

COA (SP) 2023-029  
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Historical Resources &  
Cultural Arts

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**STAFF REPORT  
SPECIAL CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS  
FOR THE PUBLIC RIGHT-OF-WAY ADJACENT TO  
216 AND 224 CATALONIA AVENUE, 203 UNIVERSITY DRIVE,  
3000 PONCE DE LEON BOULEVARD, AND 225 MALAGA AVENUE**

**Proposal:** The application requests a recommendation of approval for an amendment to the City Plan for the vacation of the alley and the abandonment and vacation of a portion of University Drive.

Because the proposed development is also a receiving site for Transfer of Development Rights, the application also requires review and approval of the proposed development to determine if the proposal adversely affects the historic, architectural, or aesthetic character of historic properties located within a 500 feet radius of the development.

**Architect:** N/A

**Owner:** City of Coral Gables

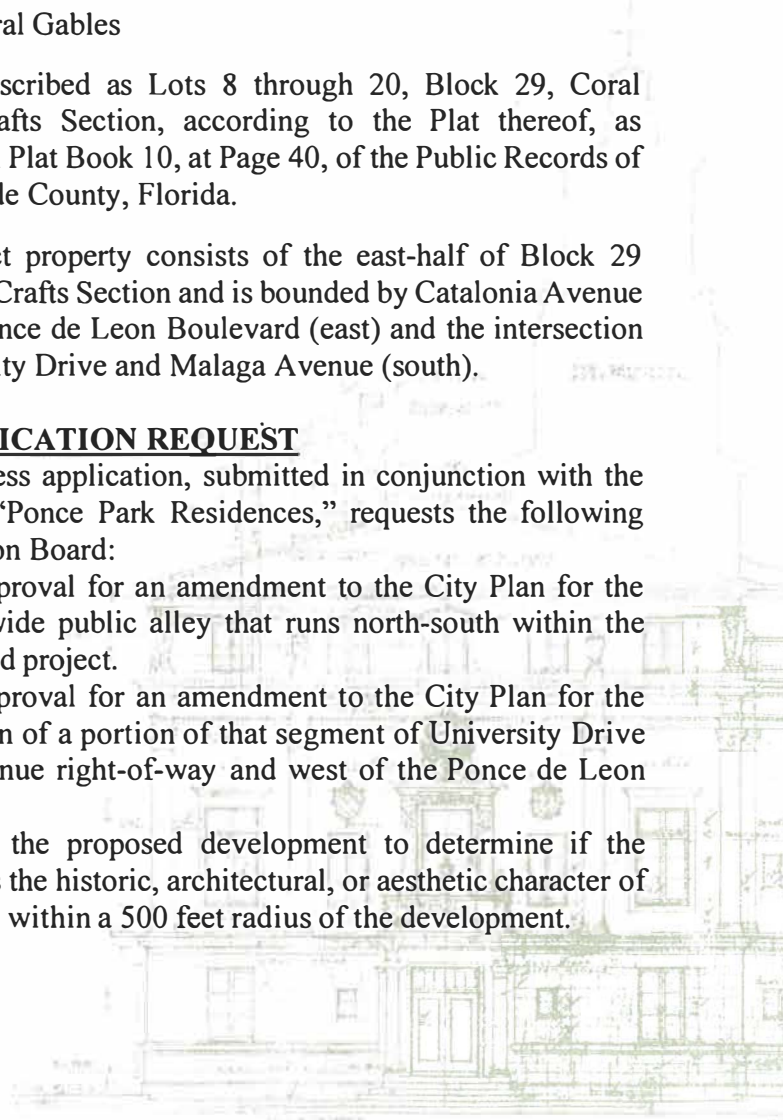
**Legal Description:** Legally described as Lots 8 through 20, Block 29, Coral Gables Crafts Section, according to the Plat thereof, as recorded in Plat Book 10, at Page 40, of the Public Records of Miami-Dade County, Florida.

**Site Characteristics:** The subject property consists of the east-half of Block 29 within the Crafts Section and is bounded by Catalonia Avenue (north), Ponce de Leon Boulevard (east) and the intersection of University Drive and Malaga Avenue (south).

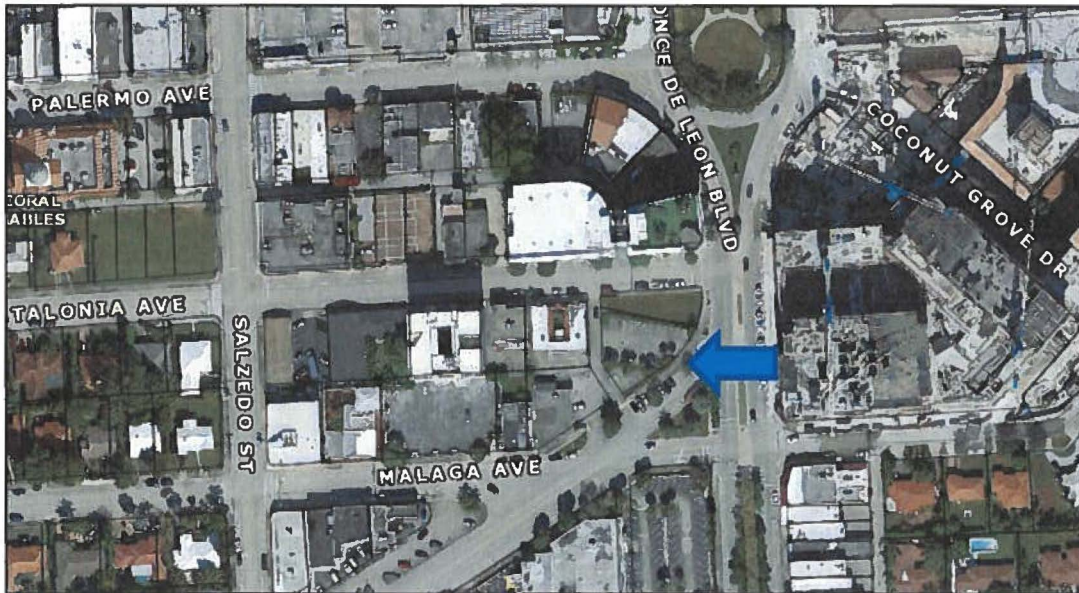
**APPLICATION REQUEST**

This Certificate of Appropriateness application, submitted in conjunction with the development project known as “Ponce Park Residences,” requests the following actions of the Historic Preservation Board:

1. A recommendation of approval for an amendment to the City Plan for the vacation of the 20-foot-wide public alley that runs north-south within the boundaries of the proposed project.
2. A recommendation of approval for an amendment to the City Plan for the abandonment and vacation of a portion of that segment of University Drive north of the Malaga Avenue right-of-way and west of the Ponce de Leon Boulevard right-of-way.
3. Review and approve of the proposed development to determine if the proposal adversely affects the historic, architectural, or aesthetic character of historic properties located within a 500 feet radius of the development.



**LOCATION MAP**



**SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR’S STANDARDS FOR REHABILITATION**

The following Standards have application in this matter:

2. *The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.*
9. *New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.*
10. *New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.*

**VARIANCES**

No variances have been requested with this application.

**BOARD OF ARCHITECTS**

The proposal does not require Board of Architects review.

**PLANNING AND ZONING BOARD**

The proposal was reviewed the Planning and Zoning Board on December 12, 2023. The PZB reviewed six requests related to the proposed development, including the vacation of the alley and abandonment of that portion of University Drive. (See the attached PZB agenda, Staff Report, and minutes for reference.)

The following summary of the meeting was provided by Planning and Zoning Staff:

The Planning & Zoning Board at their December 12, 2023, meeting recommended denial of the 1) Small Scale Comprehensive Map Amendment Commercial Low-Rise Intensity to Commercial High-Rise Intensity land use (vote: 3-3); approval of the 2) Abandonment and Vacation of University Drive with the condition to retain the slip lane as presented (vote: 4-2); 3) Abandonment and Vacation of the alley (vote: 4-2); 4) Receipt of Transfer of Development Rights (TDRs) (vote: 4-2); 5) Tentative Plat (vote: 4-2). The Board took no action on 6) Zoning Zode Code Text Amendment (vote: 3-3).

## **REQUESTS 1 AND 2 -- AMENDMENT TO THE HISTORIC CITY PLAN**

### **BACKGROUND/EXISTING CONDITIONS**

An amendment to the Coral Gables Zoning Code to allow for the designation of the city plan as historic was adopted by the City Commission on April 24, 2018. That amendment is now found in Article 8, Section 8-102 (D) 2 entitled "Procedure for Designation of the City Plan and Amendments to such Plan." The Coral Gables Historic City Plan was designated as a local historic landmark on June 21, 2018.

The Zoning Code requires that any material amendments to the City Plan shall be reviewed by the Historic Preservation Board, who will make a recommendation for a Special Certificate of Appropriateness to the City Commission. The City Commission will ultimately render the decision whether to grant or deny the issuance of the Special Certificate of Appropriateness.

Please note: each request for an amendment to the City Plan will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, as is the normal process for any Certificate of Appropriateness application. Approval of one amendment by the Historic Preservation Board will not be used as a precedent or blanket approval for other applications.

### **REQUEST #1**

In accordance with Section 8-104 (D) 2 of the City of Coral Gables Zoning Code, the application requests a recommendation of approval to the City Commission for an amendment to the City Plan for the vacation of the 20-foot-wide public alley that runs north-south within the boundaries of the proposed project between Catalonia Avenue and University Drive and lying adjacent to 216 Catalonia Avenue, 3000 Ponce de Leon Boulevard, and 203 University Avenue.

### **REQUEST #2**

In accordance with Section 8-104 (D) 2 of the City of Coral Gables Zoning Code, the application requests a recommendation of approval to the City Commission for an amendment to the City Plan for the abandonment and vacation of a portion of that segment of University Drive north of the Malaga Avenue right-of-way and west of the Ponce de Leon Boulevard right-of-way.

### **STAFF OBSERVATIONS**

Section 8-104 (D) 2 of the Coral Gables Zoning Code reads as follows:

2. In the event that the City Plan is designated historic, any material amendments to the City Plan, including but not limited to, the closing of streets and any developments that would affect such City Plan, shall be in accordance with the following procedure notwithstanding any provisions in this Article to the contrary:
  - a. The Historic Preservation Board, at a public hearing, shall review and make recommendation for a Special Certificate of Appropriateness on any proposed

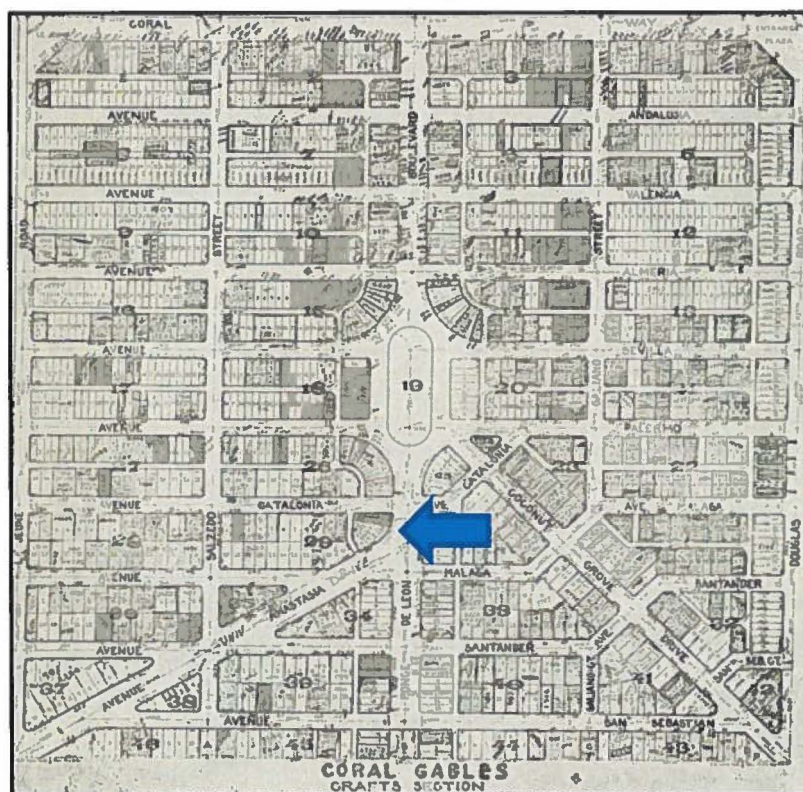
amendments to the City Plan under a balancing of interests weighing the following factors: historic integrity, development, and public purpose.

The Historic Preservation Board is tasked with considering the appropriateness of the amendment to the City Plan while taking into consideration: the historic integrity of the City Plan and the effect of the proposed amendment on the historic integrity, development, and the public purpose being served by the amendment.

**Request #1:**

In planning the City of Coral Gables, founder George Merrick incorporated the Garden City precepts of comprehensive planning which included: defined areas for different uses; quality housing for various income levels; and a wealth of public facilities. Specifically, he built distinct sections: single-family residences; multi-family residences; businesses; and industrial uses. Numerous sections were dedicated to single-family residences. The Douglas Section was planned as a multi-family area. Commercial activities were restricted to the Business Section or along the main thoroughfares such as Ponce de Leon Boulevard. An Industrial Section was implemented and located along the eastern border just north of Dixie Highway. And a specialized live-work Crafts Section was planned.

Within those sections of the city dedicated to business/commercial use, alleyways were introduced as a mechanism to keep services, such as garbage pick-up or deliveries, off the streets allowing for a more pleasant and cohesive “front-of-house” street experience. These alleyways can be seen in the plat of the Crafts Section in Figure 1 below. The alley being proposed for vacation runs north-south at the eastern end of Block 29, bifurcating the assembled site. The alley location is proposed to be a new pedestrian paseo. The proposed site plan indicates that the service functions of the project are being internalized and shifted to the west corner of the property.



**Figure 1: Coral Gables Crafts Section, Plat Map (1924)**  
*(Blue arrow: project site)*

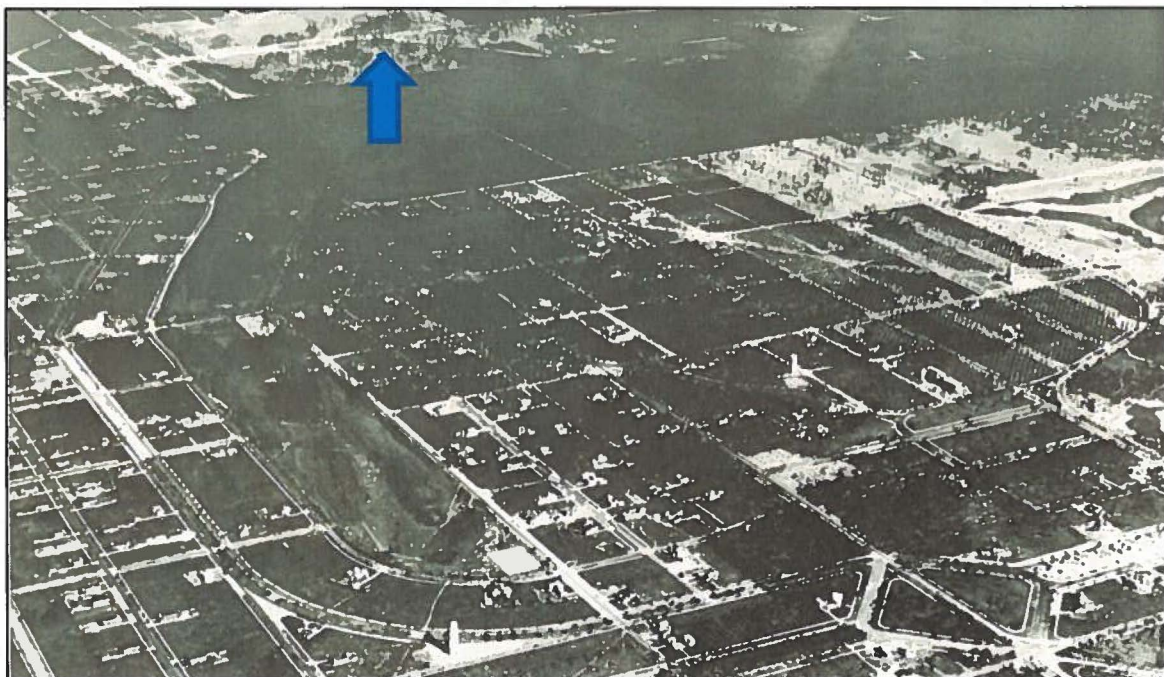
**Request #2:**

As described in the designation report prepared for the Coral Gables Historic City Plan: “Nationally-acclaimed landscape architect Frank Button drew the first comprehensive map of what would become the City of Coral Gables in 1921. It was based on an infrastructure of the inherited grid of fruit trees from the Merrick family’s citrus plantation, as well as the native pineland. Laid carefully over the resulting grid of orthogonal streets (north-south) and avenues (east-west) are a series of diagonal and curved roadways. The meeting of diagonal and orthogonal thoroughfares created both the large open areas at the intersections, often used for roundabouts, as well as smaller geometric spaces known as ‘reservations’ or ‘breathing spaces’ that provided additional green space and visual appeal.

Merrick’s intention was to serve both the motorist and the pedestrian alike and to provide modern amenities for both. An intentional hierarchy of roadways was thoughtfully planned. It included a series of wide parkways with center planting medians that were major thoroughfares across the development as well as wide parkways with substantial swales for tree-planting that provided internal access and scenic routes. The business, industrial and commercial sections also had narrow internal streets along the rear of the lots.

The City’s unique street grid was developed intentionally to conform to the vision that George Merrick had for Coral Gables. Every aspect of the built environment - the earliest homes and commercial structures being built, the landscaped plazas and entrances, civic structures and planned amenities, and even the layout and hierarchy of the City’s roadways – contributed to the aesthetic that Merrick was trying to achieve in Coral Gables.

University Drive (originally called Anastasia Drive and Ocean Beach Drive) is one of the diagonals that cut across the established grid from Ponce de Leon Boulevard to Granada Boulevard. It is highlighted by the blue arrow in the 1924 aerial photo below (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Aerial Photograph ca. 1924**

The diagonal of University Drive and the arc at its intersection with Ponce de Leon Boulevard are still discernable to this day (see Figures 3 and 4). At some point, a triangular island was inserted into the intersection, presumably to direct the flow of traffic and provide clarification to vehicular movement (see Figures 4). While this particular parcel is not original to the city plan, it is an appropriate intervention. This type of triangulation was an original feature of Merrick’s earliest plans and are called out as “reservations” leftover at the intersections of the grid and the diagonals.



**Figure 3: Coral Gables Crafts Section, Aerial View (1954)**



**Figures 4: Left - Coral Gables Crafts Section, Current Context (2019),  
Right – Enlarged view of the intersection (2021)**

*Courtesy of Miami-Dade County Property Appraiser*

The applicant’s proposal includes the vacation of approximately 1,318 sq. feet of University Drive that will slightly alter the curve of University Drive at Ponce de Leon Boulevard. The Applicant

proposed to dedicate portions of University Drive and Malaga Avenue totaling 1, 725 sq. feet which will result in an increase in the amount of landscapes open space.

### **STAFF CONCLUSION**

#### **Request #1:**

In weighing the alley vacation against the historic integrity of the City Plan and the effect of the proposed amendment on the historic integrity, development, and the public purpose being served by the amendment, Staff finds that the proposed alley vacation negatively impacts the overall historic integrity of the Historic City Plan. Staff does acknowledge that the applicant's intent to integrate the alley into the pedestrian paseo would provide a continued public access.

The concern is, by eliminating the alley in its entirety from Block 29, the City Plan loses a piece of its historic fabric. The alley vacation and subsequent proposed handling of services at the southwest corner also necessitates the relocation of a historic landmark --the extant White Way street light located just south of the site (described in further detail under Request #3).

**Therefore, Historical Resources Department Staff recommends the following:**

A motion to **DENY** the request for a recommendation of approval to the City Commission for an amendment to the City Plan for the vacation of the alley on the property adjacent to 216 and 224 Catalonia Avenue, 3000 Ponce de Leon Boulevard, 203 University Drive, and 225 Malaga Avenue, legally described as Lots 8 through 20, Block 29, Coral Gables Crafts Section, according to the Plat thereof, as recorded in Plat Book 10, at Page 40, of the Public Records of Miami-Dade County, Florida, of the Public Records of Miami-Dade County, Florida and **RECOMMEND DENIAL** of the issuance of a Special Certificate of Appropriateness.

#### **Request #2:**

In weighing the proposed abandonment and vacation of a portion of University Drive against the historic integrity of the City Plan and the effect of the proposed amendment on the historic integrity, development, and the public purpose being served by the amendment, Staff supports maintaining the slip lane open and finds that the slight modification to the curve of the street does not adversely affect the historic city plan. The diagonal streets and boulevards cutting through the regular grid of the city street were an important feature of George Merrick's plan for the City and will be maintained.

**Therefore, Historical Resources Department Staff recommends the following:**

A motion to **APPROVE** the request for a recommendation of approval to the City Commission for an amendment to the City Plan for the abandonment and vacation of that segment of University Drive north of the Malaga Avenue right-of-way and west of the Ponce de Leon Boulevard right-of-way and **RECOMMEND APPROVAL** of the issuance of a Special Certificate of Appropriateness.

### **REQUEST 3 -- TRANSFER OF DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS RECEIVING SITE**

#### **BACKGROUND/EXISTING CONDITIONS**

The proposed development is also asking to be considered as a receiving site for Transfer of Development Rights.

Article 14, Section 14-204.6 (A) (3) of the Coral Gables Zoning Code reads as follows:

- A. An application to transfer development rights to a receiver site shall be reviewed subject to all of the following:
3. If the receiving site is within five (500) hundred feet of a local historic landmark, Historic Preservation Board review and approval is required to determine if the proposal shall not adversely affect the historic, architectural, or aesthetic character of the property.

Therefore, the Historic Preservation Board's review and approval of the proposed development is required to determine if the proposal adversely affects the historic, architectural, or aesthetic character of the historic properties.

The following historically designated properties are within five hundred (500) feet of the proposed development:

- Historic "White Way" Street Lights, a Local Historic Landmark, located on Riviera Drive between Anastasia Avenue and University Drive and on University Drive between Bird Road and Ponce de Leon Boulevard.
- 2901 Ponce de Leon Boulevard, legally described as Tract E, Plaza Coral Gables, according to the Plat thereof, as recorded in Plat Book 173, Page 078 of the Public Record of Miami-Dade County, Florida.
- 247 Malaga Avenue, legally described as Lots 26 & 27, Block 29, Coral Gables Crafts Section, according to the Plat thereof, as recorded in Plat Book 10, Page 40 of the Public Record of Miami-Dade County, Florida.

The "White Way" Street Lights were designated as a Local Historic Landmark in 1981. The Arts Center building located at 2901 Ponce de Leon Boulevard was designated as a Local Historic Landmark in 1987. The building at 247 Malaga Avenue was designated as a Local Historic Landmark in 2004.

### **STAFF OBSERVATIONS**

The proposed development does not adversely affect the historic Arts Center building located at 2901 Ponce de Leon Boulevard, which has been absorbed into the Plaza Coral Gables project surrounding it, or the historic property at 247 Malaga Avenue. The proposed project will not further harm the integrity of either site. However, a historic "White Way" Street light located on the right-of-way adjacent to 203 University Drive, is proposed to be relocated and will be adversely affected by development. The existing pole is just south of the existing structure at 203 University Drive and is one of eleven extant poles that still remain in their original locations lining University Drive east of LeJeune Road. Relocation of historic landmarks is addressed in the Coral Gables Zoning Code as follows:

Section 8-109. Moving of existing improvements.

The moving of significant improvements from their original location shall be discouraged; however, the Historic Preservation Board may grant a Special Certificate of Appropriateness if it finds that no reasonable alternative is available for preserving the improvement on its original site



and that the proposed relocation site is compatible with the historic and architectural integrity of the improvement.

**STAFF CONCLUSION**

There is no viable reason for relocating the existing historic landmark from its original site. The historic pole resides on the public right-of-way, not private property, and has done so for almost 100 years. Any new development should be designed in such a way to retain the pole in its original location.

**Therefore, Historical Resources Department Staff recommends the following:**

Staff recommends a motion to determine that the proposal **DOES** adversely affect the historic, architectural, or aesthetic character of the historic properties located within 500 feet of the site, namely the “White Way” Street Lights, a Local Historic Landmark, and to **DENY** the proposal referred to as “Ponce Park Residences” with the understanding that it requires further review and approval by the City Commission.

Respectfully submitted,



Anna C. Pernas  
Historic Preservation Officer