden Pavilion and Grounds in the southeast quadrant of Fair Oaks Park within the Washburn Fair Oaks Historic District. The Applicants proposal includes a new pavilion, a small viewing pavilion, an entrance structure, and a bridge over a proposed water feature. These features will be connected with trails and landscaping. The Applicant's plan can be found in Attachment 2aa.

Pages 9-11 of the Applicant's proposal include a description of the Applicant's approach to his project. The approach includes utilizing the existing design of the landscape -mainly the topography, adding features that are inspired by the original features of the grounds of Washburn's Fair Oaks property, and adding new features that are inspired by Northern-Style Chinese Garden designs.

This proposal presents interesting questions about the decision to locate a Chinese inspired garden within the Washburn Fair Oaks Historic District, the compatibility of the proposed project with the historic and current design features of the Fair Oaks property and the compatibility of the proposed project with the surrounding Washburn Fair Oaks Historic District. The following memorandum and materials provided by the Applicant attempt to address these questions. CPED believes these questions are important for the Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) to comment on during the conceptual review.

The Applicant's materials indicate that there has been some coordination with the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) A requirement for a Certificate of Appropriateness Application to be deemed complete is permission from the property owner, Before pursuing a Certificate of Appropriateness or submitting the application the Applicant will need the approval of the MPRB.

HISTORIC BACKGROUND

Fair Oaks Park

The Park was originally the site of Senator W.D. Washburn's home "Fair Oaks", which was designed by architect E. Townsend Mix in 1883. (Mix also designed the Metropolitan Building.) The design for estate's grounds is attributed to Frederick Law Olmsted. The mansion was razed in 1924.

According to written descriptions, photographs, and plat maps the grounds of Fair Oaks included hills, two water features, a bridge over the water features and a series of trails that connect the site. Buildings included the mansion, stables, and in later years a greenhouse and an out building (Sanborn 1912). The Applicant has included some historical photographs and a plat map from 1885 identifying these features.

In 2008, the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board published a history of its parks and trails. It was compiled by David C. Smith and entitled “Parks, Lakes, Trails and So Much More: An Overview of the Histories of MPRB Properties.” The following is a brief history of Washburn Fair Oaks Park from this publication. It provides a good overview of its background history.

Washburn Fair Oaks was one of the first sites considered for a city park long before the park board was created. In 1869 Richard Mendenhall offered to sell forty acres in the vicinity to the city to create a park. The city council declined that offer and eventually two of the city’s wealthiest men, Dorilus Morrison and William Washburn, built homes there.

In 1911, Morrison’s son, Clinton, offered to donate his family’s estate, eight acres south of East 24th Street between Stevens and Third avenues, to the park board for the express purpose of creating an art museum. The park board accepted that offer and the former Morrison estate, Dorilus Morrison Park, now holds the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

The donation of the Morrison estate to the park board generated interest in the Washburn property just to the north. And later in 1911 William Washburn made an offer to the park board that it accepted. He would sell his land to the park board for the appraised price of the land alone—not counting the value of the buildings on the land. It was a generous offer considering that Washburn’s enormous mansion, the largest in the city, the barns, stables and greenhouses were valued at about \$400,000 by themselves. (The property even included a small lake fed by an artificial water supply.)

So the park board purchased Washburn’s land in 1911 for about \$250,000 on the condition that Washburn and his wife would retain possession of their home until they died. The land passed to the park board upon the death of Mrs. Washburn in 1915. The stables and greenhouses were demolished soon after the park board acquired the land, but Fair Oaks, the mansion, stood for another nine years. The park board never knew what to do with the enormous home and it fell into disrepair. It was used as a meeting place by civic groups during World War I and after, especially the Women’s Welfare League. The park board even considered at one time making the huge home its headquarters.

In 1916, park superintendent Theodore Wirth wrote that he believed the grounds could be developed “to become useful as a small children’s playground, without destroying, to any appreciable extent, the present attractive features of the park.” The next year, in the 1917 annual report, Wirth provided a drawing for how an outdoor amphitheater with a seating capacity of 1,100 people could be laid out in

the park. Wirth noted that the park had been used already for several “small plays” by children and included a photo of one such production in his annual report. (Judging by the photo, the “small plays” were likely forerunners of the later playground pageants staged at Lyndale Park.) But none of these suggestions were pursued.

While the mansion deteriorated, the grounds around it became an informal playground for neighborhood children. However, neither a dilapidated mansion nor children’s ball games were appreciated in the neighborhood. The building deteriorated to the point that in 1923 Helen Law and others offered to give the park board \$25,000 to buy a new playground in the neighborhood if it would demolish Fair Oaks. (Earlier in the year Law had asked the park board to ban baseball in the park and to build two tennis courts there instead.) The Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts, the operators of the Institute of Arts, favored the demolition so that a suitable setting and approach to the Institute could be created.

The park board accepted the offer and Fair Oaks was demolished in 1924 in the hope that the entire park could be transformed into a beautiful landscaped plaza in front of the Institute of Arts. Park commissioner Phelps Wyman, a landscape architect, and Theodore Wirth collaborated on the design of a plaza for Washburn Fair Oaks Park, which was published in the park board’s 1923 annual report, but never built. Wirth proposed in 1926 that the plaza should be the start of an esplanade that would extend from the Institute of Arts to the Minneapolis Auditorium a mile to the north.

The beautiful approach to the Institute of Arts that both the fine arts society and the park board wanted instead of the mansion or the playground, never was developed. Washburn Fair Oaks has remained instead a beautiful open green space in the center of the city. Land to replace Washburn Fair Oaks as a playground was not purchased until 1926 and it as much too small to serve as a full-service playground.

History of William D. Washburn

In 1857 Washburn came to Minneapolis and opened a law office. Soon after his arrival he accepted the appointment as secretary and agent of the Minneapolis Mill Company, which controlled the west-side power of the Falls of St. Anthony. While serving with the Mill Company Washburn acquired both lumber and flour interests for the company. In 1889, when the Minneapolis Mill Company and St. Anthony Falls Water Power Company of the east-side and the most prominent of the flour mills were consolidated under a new company, Washburn remained as a director.

In 1861 President Abraham Lincoln appointed Washburn Surveyor General of Minnesota, and while serving in this post Washburn began to build up private interests in lumber and flour. However, in 1889 the lumber business was closed and the flour milling interests were transferred to a new company, Pillsbury Washburn Flour Mills Company. William Washburn, along with his cousin, Dorilus Morrison, was involved in the building of the Northern Pacific’s first section of railway. He also acted as president of the Soo Line Railroad from the time it was built until he became senator.

W.D. Washburn was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives in 1870 and the U.S. House in 1879 in which he served six consecutive years. Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1889, he held this office for a six year term.

Washburn-Fair Oaks Historic District

The Washburn-Fair Oaks Historic District contains a significant concentration of residences built at the turn of the century by prominent developers of Minneapolis. These residences exemplify the fashionable stylistic modes of architecture during this period and were designed by important local architects, including William Channing Whitney and Ernest Kennedy. The designated area is defined by East Franklin Avenue on the north, 35-W freeway on the east, East 26th Street on the south and the alley between Nicollet Avenue and 1st Avenue South on the west, but reaches over to include the former Christian Scientist Church at the corner of Nicollet Avenue and East 24th Street. Fair Oaks Park, originally the site of Senator W. D. Washburn's home "Fair Oaks," gives the area its name and serves as an aesthetic core. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (2400 3rd Ave.), designed by McKim, Mead and White in 1912, operates as the area's major landmark and activity center.

In the early years of Minneapolis' history the most desirable and prestigious residential areas were located close to the hub of activity, the city's central business district. As the population grew, however, prominent families began to move away from the once choice areas of town and build their large homes along the outer edges of the city. The pockets of fine residential structures along the 1866 city limits of Minneapolis testify to this trend which began as early as the 1870s. With its many large and elegant homes, the Washburn-Fair Oaks District is a prime example of this outward movement.

Although incorporated into the city in 1867, intensive settlement of the Washburn-Fair Oaks District did not begin until the early 1870s. Improved transportation resulted in the progressed development of the area. In addition to elegant homes, single and two-family houses and large apartments began to fill the vacant land. By 1930, settlement of the area had begun to cease.

The Washburn-Fair Oaks District provides a varied platter of popular architectural styles that existed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Many of the structures have retained their original design although their functions have changed. The Luther Farrington House (2100 Stevens Ave.) and both of the Crosby Houses (2104 Stevens Ave. and 2105 1st Ave.) represent examples of the Georgian Revival style. The two Pillsbury Houses (100 and 116 E. 22nd St.) reflect characteristics of the Medieval Revival, while the Edward Gale House (2115 Stevens Ave.) is Renaissance Revival in conception. The E.A. Merrill Residence (2116 2nd Ave.) represents the fanciful complexities of the late Victorian brownstone era.

The District's period of significance is 1858-1926.

DECISION TO LOCATE A NORTHERN-STYLE CHINA GARDEN WITHIN WASHBURN-FAIR OAKS

The Applicant's materials discuss the connection of China with Washburn and the original owners of the properties surrounding Fair Oaks. The Applicant has done significant research to document this connection and discusses the property owner's business dealings, travels and art collections. The Applicant also addresses the connection between the Chinese culture, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts,

and the owners of the surrounding properties. The Applicant uses this information to justify locating the proposed China Garden in Washburn Fair Oaks Park.

COMPATIBILITY OF THE PROPOSAL WITH WASHBURN-FAIR OAKS PARK PROPERTY AND THE WASHBURN FAIR OAKS HISTORIC DISTRICT

During the Washburn-Fair Oaks Historic District's period of significance the structures on the subject site were demolished and the site was used as a park. No specific evidence has been provided by the Applicant that demonstrates the extent of alterations that may have occurred on the site since the demolition of the Washburn's residence through today. The designation study for the historic district does not discuss the specific elements for the park, it does however, address the setting of the mansions surrounding the park.

The Applicant's proposal falls under the rehabilitation treatment of cultural landscapes as defined by the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes. The guidelines for rehabilitation recommend identifying, retaining, and preserving historic features. The topography appears to be a feature of the site that remains intact. The Applicant's proposal is to utilize the existing topography, which appears to be in-keeping with this guideline.

The guidelines recommend the following regarding replacing missing features: "Designing and installing new structures, furnishings and objects when the historic features are missing. It may be an accurate restoration using historical, pictorial and physical documentation; or be a new design that is compatible with the historic character of the landscape. For example, replacing a picnic shelter with one of a new compatible design."

The guidelines further recommend the following for new additions: "Designing and installing a new structure, furnishing or object when required by the new use, which is compatible with the preservation of the historic character of the landscape. For example, constructing a new farm outbuilding utilizing traditional building materials or installing appropriately scaled and detailed signage."

Conversely the following is not recommended for new additions under the guidelines for rehabilitation: "Placing a new structure, furnishing, or object where it may cause damage, or is incompatible with the historic character of the landscape. For example, constructing a new maintenance facility in a primary space."

"Locating any new structure, furnishing or object in such a way that it detracts from or alters the historic character of the landscape. For example, installing a "period" gazebo that was never present in the cultural landscape."

"Introducing a new structure, furnishing or object in an appropriate location, but making it visually incompatible in mass, scale, form, features, materials, texture or color. For example, constructing a visitors' center that is incompatible with the historic character of the cultural landscape."

The Applicant's proposal introduces new additions to the site that are inspired by the historic existence of a former bridge, a water feature, gardens and out-buildings, with designs that are inspired by Northern-

Style China gardens and not by designs of the adjacent former architecture. The location of the features, expect the water feature and bridge, are not in historic locations of previous buildings or structures.

Is the design and location of the proposed structures compatible with the site and historic district in terms of mass, scale, form, features, materials and texture?

The Washburn Fair Oaks Historic District Design Guidelines provide direction for new buildings. They do this by offering guidance on scale, dimension, materials and roof form. Due to the variation in the district the guidelines do not offer specific requirements and state that these elements should be consistent and compatible with existing elements.

The historic district guidelines also state that:

Proposed new buildings shall not “materially impair the architectural or historic value of buildings on adjacent sites or in the immediate vicinity within the preservation district.”

Does the Applicant’s proposal materially impair the architectural or historic value of the Washburn-Fair Oaks Park?

Does the Applicant’s proposal materially impair the architectural value or historic value of buildings adjacent to the park?

CPED looks forward to discussing this project with the Heritage Preservation Commission on January 17, 2012.

Attachments:

Submitted by CPED:

1938 Aerial Photograph of Washburn-Fair Oaks Park: A7

Submitted by Applicant

Project Background and Narrative: B8-B21

Supporting Information and Project Concept: B22-B46