



ARLINGTON COUNTY, VIRGINIA

<p style="text-align: center;">County Board Agenda Item Meeting of May 17, 2008</p>
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DATE: April 24, 2008

SUBJECT: Proposed Designation of Swanson Middle School as an Arlington County Historic District.

C. M. RECOMMENDATION:

1. Adopt the attached ordinance (Attachment 1) approving the proposed local historic district designation of the Swanson Middle School, in accordance with the procedures outlined in Arlington County's Zoning Ordinance, Section 31A, Part C, Establishment of Historic Districts.
2. Approve the attached Guidelines for a Certificate of Appropriateness (CoA) and for an Administrative Certificate of Appropriateness (ACoA) for the Swanson Middle School Historic District (Attachment 2).

ISSUE: This report is for the approval of the proposed designation of the historic Swanson Middle School property as an Arlington County Historic District, as well as approval of the CoA and ACoA Guidelines for the historic district. No issues have been identified.

SUMMARY: The Historical Affairs and Landmark Review Board (HALRB), in its prescribed role of establishing locally designated historic districts, followed the guidelines noted in both Section 31A, Part C of the Arlington Zoning Ordinance, as well as the established guidelines for designating school properties outlined in the July 2004 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the HALRB, Arlington County, and Arlington Public Schools (APS). The HALRB therefore recommends that the Swanson Middle School be locally designated as an Arlington County Historic District (see Attachment 3, Historic District Designation Form). The HALRB has extensively researched the property and found that it is eligible for local historic district designation under all three criteria (historical significance; suitability for preservation or restoration; and educational value) as noted in Section 31A, Part D, and also meets six of the twelve designation criteria listed in the HALRB's bylaws. The HALRB further recommends that the proposed historic district boundary include the entire 6.7-acre parcel owned by the Arlington School Board and that is known as 5800 Washington Boulevard (RPC #10-037-054) (see map in Attachment 1).

<p>County Manager: _____</p>

<p>County Attorney: _____</p>

<p>Staff: Michael Leventhal and Cynthia Liccese-Torres, CPHD, Neighborhood Services Division</p>
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BACKGROUND: In accordance with the steps outlined in the MoU noted above, both the HALRB and APS have thoroughly reviewed the Swanson Middle School Historic District Designation Form and the proposed Guidelines for a Certificate of Appropriateness (CoA) for the Swanson Middle School. At its regular meeting on October 4, 2007, the Arlington School Board discussed the proposed HALRB request to designate the Swanson Middle School as a local historic district. The School Board, after a brief discussion, voted unanimously to support the proposed local historic district designation of the Swanson Middle School, as per the revised Historic District Designation Form and the CoA Guidelines proposed for the property. Two weeks later on October 17, 2007, the HALRB had a public hearing on the Swanson Middle School designation at its monthly meeting, at which the HALRB's Survey Committee formally presented its findings. The HALRB voted unanimously to accept the findings of the Survey Committee and requested that the proposed designation be submitted to the Planning Commission for its review and recommendation.

Due to competing Historic Preservation Program workload priorities with limited staff resources, the Historic Preservation Program staff did not transmit the HALRB action and related documents to the Planning Commission until February 5, 2008. Issues with the legal advertising requirement for this matter further held up its review before the Planning Commission. The Planning Commission reviewed the proposed nomination at its April 7, 2008, meeting and voted unanimously in favor of having the HALRB submit the nomination to the County Board for consideration. On April 16, 2008, the HALRB voted unanimously to 1) approve the Swanson Middle School for local historic district designation; 2) recommend to the County Board that this proposal have a public hearing; and 3) recommend that the County Board approve the designation so as to establish the Swanson Middle School as a local historic district.

Since 1978, the HALRB has been nominating important historic buildings, sites, and districts to the County Board for designation as local historic districts. This nominating procedure is outlined in the Arlington County Zoning Ordinance, Section 31A, Part C, Establishment of Historic Districts. To date, 29 buildings, sites, and/or districts have been so nominated and granted local historic district status, the most recent of which was Reevesland in December 2004. In addition to the procedures noted in Section 31A, the HALRB, Arlington County, and Arlington Public Schools also have entered into a MoU that provides a series of additional steps and approvals in order to ensure a mutual understanding by and collaboration of all parties regarding the historic designation of school properties in the County.

The historic designation of Swanson Middle School was first considered by the HALRB back in 2003 upon receiving a request from the Westover Civic Association. Although several years have passed since that initial request, the lapse has benefited the designation process in two significant ways – 1) the MoU was created and successfully carried out by all parties involved, and 2) the Historic District Designation Form was substantially revised and expanded as part of a collaborative effort between Historic Preservation Program staff and APS Administration staff. The HALRB Chairman decided to revive the designation process for the Swanson Middle School in the Spring of 2007, with the assistance of the HALRB's Survey Committee, historic preservation staff, and APS Administration staff. During this time, Certificate of Appropriateness (CoA) Guidelines were also drafted in close consultation with the APS Administration staff.

DISCUSSION: The HALRB, through examining the research and a site analysis of the building, has concluded that the Swanson Middle School is worthy of being protected and celebrated as an Arlington County Historic District. The building is one of the most visually prominent landmarks within the Westover neighborhood with a commanding hilltop presence and an open front entrance lawn. Swanson Middle School is historically significant for its association with the development of west-central Arlington in the late-1930s through the 1940s, including the communities of Westover, Highland Park, and Overlee Knolls. Completed in 1939, the school was designed by State Board of Education architect Raymond V. Long. It was built with the assistance of Federal Public Works Administration funds under a New Deal program initiated by the Roosevelt administration in response to the economic depression of the 1930s. Named in honor of a prominent Virginia politician, the school officially opened to students as Claude A. Swanson Junior High School on January 2, 1940. It has remained in continuous operation as a middle school since then.

The building itself is architecturally distinctive as a grand example of the Colonial Revival (Georgian Classical Revival) style, which was prominent during the period in which it was built. Swanson Middle School is the only such stylistic example of Colonial Revival school architecture that survives in Arlington and is also the oldest extant junior high school building in the entire County. Though some original building elements have been removed over the decades, such as the roof dormers, central rooftop cupola, and open interior courtyard, the building still retains its symmetrical arrangement of windows and doors, the prominent front entrance gable with Palladian window, and the original massing of the main block flanked by two wings and massive brick chimneys.

The school also reflects the same quality of materials and was designed in the same classical architectural style as the small-scale single-family, two-family, and garden apartment residences that surround the school in adjacent Westover Hills. Both Swanson Middle School and the buildings of Westover Hills were built with a nod to permanence given their modern concrete slab and steel construction. The physical qualities of Swanson Middle School and its immediate setting, as planned and executed in the original 1939 design, continue to dominate the character of the building. Sympathetic alterations and changes over time, including maintenance-related changes and the construction of new additions to the historic building, have not negatively compromised its historic and architectural integrity. On May 2, 2006, Swanson Middle School was listed in the National Register of Historic Places as a contributing building to the Westover Historic District.

The proposed local historic designation is limited to significant features of the site, including the original school building and its immediate surroundings, especially its prominent location on a slight hill and the formal, open entrance lawn along Washington Boulevard. The priority for preservation of the site will involve maintaining the historic and architectural integrity and character of the original portion of the school and the historic open character of the front lawn. The building's interior, rear athletic fields, existing parking lots, and the placement of any temporary school trailers would be exempt from review by the HALRB.

The HALRB has rigorously followed the guidelines and procedures that have been established in Section 31A of the Zoning Ordinance for the creation of local historic districts, as well as the special procedures for locally designating historic school properties as detailed in the MoU between the HALRB, Arlington County, and APS. Throughout the designation process and public meetings held to date, there has not been any negative discussion about this proposed historic designation from any public or private sector sources. The creation of this local historic district for the Swanson Middle School already has been several years in the making. From the initial designation request received in 2003, to the July 2004 MoU, and the recent rejuvenation of the proposal by the HALRB and APS in 2007, this process truly has been a collaborative effort amongst all involved parties. It has resulted in not only increased communication between the HALRB, Arlington County, and APS, but also a greater appreciation for the County's historic school facilities. It is only appropriate that the local designation of the Swanson Middle School be the first successful example resulting from this coordinated effort.

FISCAL IMPACT: The proposed local designation of the Swanson Middle School Historic District has no fiscal impact.