



HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

APPLICATION: MA-96 (Amendment)

AGENDA ITEM: PH-3

PREPARED BY: Craig Jimenez
Planning Division Manager

MEETING DATE: July 23, 2014

SUBJECT: Amendment to Mills Act Contract MA-96 (HL-102)
619 West Hillcrest Boulevard

APPLICANT: Christopher and Lisa Tsirgiotis

REQUEST: Modify a condition of a Mills Act Contract requiring the preservation of a small accessory structure.

ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION: Categorical Exemption (Class 1)

BACKGROUND: In 2006, the property at 619 West Hillcrest Boulevard was designated Historic Landmark HL-102. A Mills Act Contract for the property was also approved.

This house is located on the north side of West Hillcrest Boulevard. Built in 1926, the house is a very good example of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture. The property was determined to meet Criteria Number 1 (Person of Significance) and Criteria Number 4 (Architecture) of the Historic Preservation Ordinance. The house was named after Clifford Emberson, who served on the Planning Commission and City Council during the 1930s and 1940s.

The Mills Act Contract is a benefit afforded to property owners of City designated historic landmarks which provides a property tax reduction to the property owners in exchange for the maintenance, preservation and restoration (if necessary) of the property. Every Mills Act Contract includes a list of Standards and Conditions which contain several uniform requirements applied to all contracts including an electrical safety inspection, placing a landmark plaque on the property and a seismic retrofit. Additionally, there are conditions unique to each contract that may have certain specific restoration tasks or preservation requirements.

Condition #7 of the Mills Act Contract for this property requires the preservation of the detached garage and the small casita in the rear yard (pictured to the right).

DISCUSSION: The property owners would like to build a larger accessory structure in the rear yard in place of the existing casita. The casita is approximately 60 square feet.



However, as the condition on the Mills Act Contract requires the casita's preservation, this precludes the Historic Preservation Commission from approving a Certificate of Appropriateness for a structure that removes or substantially replaces the existing structure.

The owners of 619 West Hillcrest Boulevard have filed an application to amend the property's Mills Act Contract Condition #7 by removing the requirement that the casita be preserved and is not considered contributing to the historical significance of the property. The property owners submitted a letter which is attached to the report which provides the owners' reasoning and justification for the request.

The request is whether or not Condition # 7 should be amended to read as follows:

"7. The garage ~~and casita~~ in the rear yard ~~is are~~ considered as contributing and ~~its their~~ preservation is required."

Therefore, the question before the Historic Preservation Commission is if the casita is a significant contributing factor to the historical significance of the property.

The record of the proceedings do not indicate a specific discussion or reason behind the inclusion of the condition, nor is there indication that the significance is based on factors other than architectural. The preservation of the casita was part of the draft conditions that were presented to the Commission; it was not added during the public hearing.

Since, there is no precedence for this type of request and Staff is looking to the Commission to provide direction.

OPTIONS: Two options are presented to the Commission for their consideration and discussion.

Option 1 – Determine that the casita is not a significant contributing factor to the significance of the property and recommend to the City Council that Condition #7 of the Mills Act Contract be amended to remove the preservation requirement of the casita.

If the Commission determines that the preservation of the casita should not be mandatory, and the City Council concurs and approves amendment to the Mills Act Contract, as proposed, then the removal or the modification of the casita does not necessarily cause a barrier to the approval of the proposed Certificate of Appropriateness. In this case, the following motion is appropriate:

Approve the amendment to Condition #7 of the Standards and Conditions as presented in the Staff Report and so recommend to the City Council.

Option 2 – Confirm that the Casita is a significant contributing factor to the historical significance of the property and recommend to the City Council that the proposed amendment should be denied.

If the Commission determines that the preservation of the Casita should remain a mandatory requirement of the Mills Act Contract, then the proposed Certificate of Appropriateness cannot include the removal of the existing Casita as it would be in violation of the Mills Act Contract as the findings for approval could not be made. In this case, the following motion is appropriate:

Deny the request to amend the Standards and Conditions list and so recommend to the City Council.

Chris Tsirgiotis

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Date: June 19th, 2014

Historic Preservation Commission
City of Monrovia
415 S. Ivy Avenue
Monrovia, CA 91016

Members of the Historic Preservation Commission:

My family and I are long time residents of Monrovia and own a historically designated home at 619 West Hillcrest Boulevard, which was purchased in July of 2013.

I have requested an amendment to the Mills Act Contract for my property. The current contract lists a "casita" as contributing to the property and therefore must be preserved. This building is quite small, about 60 square feet inside with a 7-foot ceiling. It is being used at the moment as my office and design studio, which I use frequently in my line of work as an animation artist. As one can see when stepping inside, the casita is too small and cramped to house my workstation and my library of reference books. I hope to build something more suitable as a workspace, and the location of the casita is the most logical spot when one considers the configuration of the property. Since it doesn't seem possible to preserve the building in its present form and still build the studio I need, I request to remove the listing of the casita as contributing to the property.

There are several reasons why I believe this request is reasonable and should be granted:

1. The casita cannot be seen at all from the street. If the Commission's primary charge is to preserve the architectural heritage of Monrovia, then it is reasonable to assume that the focus would be on structures that are visible to the community. As far as the community is concerned, the existence of the casita is not a factor. Therefore, it should not be considered as significantly contributing to the property by the Commission.
2. When the original application was submitted, the alterations done to the main house in 2006 were considered acceptable by the Commission. These changes altered the look of the property much more than expanding the casita would, since they are visible from the street and the casita is not. They are also rather atypical in style from the period when one notices the large wood support pillar holding up the extension. Considering the fact that these alterations were deemed acceptable, it is reasonable to conclude that my proposal should also be deemed acceptable.
3. As outlined in Steve Baker's history of the house, there is no mention of the casita as having any particular purpose or historical significance. Judging from its small size, one can only suppose that it may have been built as a shed or a playroom, certainly not a living space of any kind. It is my view that a small, purposeless structure like this need not be deemed as significantly contributing to the property. I hope the Commission will agree.
4. When discussing the situation with Jimi Hendrix, I was told that the preservation of the casita and garage was a specific request by the former owners, the Dunbar family, when they originally applied for the Mills Act designation. If this is the

case, it suggests to me that perhaps these structures might not have been included in the designation if the Dunbars had not requested it. Upon further discussion with Mr. Hendrix, I learned that although it is not uncommon for accessory structures to be included in a contract, it is not a strict requirement.

5. The casita is not up to current building fire safety standards, which state that accessory buildings must be at least 3' from any property line. In addition, because it is less than 5' from the property line, it must have fire sprinklers if there are openings facing the property line. The proposed structure will satisfy all building, planning, and fire safety considerations.

It is also important to note that I carefully considered alternatives that would preserve the casita before I decided to request the contract amendment. These alternatives are outlined below along with reasons why I believe they are not the best solutions:

1. Build the proposed art studio in a different location on the property:

This solution preserves the casita by building the proposed structure next to it or in the opposite rear corner of the property. In order to do this, I'd have to cut down most if not all of the mature fruit trees in the rear yard, which is undesirable. More importantly, the proposed structure will look like an obvious addition to the property when one views the smaller casita next to it. My intention is to build a structure that matches exactly with the architectural style of the house and garage and is perfectly integrated with its surroundings so that when one views the art studio from the house, it will look like it has been there all along.


2. Re-locate the casita to another area on the property:

This solution preserves the casita by moving it to the opposite rear corner from its current location. I discussed the logistics and rough cost of doing this with Mr. Hendrix. Moving the casita is not practical and is well outside of my budget for this project.

Let's assume for argument's sake that there's a way to build the studio while preserving the casita that I haven't considered. If so, and the studio is built, the casita will no longer serve any useful purpose other than as a storage unit. This would not be a practical use of the space on the property.

In closing, let me say that I believe the Historical Preservation Commission is a vital body to this city. I wholeheartedly support its mission to preserve the historical architectural heritage of Monrovia. It's one of the biggest reasons my family has chosen to make Monrovia our home for over a decade. I respect the review process in place and I understand the unusual nature of my request to amend the current Mills Act contract to exclude the casita. I believe I've made every reasonable effort to preserve the overall mission of this Commission regarding this proposal. I respectfully ask that you will consider my proposal in the spirit of that mission, and allow it to go forward.

Sincerely,


Chris Tsirigotis