Stephanie Rawlings-Blake
Mayor

PLANNING COMMISSION

Wilbur E. "Bill Cunningham, Chairman

STAFF REPORT

Thomas J. Stosur
Director

June 23, 2016

REQUEST: CC Bill #16-0658 - Landmark Designation: Ambassador Theatre, 4604 Liberty Heights Ave.

RECOMMENDATION: Approval

STAFF: Lauren Schiszik

PETITIONER: Councilwoman Rochelle "Rikki" Spector

OWNER: Larry Gaston Enterprises

SITE/HISTORIC DISTRICT

Site Conditions/Architectural Description: The Ambassador Theatre is a free-standing two-story brick movie theater. The façade of the building is constructed with buff brick with bands of black brick, Vitriolite, and ornamental stone. The building is three bays wide, with an entrance in the center bay. This entrance has been altered over the years, suffered a fire in 2012, and is currently boarded up with plywood. Above the center bay is a large horizontal Vitriolite marquee that projects over the sidewalk by more than ten feet. The façade of the building is one story tall at the sidewalk, and steps up and back in a series of recesses above the entrance. The vertical AMBASSADOR marquee is located to left of the entrance, rising higher than the building itself. The two outer bays of the building feature two semi-circular projections on the second story, which are crumbling, as well as decorative horizontal banding. The rest of the building is constructed with a red brick. The structure has been vacant since at least 2009, and suffered a fire in 2012 that gutted the interior. Based on an exterior visual survey, the building still retains physical integrity, but is at risk of further decay. The roof structure is still intact, but has some holes and is missing some roofing.

General Area: The Ambassador Theatre is located on Liberty Heights Avenue in the northwestern neighborhood of Howard Park, near the intersection with Gwynn Oak Ave. This neighborhood was developed in the early 20th century as a streetcar suburb. Liberty Heights Avenue is the main commercial street in the neighborhood. The south side of the 4600 block of Liberty Heights Avenue was historically comprised of one and two story commercial structures, but today it is the site of the new Shop-Rite grocery store. On the north side of the block, the theatre is located mid-block, adjacent to two single family homes converted to commercial businesses on one side, and a gas station on the other side.

HISTORY

There are no previous Planning Commission actions regarding this site.

CONFORMITY TO PLANS

The proposal is consistent with the City of Baltimore's Comprehensive Master Plan, specifically: PLAY Goal 1: Strengthen Stewardship of Historical and Cultural Resources; LIVE Objective 4: Protect and Enhance the Preservation of Baltimore's Historic Buildings and Neighborhoods.

ANALYSIS

This is the second public hearing for this structure as part of the Baltimore City Landmark designation process. The first hearing occurred when the CHAP Commission reviewed and recommended approval of Landmark designation on June 14, 2016. CHAP's landmark report is attached to this staff report.

The CHAP Commission found that based upon the historical context and architectural design of the Ambassador Theatre, the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation found that it meets CHAP Landmark designation criteria for the following standards:

B. A Baltimore City Landmark may be a site, structure, landscape, building (or portion thereof), place, work of art, or other object which:

1. Is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Baltimore history;
3. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

Located in the northwestern neighborhood of Howard Park, the Art Deco- style Ambassador Theatre was one of the most modern theaters in the city when it opened in 1935. The theater was designed by prominent Baltimore architect John J. Zink for Durkee Enterprises, which was the largest neighborhood movie theater company in the city. The Ambassador is considered to be one of Zink's most exuberant designs. The theater is significant for its role in the development of Northwest Baltimore and theater design, and serves as an excellent example of Art Deco architecture.

This Landmark Designation has been reviewed by the CHAP Commission and is consistent with planning initiatives.

NEIGHBORHOOD NOTIFICATIONS

Notification of this hearing has been provided to the owner and posted on the property. The following entities were notified about the consideration of this item: Councilwoman Spector, Councilwoman Holton, AIA Baltimore, Baltimore Heritage Inc., Baltimore National Heritage Area, Preservation Maryland, Howard Park Civic Association, Howard Park Community Activities Association, Inc., and GO-Northwest Housing Resource Center.

Thomas J. Stosur
Director