



S A V A N N A H H I S T O R I C D I S T R I C T
B O A R D O F R E V I E W

REQUEST FOR CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS

Petitioner: GM Shay Architects

MPC File No.: 24-001537-COA

Address: 620 East River Street

PIN: 20005 02003

Zoning: D-W

Staff Reviewer: Caitlin Chamberlain

Date: August 12, 2026

NATURE OF REQUEST:

The applicant is requesting approval for design amendments to the previously approved hotel at 620 East River Street. The building permit is still active. The scope of the changes include:

- Eliminate balconies without river views; add other balconies
- Minor fenestration changes
- Screen final rooftop equipment locations
- Addition of stair penthouse per building code
- Addition of ground level handrails per building code
- Add pool area lighting (as required by local Health Department)
- Change from St. Croix limestone cladding to Alabama natural limestone (supplier changed)
- Shade trellis added

SITE CONTEXT:

This proposed hotel is part of a larger development which consists of four hotel buildings and a parking garage. Across River Street, to the southwest, a portion of this development is already constructed and includes the Homewood Suites hotel. To the west of Homewood Suites, the former SEPCO/Georgia Power building has been demolished and new construction of a hotel has been approved by the Review Board. These parcels, in the northeast quadrant of the Savannah Historic District, flank River and Bay Streets.

The project area is outside of the Savannah National Historic Landmark District but is within the local historic zoning overlay (Figure 1). There is little remaining historic context.

Historically, this area was defined by an industrial character. The 1888 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, provided in Figure 2, illustrates several buildings on the site with an active wharf, buildings

engaging Bay Street, and paved areas internal to the site at the approximate location of River Street. Buildings were both wood frame and masonry, ranging from 1-3 stories in height.

The neighboring Marriot Hotel, to the immediate east, is not located within the historic district and is not subject to the requirements of the Historic District ordinance. The Marriott is approximately nine stories tall with a mezzanine and is approximately 100 feet tall with an additional pyramidal roof over the center atrium.

Trustees' Garden, to the south, is a contributing element to the Savannah National Historic Landmark District. The property is on a bluff bounded by a retaining wall on the north of the property; portions of the wall are parallel to Bay Street.

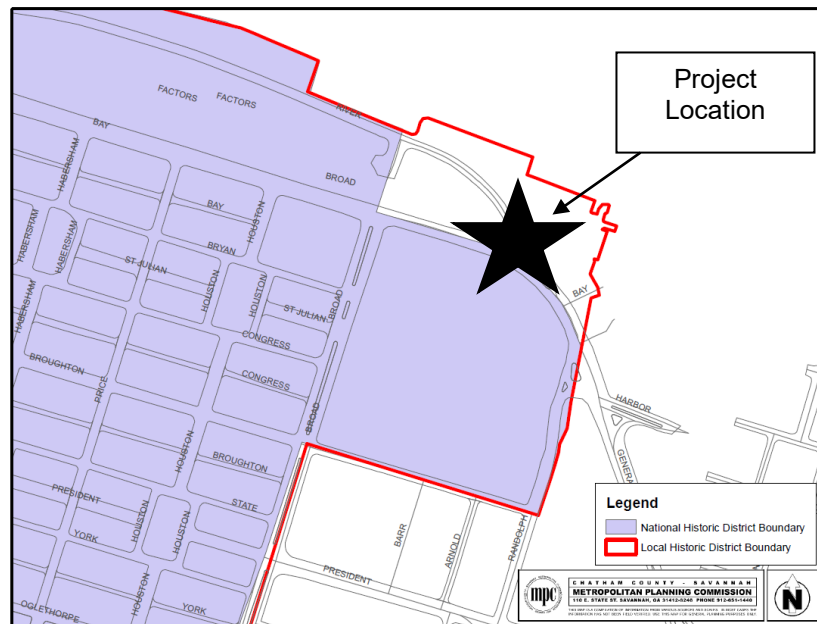


Figure 1. Map of the Savannah National Historic Landmark District, in purple, and the local historic zoning overlay district, outlined in red. The approximate location of the subject area under consideration is identified by the star.

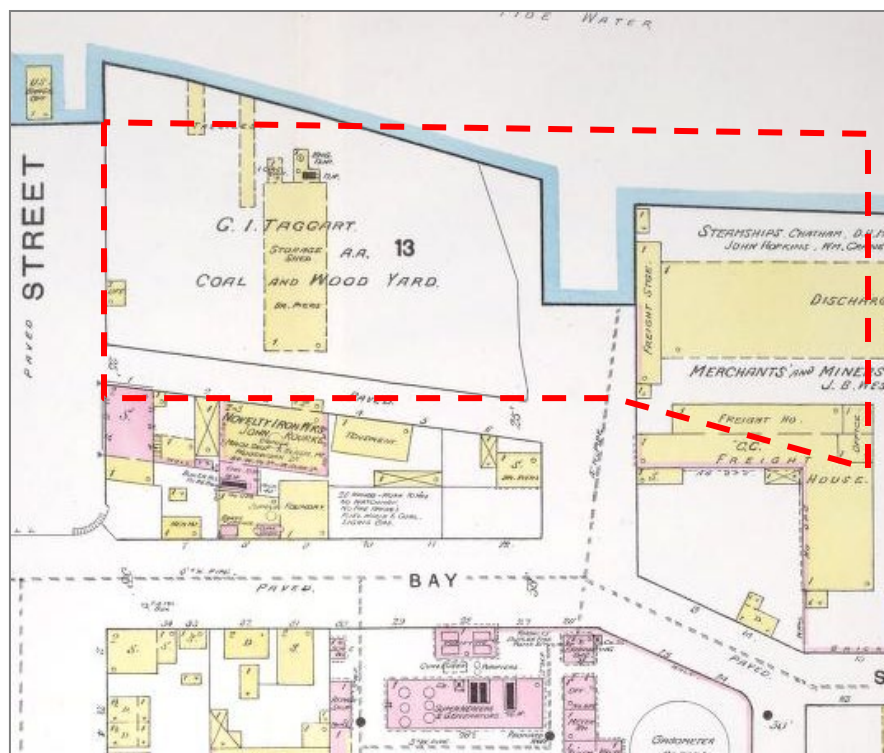


Figure 2. 1888 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map. Approximate location of the entire development is outlined.

PROJECT HISTORY

This development first came before the Review Board in 2012 [File No. H-120719-4727-2] after the applicant petitioned City Council for a change to the Historic District Height Map in this area of the Savannah Historic District. The Height Map was subsequently changed, in June 2012, to permit 3-stories or 45 feet above Bay Street in this building's location, (measured at the datum of City Hall, which is 42 feet above MSL, allowing 87 feet above MSL). Now known as the Hilton Hotel, in the previous COAs it was known as Hotel 2 and then Hotel 1.

Due to the size and significance of this project, it was previously decided (in 2012) by the Review Board that the Part I, Height and Mass review would be considered in two phases. Phase A would consider height, proportion of structure's front façade, rhythm of structures on the street (setbacks and any parking standards that affect setbacks), massing including recesses and scale. Phase B would consider proportion of openings, rhythm of solids to voids, entrances and balcony/porch rhythm, any parking standards that may affect these openings or entrances, walls of continuity, and roof shape. Directional character would be considered by both the building form and openings and applies to both Part I reviews.

The conditions of the previous continuances and approvals were as follows:

2012-2013 COMMENTS

December 2012 Meeting (Continued):

General Comments:

1. Lower heights will allow greater views in the spirit of open structures along River Street. Preserve as much of the River view as possible.
2. River Street is an organic element that follows the shape of the river and Factors' Walk is the primary context.
3. Cupolas and rooftop features have a better place at the end or beginning of River Street, as you enter General McIntosh Boulevard, not the centerline of the road.
4. Continue the connections between the pedestrian spaces and the River.

Building Specific Comments:

1. Break up the massing of the two-story segment along the river front. Reconsider the vertical element [tower] at the far western end of the structure.
2. Increase the north setback of the western half of the hotel segment along the waterfront to be consistent with the line of continuity established by the proposed development along the waterfront.
3. The height should not exceed two-stories forward of the adjacent Marriot Hotel in order to be compatible with neighboring structures to which it is visually related and to continue the one- and two-story character of new development adjacent to the river walk.
4. The height on the north blocks view from Emmett Park.

January 2013 Meeting (Approved with Conditions):

1. Parapet heights not to exceed four feet, and

2. Approval of the additional story provided that the ground floor active use standard is met and verified through submittal of entrances and openings with the Part I, Phase B application for the Certificate of Appropriateness.

2017 COMMENTS

January 2017 Meeting (Continued):

1. The portion of the building along the River Walk which is greater than two stories, is setback to the same depth as the adjacent Marriot, to be compatible with the height, rhythm, and scale of adjacent building and similar historic buildings and to retain the one- and two-story character of the river front.
2. Reduce the height of the tower element significantly or eliminate entirely.
3. Further break down the width of the west façade.
4. Revise the square windows to be vertical in character and have a 5:3 ratio.
5. Restudy the relationship of the very tall first story with the shorter, second story, on the west, two-story portion of the building.
6. Revise the 12-foot-wide bay spacing.
7. Reduce the width and depth of the porte-cochere significantly.
8. While a Part II Design Detail, redesign the formal decorative, Art Deco parapet towers and other elements to be more visually compatible with the industrial nature of the surrounding historic context.
9. Ensure that a minimum of 10 feet is provided along the river's edge to meet the standard.
10. Contain the mechanical and access structures within the additional story.
11. Redesign all parapets to not exceed four feet high.
12. Reduce all curb cuts to a maximum of 20 feet wide.
13. Where intersected by a new driveway, ensure the sidewalk shall serve as a continuous uninterrupted pathway across the driveway in materials, configuration, and height.
14. Provide information regarding the visibility of the roof HVAC units from Trustees' Garden.

May 10, 2017, Meeting (Continued):

1. Reduce the height and scale of the domes and integrate into the massing of the building or eliminate entirely.
2. Incorporate a regular rhythm of punched openings (windows) into the bays rather than the larger expanses of storefront or curtainwall system.
3. Restudy the 12-foot-wide bay spacing on the first and second floors.
4. Incorporate voids within the six- and seven-foot-wide spaces between the bays.
5. Incorporate regular voids on the northern two bays of the third floor, west façade; the western bay of the third floor, north façade; and one bay on the first floor, north façade.
6. Increase the setback of the eight-story portion of the building on the north façade to be more similar to the 60-foot setback from the west façade, in order to maintain the one- and two-story character and context of the River Walk and preserve views to the river.
7. Reduce the depth of the porte-cochere significantly.
8. Substantially reduce the number of balconies, and where balconies are incorporated, eliminate the privacy dividers.
9. While a Part II Design Detail, restudy the architectural detailing, which appears to be a high-style classical interpretation with elements of New Formalism, to be more in keeping with the industrial character of the historic context.

10. Redesign the architectural features which appear to be parapet walls throughout the building's design.
11. Revise the sidewalk adjacent to the street to be a continuous uninterrupted pathway in materials, configuration and height.
12. Provide the location of the electric meter.
13. Incorporate a primary exterior entrance to the ballroom.
14. Incorporate the mechanical equipment into the bonus story.

July 12, 2017, Meeting (Part I Approved): *(The petitioner's responses are italicized)*

1. Reduce the height of the proposed "architectural elements" on the rooftop and change the voids to an alternative material.
2. Reduce the depth of the porte-cochere significantly.
3. Either reduce the overall building mass to the 2012 volume or increase the setback from River Street further, more similar to the 60-foot setback from the west façade, to maintain the one- and two-story character and context of the River Walk and preserve views to the river.
4. Provide additional details on the sidewalks at the curb cuts and the elevator and stair on the rooftop.

June 13, 2018, Meeting (Extension):

12-month extension request approved by the HDBR to expire on July 12, 2019, with the previous condition to be met.

May 8, 2019, Meeting (Denial):

The Board denied the petition for New Construction: Part I, Height and Mass based on the incompatibility of the project as outlined in the Staff Recommendation. Staff's recommendation consisted of the following:

Continue the request for amendments to New Construction: Part I, Height and Mass for an eight-story hotel building to be located on the vacant parcel at 620 East River Street in order for the petitioner to consider the following:

1. *Either reduce the overall building mass to the 2012 volume or increase the setback from River Street further, more similar to the 54-foot (+/-) setback from the west façade.*
2. *Redesign/relocate the vertical amenities on the two-story portions of the building, such as trellises and cabanas, to be setback further from the west façade so they are not visible from the street. Include locations for light poles or other vertical objects that are proposed and not currently indicated on the drawings.*
3. *Ensure that the trellises do not exceed 11 feet in height (provide dimensions).*
4. *Revise window openings to meet the 5:3 ratio standard.*
5. *Revise the south elevation of the courtyard so that the distance between windows is not less than two times their width.*
6. *Redesign the sidewalk to continue across the driveways in materials, configuration, and height.*
7. *Locate all HVAC equipment on the drawings and, if visible from a public right-of-way, provide screening details.*
8. *Ensure that a 10-foot pedestrian setback is provided along the river's edge and on the north side of River Street.*

9. *Ensure that all mechanical and access structures are contained within the bonus story. A stair and elevator equipment penthouses are shown on the roof plan.*

June 12, 2019, Meeting (Rescind Denial and Part I Continued):

The Board rescinded their denial of the petition from the May 8, 2019, HDBR Meeting and then voted to continue the request for amendments to New Construction: Part 1, Height and Mass for an eight-story hotel building to be located on the vacant parcel at 620 East River Street in order for the petitioner to consider the following:

1. Either reduce the overall building mass to the 2012 volume or increase the setback from the river further, more similar to the 54-foot (+/-) setback from the west façade.
2. Redesign/relocate the vertical amenities on the two-story portions of the building, such as trellises and cabanas, to be setback further from the west façade so they are not visible from the street. Include locations for light poles or other vertical objects that are proposed and not currently indicated on the drawings.
3. Ensure that the trellises do not exceed 11 feet in height (provide dimensions).
4. Revise window openings to meet the 5:3 ratio standard.
5. Revise the south elevation of the courtyard so that the distance between windows is not less than two times their width.
6. Redesign the sidewalk to continue across the driveways in materials, configuration, and height.
7. Locate all HVAC equipment on the drawings and, if visible from a public right-of-way, provide screening details.
8. Ensure that a 10-foot pedestrian setback is provided along the river's edge and on the north side of River Street.
9. Ensure that all mechanical and access structures are contained within the bonus story. A stair and elevator equipment penthouses are shown on the roof plan.

November 13, 2019, Meeting

The Savannah Downtown Historic District Board of Review does hereby:

Approve amendments to New Construction: Part I, Height and Mass for an eight-story hotel building to be located on the vacant parcel at 620 East River Street as requested because the proposed amendments are visually compatible and meet the standards.

Approve New Construction: Part II, Design Details for an eight-story hotel building to be located on the vacant parcel at 620 East River Street with the following condition to be submitted to staff for final review and approval because the proposed work is otherwise visually compatible and meet the standards:

1. Revise the frosted plastic awnings to be canvas, other equivalent cloth, metal, or glass to meet the standard and be visually compatible.

April 10, 2024, Meeting

The Savannah Downtown Historic District Board of Review does hereby approve the proposed changes in the amendment for the hotel project at 620 East River Street and the plaza

construction with the following condition for staff review and approval prior to starting the work because the work is otherwise project is otherwise visually compatible and meets the standards:

1. Ensure that any canopy structures on the plaza meet the standard of being at least eight (8) feet in height.

FINDINGS:

The proposed building was originally reviewed under a previous version of the Historic District Ordinance (2015-2018 version); therefore, the prior version still applies. The proposed building is classified as a Large-Scale Development. The property is within the Factors Walk Character Area. New construction in this Character Area is exempt from commercial and large-scale development standards (including Height standards) under the previous version of the ordinance.

The following standards from the Historic District Section (8-3030) of the City of Savannah Zoning Ordinance apply:

Visual compatibility factors. New construction and existing buildings and structures and appurtenances thereof in the historic district which are moved, reconstructed, materially altered, repaired or changed in color shall be visually compatible with structures, squares and places to which they are visually related. The following factors shall be considered in determining the visual compatibility of such a building, structure or appurtenance. These factors shall not be the basis for appeal of an adverse decision. Greater weight shall be given to adjacent historic structures.

Height. New construction shall be permitted to build to the number of stories as shown on the Historic District Height Map [see Height (n)(2)] and the Height of a building and the height of individual components of a building shall be visually compatible to the contributing structures to which it is Visually Related.

The inclusion of the stair penthouse to the roof does not dramatically alter the height of the building and remains compatible.

Proportion of structure's front facade. The relationship of the width of a structure to the height of its front facade shall be visually compatible to the contributing structures to which it is Visually Related.

The proposed changes have rearranged the front façade slightly but in a way that is still in proportion.

Proportion of openings. The relationship of the width of the windows to height of windows within a structure shall be visually compatible to the contributing structures to which the structure is Visually Related.

The standard is met, for the same reasons as mentioned above. The height on the sills of the windows on the south elevation were raised to miss the adjacent parking garage but this area is not visible from the public right of way.

Rhythm of solids to voids in front facades. *The relationship of solids to voids in the facades visible from the public right-of-way of a structure shall be visually compatible with the contributing structures to which the structure is Visually Related.*

The rhythm of solids to voids in facades visible from all public rights-of-way are still visually compatible with the changes. The consistent bay spacing is appropriate and compatible.

Rhythm of entrance and/or porch projection. *The relationship of entrances, porch projections, and walkways to structures shall be visually compatible with the contributing structures to which they are Visually Related.*

The removal of balconies not facing the river would not negatively affect the visual compatibility and the addition of balconies elsewhere is still appropriate in the overall rhythm of the design. The slight changes in fenestration including doors will not dramatically shift and thus the visual compatibility will remain intact.

Roof shapes. *The roof shape of a structure shall be visually compatible with the contributing structures to which it is Visually Related.*

The standard is met.

Scale of a building. *The mass of a structure and size of windows, door openings, porches column spacing, stairs, balconies and additions shall be visually compatible with the contributing structures to which the structure is Visually Related.*

With the proposed changes, the scale of the building and all elements noted above, remain as visually compatible as the previously approved version was.

Relationship of materials, texture and color. *The relationship of materials, texture and color of the facade of a structure shall be visually compatible with the predominate materials, textures, and colors used on contributing structures to which the structure is Visually Related.*

The majority of the materials, textures, and colors remain unchanged from the previous approval. There are a few newly proposed materials which appear to meet the standard but staff requests product specifications including colors and materials to verify. The new materials include:

- Structural brick columns
- Shade trellises (galvanized steel- black locust wood stained clear)
- Aluminum mechanical screens – white
- Mechanical louver
- Natural limestone (supplier changed but will look the same as previous)
- Handrails and stairway railings (need materials/colors)
- Pool deck lighting (black aluminum pole mounted with white light)

Staff requests further info for the mechanical screening and new limestone to ensure they remain visually compatible.

Design standards. *The following design standards shall apply to new construction, additions, and alterations to historic and non-historic buildings and structures unless otherwise described herein. Though certain building materials are prescribed herein, the Board may approve alternative materials that are not listed as prohibited upon a showing by the applicant that the material or product is visually compatible with historic building materials and has performed satisfactorily in the local climate.*

Balconies, stairs, stoops, porticos, and porches. *Balconies, stairs, stoops, porticos, and porches shall be subject to the following criteria:*

Balusters shall be placed between upper and lower rails, and the distances between balusters shall not exceed four inches.

This should be shown on the final set of drawings for the new exit stairway on the east elevation, to verify that this standard is met.

Service Areas, Utilities and Mechanical Systems. *Service Areas, Utilities and Mechanical Systems shall comply with the following:*

Electrical vaults, meter boxes, communications devices, and similar equipment shall be located on secondary and rear facades and shall be minimally visible from view.

The gas meters will be assembled on the east elevation, which is a secondary façade and minimally visible.

Windows and Storefronts. *The following standards shall apply to all development.*

Windows.

The centerline of window and door openings shall align vertically on the primary façade.

The standard is met. Openings on all facades align vertically, even with the proposed changes.

All windows facing a street, exclusive of storefronts, basement and top story windows, shall be rectangular and shall have a vertical to horizontal ratio of not less than 5:3; provided, however, nothing in this section precludes an arched window being used. Accent windows may be round or other shapes.

Paired or grouped windows are permitted, provided the individual sashes have a vertical to horizontal ratio of not less than 5:3.

The window standards are met.

Lighting. *In addition to the requirements set forth in Sec. 9.8, Lighting, the following standards apply:*

Configuration: Light fixtures shall be compatible with the scale of the subject property and with the character of the district.

Materials: Light fixtures shall be constructed of metal and/or glass.

Source Type: White light source only.

The standard is met for the proposed pool lighting.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Approve the proposed changes in the amendment for the hotel project at 620 East River Street with the following conditions to be reviewed and approved by staff prior to submitting the final set of drawings for permitting, because the work is otherwise visually compatible and meets the standards:

- 1. Provide further details on the mechanical screening and limestone to ensure they meet the standards.**
- 2. Provide information on the drawings showing that the balusters between railings will be no more than four inches on center.**

MW: CC

Note: This recommendation could change subject to new information provided at the Historic District Board of Review meetings. Final decisions will be made by the Historic District Board of Review at the public hearing based on information provided at the meeting, as well as information submitted for the staff recommendation.