

1201 East Abingdon Drive Renovation and Addition

Board of Architectural Review – Certificate of Appropriateness

16 April 2025

Melissa Butler Kuennen, Resident

As an Architect who practiced for 40 years and designed hundreds of multifamily units in historic districts as renovations / additions or as new development, I am greatly concerned about the appropriateness of design of this development.

The issue is Context.

Is the development designed **in context** with the **Old Town North Urban Design Guidelines**?

NO – the OTN guidelines promote building design excellence that is “**context-sensitive**”, rather than a change in massing, scale and visibility that overwhelms the neighborhood.

NO – the development **bears no relation** to the **Neighborhood Precedents**, because of the **change in color** and use of **multi-story piers** on the façade.

NO – the addition creates a “**monolithic façade** without relief.” The guidelines recommend it either step back above the 3rd story, have **building breaks or setbacks** or incrementally **alter the depth of the façade along the street** “with 20-25% of the total street frontage setback 2-10 feet from the property line.”

Is the development designed **in context** with the **Old and Historic district** to memorialize the **George Washington Parkway** entrance to the city?

NO – this development is NOT **compatible** with the **massing, materials or scale** of the architectural setting and parkway environment. Regardless of the massing of the previously approved existing building – at least it used materials that were **contextual** in their impact on the neighborhood.

NO - the development does NOT safeguard the **identity** of the **George Washington Memorial Parkway** by creating an entrance to the city that **memorializes** the **historical, cultural and traditional** character of the city.



NO - The development **purposefully exaggerates** its size and visibility from the **GW Parkway** – this would be obvious if a **rendering** had been provided.

NO - The building materials do nothing to **complement** the neighborhood – by changing the red brick to a **lighter grey color** its **visibility will overwhelm drivers** as they approach Old Town.

The existing building is already the **only building between **Slaters Lane** and **First Street** that is **visible** behind the tree-lined border of the **GW Parkway**.**

NO – fencing for residential buildings in this zoning district is not to exceed 3 ft. 6 inches in height. Yet the courtyard will have a six-foot-high privacy fence, where only brick gateway entrances are shown as precedent.

Is the development **in context** to the **existing neighborhood**?

*The major tenet of new design in **historic districts** across the nation that is **universally** understood is that the design should **complement** the neighborhood, not detract from it.*



Proposed facade for GW Parkway



525 and 425 Montgomery Street – former industrial/commercial sites



Surprisingly, this design **imitates new buildings and additions that come out of review by the city of Alexandria - with its multi-story masonry piers and change of material in between – yet this is wholly inappropriate for its location and site.**

NO - The **context** of the neighborhood of **East Abingdon Drive** is its presence along a leafy green lawned **Parkway** surrounded by smaller scale townhouses of varying hues of red brick, not a dense urban neighborhood previously composed of industrial buildings.

NO - The addition is designed to be visibly **distinct** from the original building - which utilizes a more harmonious color palette – and does not **complement** the neighborhood. As the architect pointed out on March 5th, **the addition “needs a presence, needs to stand out.”** This idea is better suited to another project and is cited as **inappropriate design** in the zoning regulations.

NO - The use of **vertical piers** violates the requirement for **“traditional solid-void relationships”** and creates the illusion of **greater height** rather than adapting residential scale floor-to-floor heights to **complement** the neighborhood.

NO – the use of the front façade as a “screen” stretches the width of the actual building to include the projecting balconies, which again is out of **context** with the design and scale of the neighborhood.

NO – the **existing two-story piers** remain at the 1st floor of the original building – Are they double height amenity spaces? Or are they 2 story townhouses with inappropriate commercial storefronts?




FW: [EXTERNAL]Comments and attachment on Items BAR#2025-00035 - OHAD and BAR#2025-00036 - OHAD

From William Conkey <william.conkey@alexandriava.gov>

Date Mon 4/14/2025 2:31 PM

To Kendra Jacobs <Kendra.Jacobs@alexandriava.gov>; Ted Alberon <ted.alberon@alexandriava.gov>; Luke Cowan <luke.cowan@alexandriava.gov>

 1 attachment (263 KB)

1201 E Abingdon Drive - BAR Comments by MB Kuennen.pdf;

Please see the attached letter from the public regarding the 1201 E Abingdon case.

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The City of Alexandria's 275th Anniversary

From: Melissa B Kuennen <melissa.b.kuennen@gmail.com>

Sent: Monday, April 14, 2025 12:54 PM

To: William Conkey <william.conkey@alexandriava.gov>

Subject: [EXTERNAL]Comments and attachment on Items BAR#2025-00035 - OHAD and BAR#2025-00036 - OHAD

You don't often get email from melissa.b.kuennen@gmail.com. [Learn why this is important](#)

Hi Bill,

I'm an architect who moved to Old Town North in 2013 and was active on the OTN Small Area Plan and the Potomac Yards North Master Plan in 2016 - 2017. I currently serve on PYDAC and am Vice President for Development on the NOTICe board.

But my concerns about the design of the development of 1201 E. Abingdon Drive are initiated as a resident of OTN and as an architect who has designed hundreds of units of multifamily housing as either rehabs or new construction in historic districts.

This development seems to ignore the idea of an Old and Historic District that has as its goal to MEMORIALIZE the historic George Washington Parkway. Nor does this development acknowledge important aspects of the Old Town North Urban Design Guidelines.

First of all, the design of the addition seems to **imitate** every new project that comes out of review by the city - with the application of brick piers carving out multi-story sections of the facade. That may be appropriate for Old Town North which was previously more industrial, but this site is a tree-lined street with open lawns and surrounded by medium height townhouses of various shades of red brick.

Secondly, the existing building at 1201 E Abingdon is already the only building on North Washington Street from Slaters Lane to First Street that is **visible** above the tree canopy. The scale and appearance of the addition - using a brick screen to make the building appear wider, and with its diversion from a compatible range of red brick facades to light and dark grey brick - will OVERWHELM drivers with its presence as they approach the city.

Other minor issues include the fact that the 2 story piers and commercial storefronts remain on the existing building, the lack of a rear public entrance for residents and visitors, and the distance from the street to the main entrance at the back of a now unwelcoming courtyard (when have 6 ft high fences been allowed in this district?) are also at issue.

I raised these issues at the City Council presentation in February, and many of the same issues were raised at the March 5th BAR presentation by committee members, resulting in the applicants request for a resubmittal. But this new submission does not appear to address any of these concerns, instead they appear to be doubling down on their justification for a building that "needs to stand out" as stated by their architect on March 5th. This is the wrong site for a building with the kind of "presence" they desire.

I am hoping the BAR committee members understand the significance of these comments in relation to the effect this building will have on the Old and Historic District for decades to come. This project may very well set a precedent for future development along North Washington Street, our gateway to Alexandria from the north.

Please include the attached comments in the project information to the BAR committee members.

Thank you,
Melissa

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