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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD  
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

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Property Address:	<b>7051 Spring Place NW</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Landmark/District:	<b>Takoma Park Historic District</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
ANC:	<b>4B</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Denial Calendar
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept Review
Meeting Date:	<b>December 15, 2011</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	<b>11-518</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Brendan Meyer</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

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The applicant, Bruce Levin (owner) seeks concept review for a 142-unit, two-building residential development in the Takoma Park Historic District. Plans were prepared by Don Tucker of EDG Architects, LLC.

### **Property Description and Context**

The site is tucked in an isolated corner of the Takoma Park Historic District nearly adjacent to the above-ground platform of the Takoma Park Metro station. It is a triangular shaped collection of lots that straddle a narrow, dead-end public right-of-way (Bull Place). Spring Place is to the south, the rear property lines of four Chestnut Street houses is on the west, and the Metro and railroad track rights-of-way are on the north.<sup>1</sup>

The existing lots are either vacant or put to light-industrial use as an auto repair and storage yard with a cluster of non-contributing garages and sheds. The original 1983 historic district nomination aptly describes the area as an “intrusion” in the historic district which is, “not readily visible from the historic district but [is] never-the-less non-conforming.” The adjacent houses on Chestnut Street are prime examples of the Victorian and c. 1900 four-square houses which typify Takoma Park’s character and sense of place.

Spring Place has a single outlet onto Chestnut Street, and at the time of the historic district designation, was a generally under-used back street. Recent new construction and development has lent Spring Place a higher order of use that began with the Cedar Crossing (Cedar and Blair) and The Gables (7051 Blair Road) projects. These two residential developments, reviewed and approved by the Board in the last ten years, began transforming Spring Place to a residential street. With the exception of a few commercial properties that back onto Spring, the proposed project at 7051 Spring Place will essentially complete the transformation of Spring to a residential street.

### **Proposal**

The proposal will consist of approximately 140 residential units divided into two buildings to be built in two phases. The site which currently has a gentle slope up from Spring to the tracks will be graded down to the level of Spring. The new grade at the rear of the site will be approximately 15 feet lower than the grade of the Chestnut Street lots. The Spring Place elevations will be brought nearly flush to the south property line, but give over to public use a four foot wide strip of private property to a new

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<sup>1</sup> Being a triangular site there is no “east” side. While technically the site is angled within the street grid, this staff report uses simplified ordinal references. South is assigned to the Spring Place side because site plan drawings orient Spring to the bottom of the page.

bike lane. On the west and north, buildings will generally be setback anywhere from 15 to 25 feet and are to be landscaped with existing and newly planted trees.

Both buildings will be winged plans that define open courts. Triangular Phase I, east of Bull Place will have a north-south wing along Bull and an east-west wing along the tracks. The two ends of the wings will face Spring and create a triangular landscaped court open to Spring. The circulation to individual units of Phase I will be exterior, covered galleries overlooking this court. Phase II will have more traditional interior circulation and align along the west side of Bull Place. It will have two short wings that project to the west and the rear property lines of the houses on Chestnut Street. Altogether this will enclose a court big enough to be used as five parking spaces and automobile circulation. The rear of Phase II will be elevated on posts to allow at-grade parking spaces and vehicle circulation underneath.<sup>2</sup>

Elevations are fully articulated on the south, west, both sides of Bull Place, and the courtyard elevations of Phase I. The courtyard elevations of Phase II and both faces along the tracks are not yet fully rendered, but indicate a similar rhythm and pattern as the developed elevations. The new elevations along Bull have not been developed.

The first floors would be brick with simple punched openings and act as a base for the overall building. Along Spring Place, the floors above the base would have a sawtooth profile on top of the straight brick wall below. As a result the main floors would be a rhythm of angular enclosed projections beyond the base and open balconies inset from the base. This pattern would vary only slightly, most noticeably at the southeast corner of each building which will be completely glazed. The courtyard elevations of Phase I--which would be prominent as pedestrians approached from the Metro—transition to a horizontal character due to the open galleries, but is overlaid by a series of vertical green screens. Once alive with plants the screens should echo the vertical elements of Spring Place. The western elevations of Phase II forego the sawtooth profile of Spring and simplifies to square projections at each corner. The upper story along Spring sets back once, and the upper stories on west which face the backs of the Chestnut Street houses setback twice.

Cladding materials of the main floors will be fiber cement panels of varying colors, in both smooth and wood grain textures. Other façade accents include horizontal aluminum sunshades over most windows, and balcony railings of wire screens and planter boxes which will provide more area for plant growth. Windows above the double-hung windows of the ground floor will be slider and fixed windows with transoms above.

### **Zoning and Community Issues**

The development team has held a series of neighborhood meetings with the ANC, Historic Takoma, and individual groups of neighbors. HPO has received a large amount of correspondence from community organizations and members, roughly balanced between concerned parties and supportive parties. ANC 4B submitted a resolution (6-0) that supports redevelopment of Spring Place but outlines a number of important concerns and suggestions.

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<sup>2</sup> The site provides a total of 35 parking spaces, the remainder of which to be located at the eastern apex of the triangular site. The applicant's Concept Approval Application Form states that 53 spaces are required. The parking shortfall is a primary reason why this project requires Zoning relief which is being pursued separately by the applicant

As mentioned above, the project will require zoning relief. The developers have also been working with the District Department of Transportation to analyze and mitigate their traffic impact on the neighborhood.

There is no archaeological potential on site due to previous significant re-grading of the site most likely due to building up the railroad right of way.

### **Evaluation and Recommendation**

The Board has had recent experience with multi-unit new construction in this neighborhood. Most recently it approved the second phase of a residential and commercial project at 231 Carroll St NW (HPA #11-282) across the tracks and closer to the commercial heart of Takoma, and 7041 Blair Road NW (HPA #05-286), the rear of which is directly across Spring Place from the subject project.

Both the community and staff can point to 7041 Blair Road as a successful and compatible addition to the historic district. Indeed, its proximity to the site and prominent location fronting one of the main thoroughfares of Takoma Park, make it a very convenient and worthwhile comparison. Its traditional material arranged in heavy masonry masses, its symmetry, and its setback central court with circular drive is handsome in a way evocative of the grand apartment houses of Connecticut Avenue. It may not have the most direct precedent in the specific Victorian suburb of Takoma Park, but its low height helps it fit into this specific neighborhood and make it *not incompatible* with its surrounding context.

“Not incompatible” is the general standard in the preservation law used to qualify new construction in historic districts. It allows the Board to guard against incompatible new construction that would otherwise diminish the historic character of protected neighborhoods, but it also allows the Board to be open to contemporary, modern 21<sup>st</sup>-century designs. Contemporary design, by its nature, cannot adopt every trope of traditional architecture, but if it follows general principals derived from the surrounding context or historic building types it can almost certainly fit into the historic district without disrupting it.

The most fundamental aspects of the design—its site plan, footprints, massing, height, and number of units—fit into this corner of the historic district efficiently and would be a complementary addition to Spring Place. Material selection, window design, and secondary elevations not yet fully designed require further study so as to eliminate any lingering incompatibilities.

The isolated site offers the advantage that it has a minimal relationship to surrounding historic buildings. It does not sit next to or across from such resources, but in this case sits behind the Victorian and four-square houses of Chestnut Street. It's a relationship that is not immediately evident, but will directly impact the current residents and owners. The design has to a large extent successfully mitigated this impact through a variety of measures. Most fruitful is that the re-graded and lowered site will effectively lower the overall building enough that its roof line will generally align with the rooflines of the Chestnut Street houses. Additionally the two upper floors each setback—at the loss of a few residential units—so that Phase II steps down towards Chestnut. The new construction will not be significantly taller than the houses on Chestnut Street. Also, by arranging the open court on this side, the weight of the new building's massing is lessened and the Chestnut houses are relieved from being encroached on by a sheer wall. The rear yards of Chestnut vary in depth from 40 to 50 feet and the side yard of the Phase II will vary from 15 to 25 feet.

Combined with the proposed fence and retaining wall, the project will sufficiently respect the historic conditions on Chestnut Street.

In general the façade compositions along Spring and the courtyard in Phase I are obviously contemporary in their materials and geometry. This fits in with the applicant's desire to market a modern, "green" and sustainable project. However, aggregating the details, the cumulative effect is somewhat more commercial rather than residential. The Board was unequivocal when it heard 7041 Blair Road that Spring Place could someday become a "real" street, alive with residents and pedestrians. The current project could complete this residential trajectory. However, there are several approaches that could be taken to softening the commercial effect of the current design. Not all of them may be necessary, but enough should be explored so as to have the desired residential effect.

Some examples include adding divisions to the windows or assuring that there is sufficient reveal at the window openings so that the scale of the windows is lessened and the windows imply some significant wall thickness. Reducing the number of color and texture combinations in the fiber cement panels would simplify and quiet what is already a complicated geometry due to the sawtooth profile of alternating projections and balconies. Compositionally, there is little wrong with the shape and rhythm of the sawtooth profile and the open galleries of the courtyard. This area of the project has no relationship with any historic resources, and largely sets the tone for the applicant's contemporary design. However some minor refinements should be reconsidered, like how the entrances to the two buildings are called out (they are currently not obvious or prominent) and the composition of the of the Phase I elevation at Spring (which consists of a glazed corner, a lone green screen, and topped by a large pergola at the roof setback) could benefit from re-arrangement and simplification.

As the project continues to be developed, the applicant should expand his set of drawings to clearly show the elevations along the tracks on the north side of the site and on both sides of Bull Place. Also, while the current drawings are sufficiently clear on the conceptual size and scale of the project relative to its context, there are some slight discrepancies between the site plan and the elevations. These should be corrected and dimensioned when it returns to the Board.

### **Recommendation**

*The HPO recommends that the Board approve in concept the site plan, footprints, massing, height, and number of units, and return to the Board when the following items have been sufficiently developed:*

- 1. Revise materials, windows, colors, etc. to achieve residential character*
- 2. Revise corner composition at southeast corner, and*
- 3. Develop elevations for Bull Place and north facades.*

*No portion of this recommendation shall be construed as approval or endorsement for any necessary zoning relief.*