



## Historic Resources Board

### Staff Report

---

**Agenda Date:** January 16, 2013

**To:** Historic Resources Board

**From:** Dennis Backlund  
Historic Preservation Planner  
Department: Planning and  
Community Environment

**Subject:** 1305 Middlefield Road [12PLN-00222]: Request by Palo Alto Community Services Division for Historic and Architectural Review of a new sign program for Rinconada Cultural Park that includes the Lucie Stern Community Center, a Category 1 Historic Resource. Zone: PF. Environmental Assessment: Exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act per sections 15301 and 15311.

---

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Historic Resources Board recommend to the Architectural Review Board and the Director of Planning and Community Environment that all the proposed options for the new sign program for Lucie Stern Community Center and Rinconada Cultural Park are consistent in materials, colors, and overall compatibility with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings, and staff further recommends that the Historic Resources Board recommend specific proposed sign options as the most compatible with the historic Lucie Stern Community Center, subject to the Conditions of Approval in Attachment A.

#### **BACKGROUND**

##### Initial Signage Submittal

On July 9, 2012 the Department of Planning and Community Environment received a proposal from the Community Services Department for a new sign program for Lucie Stern Community Center and Rinconada Cultural Park that was intended to inform residents of these facilities' diverse offerings and thereby to increase their usage. The Historic Resources Board reviewed the proposed sign program at a Study Session on July 18, 2012. While the Board supported a new sign program, the Board expressed strong concern about the compatibility of the sign designs with the historic character of the Category 1 Lucie Stern Community Center. In response to the HRB's comments the designs for the new Lucie Stern signs were abandoned and a completely new set of designs for the Lucie Stern buildings and site were developed with an emphasis on compatibility

with the Spanish Colonial Revival style of the Community Center. These new designs are the subject of the January 16, 2013 HRB meeting. The new design proposal also includes the previously submitted Directional Signposts with Blades but the colors for these have been revised for greater compatibility with the natural setting of Rinconada Cultural Park.

### Site Information

The structures comprising Lucie Stern Community Center are sited within Rinconada Park, a 19-acre site which is bounded by Middlefield Road, Melville Avenue, Embarcadero Road, and Newell Road. The land for Rinconada Park was acquired by the City in 1922 but the Park was mainly developed between 1930 and the 1950s. Lucie Stern Community Center was made possible by financial gifts from Lucie Stern, Palo Alto's most important philanthropist of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it was designed by resident Birge Clark, Palo Alto's most important architect of the period 1920-1950 who established the Spanish Colonial Revival style in both commercial and residential areas. Spanish Colonial Revival buildings are found throughout the United States in a number of local variants of the style. The California variant is derived from the state's original adobes and missions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Mexican ranchos of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, Spanish Colonial Revival buildings in California usually exhibit plain, informal designs that have a relaxed, serene, easy-going character suggestive of country locales rather than more formal and ornate urban settings. Birge Clark indicated that he was designing within this variant of the Spanish Colonial Revival style by calling his designs "Early California," the period of the adobes, the missions, and the ranchos. Lucie Stern Community Center was initially constructed in 1932 with additions, all designed by Birge Clark, built up to 1940 (Attachment B).

Rinconada Park is located in a single-family home neighborhood adjacent to the Main Library, the Art Center, and Walter Hays Elementary School. Rinconada Park and adjacent uses, which also include Children's Library, and the Junior Museum and Zoo provide the residential neighborhood with an unusually dense and diverse array of cultural opportunities.

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The project scope for the HRB review includes three types of signs: two types of signs that will be located at Lucie Stern Community Center ("On-Building Signs and "Map Signs) and one type of sign that will be located in Rinconada Cultural Park ("Directional Signposts with Blades"). The submittal for each of these three types of signs provides three design options to assist the HRB in determining the most compatible design (Attachment C).

Note for the HRB: several sign types that will be added to Rinconada Cultural Park were not submitted for the current HRB review but per the Conditions of Approval these signs will return to an HRB Subcommittee (or to the full Board if the HRB so decides). These signs will comprise a new free-standing "Arrival Sign" located on Middlefield Road between the side of Lucie Stern Community Center and the Junior Museum and Zoo and a new color scheme for four existing signs on the site. One purpose of the new "Arrival Sign" will be to alert drivers on Middlefield Road where the main driveway entrance to the Lucie Stern Community Center parking lot is.

The three proposed types of signs that the HRB will review are described below:

1. "Wall Signs" (also called the "On-Building Signs"): There are six wall signs proposed (labeled as "Destination ID" on the "Sign Locator Map" which is attached to Attachment C). The three design options are: (a) begin the "Title & Logo with Rule" option which is the most complex design and includes the City's logo under which is name of the facility underlined with a "Rule" line, (b) the "Title & Logo without Rule" option, and (c) which is the "Title Only without Rule & Logo" option which is the simplest design. The proposed materials and colors for these three options for the "Wall Signs" would be raised letters (possibly cast aluminum) covered with a bronze finish. The City logo would be laser-cut. The signs would not be illuminated no sign exception would be required by the City.

Staff Comment: Historic staff recommends Option C "Title Only without Rule & Logo" because the architect of Lucie Stern Community Center, Birge Clark, adhered to the simplest variant of the Spanish Colonial Revival style which he personally called "Old California." Staff concluded that the simplest signage would be the most compatible option for the rustic arcades and plain walls of Lucie Stern Community Center. However, staff still recommends the use of the City logo for the wall adjacent to the entry to the Community Services Administration office and the Recreation Services office. Staff believes it necessary to clarify to visitors that these are City department offices.

2. Directional Map Signs: There are five map directional signs proposed. The plans provide three color palettes for this sign. The sign is approximately 57" tall and 14 square feet at the map surface and would have a bronze finish for the sign frame. A sign exception is needed due to its size and height. The code allows directional signs to be up to six square feet and no taller than three feet.

Staff Comment: Historic staff recommends Option C for the map signs because staff concluded that the shade of green for the map was the most similar to surrounding vegetation of the three map colors proposed, and therefore Option C would be the least intrusive and most harmonious of the three color options. Of the other two options, staff found the yellow green map color to be a little too bright and to be a shade of green unlike most of the vegetation of the site, and staff found the grey-green map color to be unnecessarily different from the surrounding vegetation and therefore more intrusive.

3. Pedestrian Directional Signs (pole signs): There are four pole signs proposed that include a permanent banner element stating "Welcome" with the City logo and six blades indicating the direction for each listed facility. The plans provide three color palettes for the pole sign that tie into the colors for the map signs. The height of the pole is 13 feet and the clearance from grade to the bottom of the signage is six feet eight inches. The pole is also proposed with a bronze finish. Because of this unique sign type, the poles require a sign exception which staff supports due to the superior usefulness of this sign design for visitors.

Staff Comment: Historic staff recommends Option C for the "Pedestrian Directional Signs" for two reasons: (a) the overall colors are a little lighter than Option B and, therefore, give the sign a

less dominant slightly more light-weight character that appeared more harmonious with the light-weight character of the vegetation moving in the breeze. Also, the diverse colors of the blades and the “Welcome” banner appeared to staff to be more unified than was the case in the other two options, and, therefore, Option C appeared to fit into the natural setting with the best compatibility.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Compliance with Sign Ordinance**

The proposed wall signs are in conformance with the standards in the Sign Code (PAMC 16.20). As mentioned above, the pole signs and map directional signs require ARB approval of a sign exception. In considering approval of the pole signs and map directional signs, the following sign exception findings must be made:

- (1) There are exceptional or extraordinary circumstances or conditions applicable to the property involved that do not apply generally to property in the same district;
- (2) The granting of the application is necessary for the preservation and enjoyment of a substantial property right of the applicant and to prevent unreasonable property loss or unnecessary hardships; and
- (3) The granting of the application will not be detrimental or injurious to property or improvements in the vicinity and will not be detrimental to the public health, safety, general welfare or convenience.

Staff believes the findings can be made to support the signs. The project site is the City facility, and due to its civic nature and unique and specific function, the Rinconada Park and Lucie Stern Community Center would be considered an exceptional use that is not found at other sites within the City.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The recommended action furthers the Comprehensive Plan goals and policies encouraging the conservation and preservation of Palo Alto’s historic buildings, and encouraging high quality signage in the City.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW**

Upon approval of the project as consistent with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, the project would be categorically exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), per Section 15331.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment A: Project Conditions of Approval

Attachment B: Historic Inventory Form for Lucie Stern Community Center

Attachment C: Applicant’s Presentation Document “Rinconada Cultural Park” prepared by Jill McCoy Design, dated October 22, 2012.

PREPARED BY: Dennis Backlund  
Dennis Backlund,  
Historic Preservation Planner

REVIEWED BY: Steven Turner  
STEVEN TURNER  
Advance Planning Manager

**CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL**

1305 Middlefield Road:  
New Signs for Lucie Stern Community Center and Rinconada Cultural Park  
File No. 12PLN-00222  
Historic Resources Board  
January 16, 2013

---

**Planning Division**

1. The project shall be in substantial conformance with the approved plans and related documents received November 5, 2012, except as modified to incorporate these Conditions of Approval. The project's approval letter with the Conditions of Approval document shall be printed on all plans submitted for permits related to this project.
2. The proposed "Arrival Sign" and the repainting color scheme which have not been submitted yet will return to the HRB Subcommittee for review and recommendation.
3. These historic Conditions have been found consistent with the Conditions of Approval approved by the Architectural Review Board.
4. The Director of Planning's project approval letter, including the approved historic Conditions, shall be printed on one of the initial sheets of the Permit Plan Set.
5. The ten Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation shall be printed on one of the initial sheets of the Building Permit Plan Set.
6. No demolition or permanent removal of significant historic fabric shall be carried out by this project in any amount for any reason except with written permission by the Department of Planning and Community Environment.
7. The most recent edition of the California Historical Building Code shall be applied to all eligible aspects of the project exterior if needed to preserve character-defining features.
8. The Historic Preservation Planner shall review the Permit Plan Set for consistency with the Director of Planning's approval based on the recommendation of the Historic Resources Board.
9. The Historic Preservation Planner shall participate in the Planning Department's Final Inspection of the completed project.

HISTORIC RESOURCES INVENTORY

UTM \_\_\_\_\_ Q \_\_\_\_\_ NF \_\_\_\_\_  
 Lat \_\_\_\_\_ Lon \_\_\_\_\_ Era \_\_\_\_\_ Attachment B  
 Adm \_\_\_\_\_ T2 \_\_\_\_\_ T3 \_\_\_\_\_ Cat \_\_\_\_\_ HABS \_\_\_\_\_ HAER \_\_\_\_\_ Fed \_\_\_\_\_

IDENTIFICATION Cat. I

1. Common name: Lucie Stern Community Center
  2. Historic name, if known: Lucie Stern Community Center
  3. Street or rural address: 1305 Middlefield Road  
 City: Palo Alto ZIP: 94303 County: Santa Clara
  4. Present owner, if known: City of Palo Alto Address: 250 Hamilton Avenue  
 City: Palo Alto ZIP: 94301 Ownership is: Public  Private
  5. Present Use: Community Center Original Use: Community Center
- Other past uses: \_\_\_\_\_

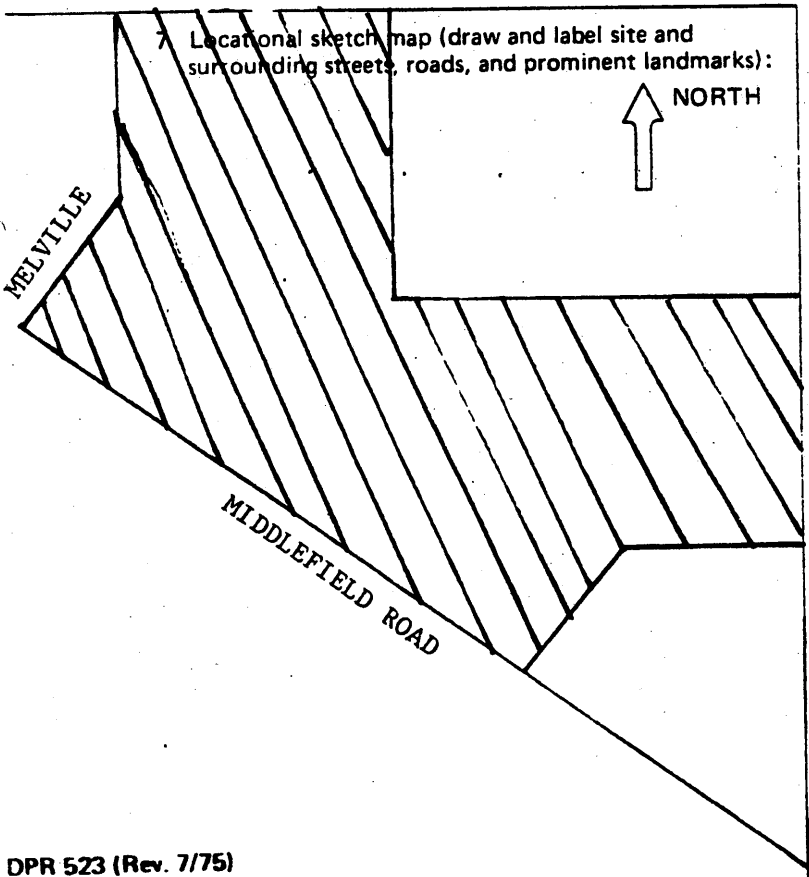
DESCRIPTION

6. Briefly describe the present physical appearance of the site or structure and describe any major alterations from its original condition:  

The Lucie Stern Community Center is a complex of buildings designed by Birge Clark, an important local architect.

The complex combines several one and two story Spanish Colonial Revival structures in a planning scheme that utilizes an entry patio, decorative circular fountain and wooden bench seating.

The Center buildings are sited in a landscaped park.



8. Approximate property size:  
 Lot size (in feet) Frontage \_\_\_\_\_  
 Depth \_\_\_\_\_  
 or approx. acreage 18.45 (part of park)
9. Condition: (check one)  
 a. Excellent  b. Good  c. Fair   
 d. Deteriorated  e. No longer in existence
10. Is the feature a. Altered?  b. Unaltered?
11. Surroundings: (Check more than one if necessary)  
 a. Open land  b. Scattered buildings   
 c. Densely built-up  d. Residential   
 e. Commercial  f. Industrial   
 g. Other
12. Threats to site:  
 a. None known  b. Private development   
 c. Zoning  d. Public Works project   
 e. Vandalism  f. Other
13. Date(s) of enclosed photograph(s): 1978

NOTE: The following (Items 14-19) are for structures only.

14. Primary exterior building material: a. Stone  b. Brick  c. Stucco  d. Adobe  e. Wood   
f. Other  Tile
15. Is the structure: a. On its original site?  b. Moved?  c. Unknown?
16. Year of initial construction 1932 This date is: a. Factual  b. Estimated
17. Architect (if known): Birge Clark
18. Builder (if known): Wells Goodenough
19. Related features: a. Barn  b. Carriage house  c. Outhouse  d. Shed(s)  e. Formal garden(s)   
f. Windmill  g. Watertower/tankhouse  h. Other  complex of related buildings None

## SIGNIFICANCE

20. Briefly state historical and/or architectural importance (include dates, events, and persons associated with the site when known):

The series of buildings were designed by Birge Clark, prominent local architect, in 1932, to be used as a Community Center. The buildings were made possible by the donations of Mrs. Lucie Stern, for whom Clark also designed two other houses.

The Community Center is carefully composed and serves as a visual and social focal point for the surrounding area, utilizing a design mode important to the character of Palo Alto

The adult theater was built in 1932; the balance was added from time to time up until 1940, all in accordance with the master plan as originally conceived.

21. Main theme of the historic resource: (Check only one): a. Architecture  b. Arts & Leisure   
c. Economic/Industrial  d. Exploration/Settlement  e. Government  f. Military   
g. Religion  h. Social/Education

22. Sources: List books, documents, surveys, personal interviews, and their dates: P.A. Hist. Assn. Community Center files; P.A. Times 10/27/33, 3/14/34  
Information from Birge Clark

Revised 1981 - Birge Clark, member - Historic Resources Board

23. Date form prepared: 1978 By (name): City of Palo Alto  
Address: 250 Hamilton Ave City Palo Alto, Ca 94301 ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Organization: \_\_\_\_\_

(State Use Only)