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Heritage at Old Town Appeal

November 7, 2021

Dear Mayor Wilson and City Council Members,

Thank you for your time. I am writing to you as a private citizen in regards to the Heritage at Old Town Project. I know that this project has had issues from the beginning and that it has been a divisive issue in our city. The whole process was very rocky from the start, and we lost valuable time during the first couple of meetings, with not much meaningful feedback being provided to the applicant by the BAR. I firmly believe that this project as a whole is good for our city and its citizens. My view is that the BAR's role is to make sure that any project of this size within our historic districts has a quality architectural design that could, in 50 years, become historic in its own right.

On that note, I have some design considerations that I would like to put forward as my recommendations for conditions to be added to your ruling if you choose to overrule the BAR's decision. I have attached those design recommendations to this letter as annotations on the package provided to the BAR at the October 20, 2021 meeting. From my almost decade on the BAR, I'm sure that many here know that I have a very consistent opinion on the architectural character of new buildings. I firmly believe that architecture should be of its time and that the architecture we have in our city benefits from being unique and interesting. I don't think that "compatible" means taking historic forms and details and recreating them on new buildings or making them modern mimicries; in my mind, it's about scale, mass, and relationship to the existing street face that makes a new building compatible.

I do believe that the existing design can be stronger by being architecture of our time. Per the comments on the attached exhibits, this could be achieved by using modern materials, forms, and color palettes. It could become more contextual by adding nods to what was historically in this location, with themes pulled from the historic structures and uses of this neighborhood. Its immediate context is predominantly 1980s buildings and not what we think of as Old Town – Federal, Colonial, and Late Victorian.

Thank you for your time. I take my role on the BAR very seriously, and I use all of my professional experience to inform my feedback on every case.

Attached to this letter are the remarks that I shared with the BAR at the last meeting. I wanted to include those here, as they were a direct response to many of the comments by the public.

Thank you for your time and all you do for our city.

Purvi Gandhi Irwin, AIA

October 20, 2021 BAR Meeting Remarks

Purvi Gandhi Irwin, AIA

I wanted to share my thoughts on this project with all of you. I have shared comments on the latest design with staff and the applicant and would like those comments be added to the minutes of this meeting.

I wanted to address a few concerns that both the board and the public have had. First, the height. While the building is large, I think that we need to take into consideration a few things. The first is that this project is on the edge of Old Town and its context is 8-lane Rt. 1, itself, and 2 additional blocks that are slated in the small area plan, to be redeveloped to a similar density. This rolls into the context of the project and how the design itself addresses the criteria in the zoning ordinance. Almost all of the criteria mention the historic setting, Materials/texture/color appropriate to adjacent existing structures, and relationship of features to buildings and structures in the immediate surroundings. Adjacent and immediate surroundings are the key words. On the sides that face existing buildings, the applicant had used traditional materials and has made the design more of a background to those existing buildings. For the rest of the building, the context is the buildings themselves. There are only 2 historic buildings directly adjacent to the property, on the northeast corner of Wolfe and S. Alfred, and on S. Columbus one property south of Wolfe Street. All the rest are 1950s and 1980s era buildings.

The next point I want to address is that this building is the "Gateway to Old Town". I agree that this is going to be one of the first things that you see, but before you get to this project, you first encounter sound walls, gas stations, and other industrial buildings. When we think of gateways to our city more broadly, I want to point you to the northern gateway into Alexandria, the bridge over the train tracks. Along Rt 1 here, there are many tall buildings most of them taller than this one. They are not in the historic district formally, but are on the edge of the district. Rt. 1 is narrower here than it is at the southern end of our city. Why is the southern entrance of the city seen differently than the northern entrance? Parker Gray is just as historic as the Old and Historic District.

The last point I want to address is that this project does not follow the S. Patrick Street Housing Affordability Strategy. This area is the core of that strategy and the applicant is allowed bonus height under the zoning ordinance. The zoning ordinance, if I'm reading it correctly, allows for up to 25' of additional height in exchange for additional low- and moderate-income housing. I know that just because it's allowed by the ordinance doesn't mean that automatically it's ok, but I am looking at it in context to its location. This project is not in the middle of the district, surrounded on all sides by historic structures. It's on the edge, surrounded by itself and other newer buildings.

Most of you know, from my decade serving the city on first Parker Gray and now the consolidated board, that I have a very consistent view on what the architectural character of new buildings should be. I am a strong believer that architecture should be of its time and not try to mimic something historic. This mimicry dilutes the value of actual historic buildings. I do think that this design could be better, could have more reflection of what was here historically with some more interpretation of that history, but it is a lot better than it was when we first reviewed it. I would push for it to be more modern, looking to historic proportions and lines to be compatible with the neighborhood. Compatible does not mean copy.



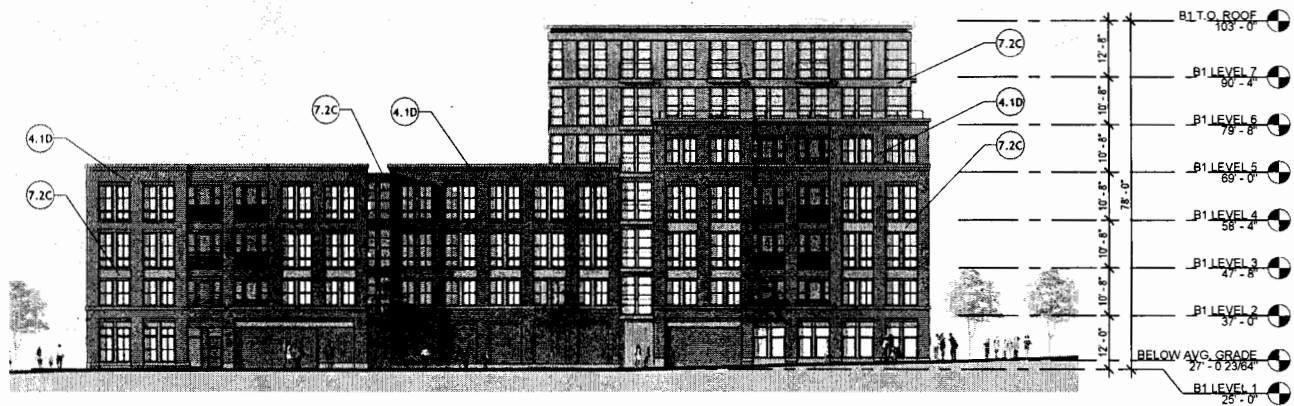
THE HERITAGE BLOCK 1 - S PATRICK ST ACROSS FROM WILKES ST PARK (PRIOR)

ALEXANDRIA, VA

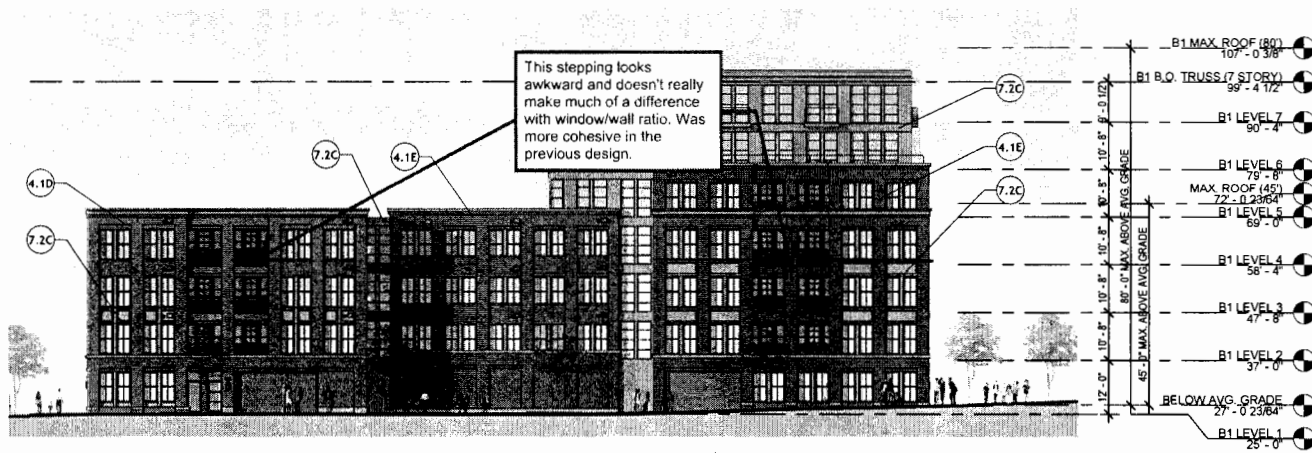
Purvi Gandhi Irwin Comments - 10/20/21

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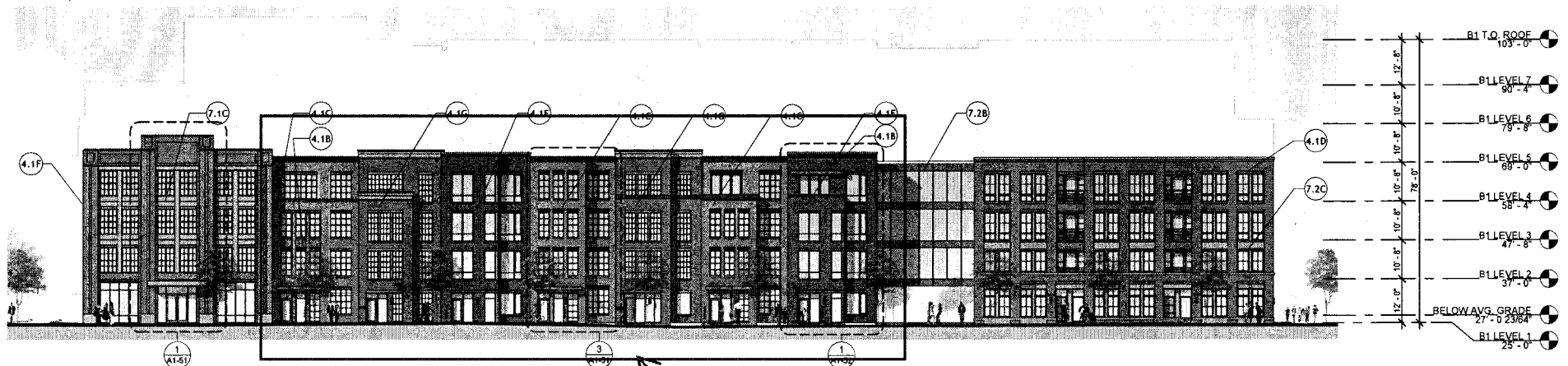
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BLOCK 1 - NORTH ELEVATION - WOLFE ST. (PRIOR)

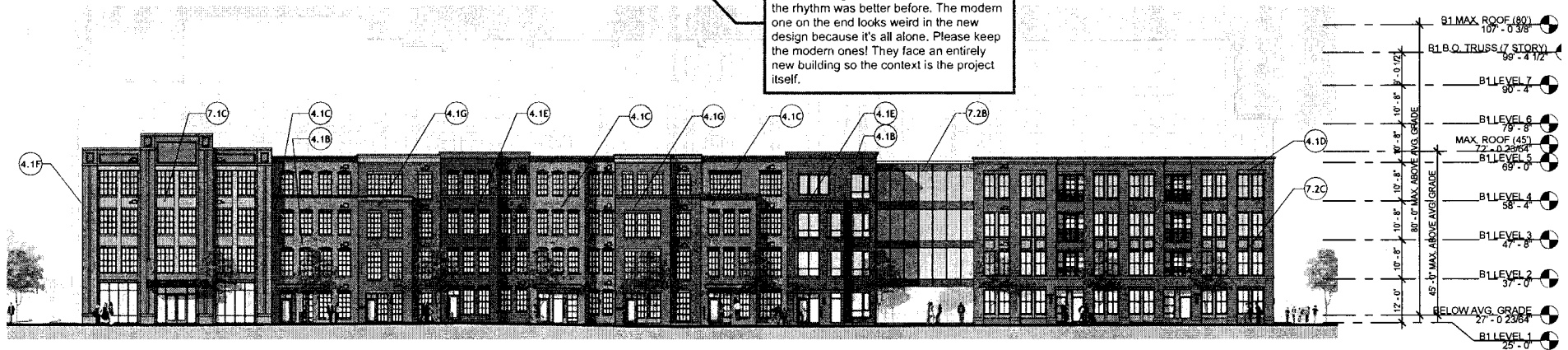


BLOCK 1 - NORTH ELEVATION - WOLFE ST. (CURRENT)



BLOCK 1 - EAST ELEVATION - S. ALFRED ST. (PRIOR)

Old design had more interesting variety. The new one is too much the same with all the divided light windows. I also think that the rhythm was better before. The modern one on the end looks weird in the new design because it's all alone. Please keep the modern ones! They face an entirely new building so the context is the project itself.



BLOCK 1 - EAST ELEVATION - S. ALFRED ST. (CURRENT)



THE HERITAGE BLOCK 1 - S ALFRED STREET (CURRENT)

ALEXANDRIA, VA

Purvi Gandhi Irwin Comments - 10/20/21

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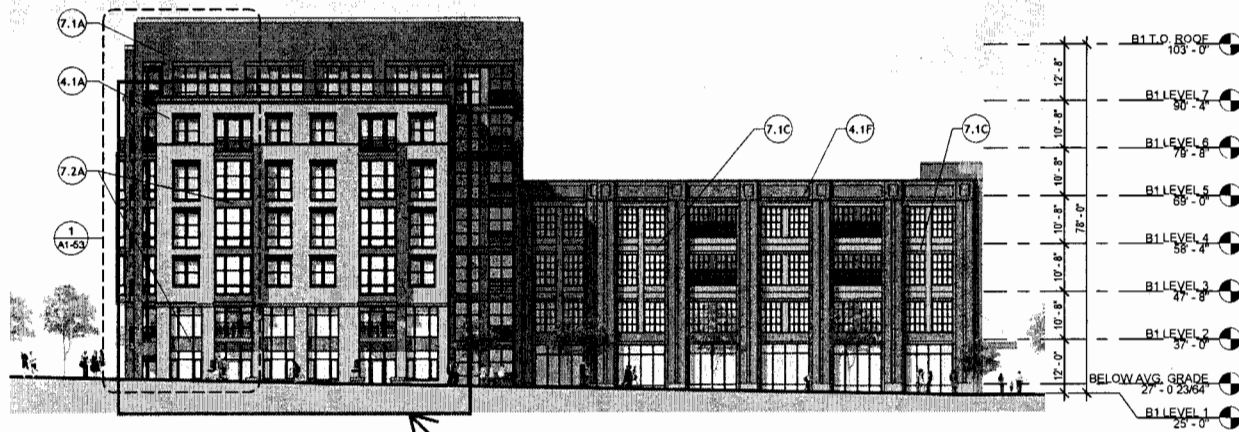
THE HERITAGE BLOCK 1 - S ALFRED ST AT WILKES ST PARK

ALEXANDRIA, VA

Purvi Gandhi Irwin Comments - 10/20/21

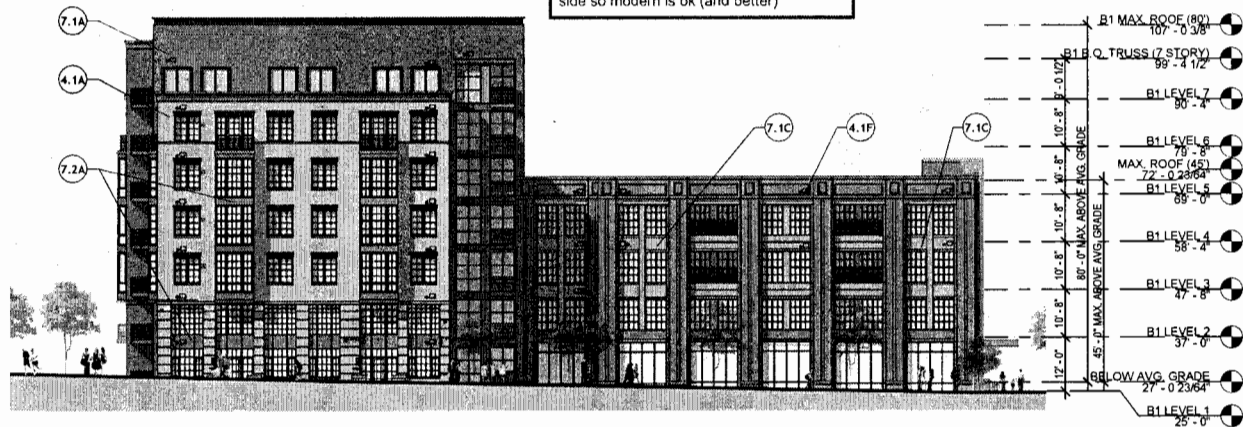
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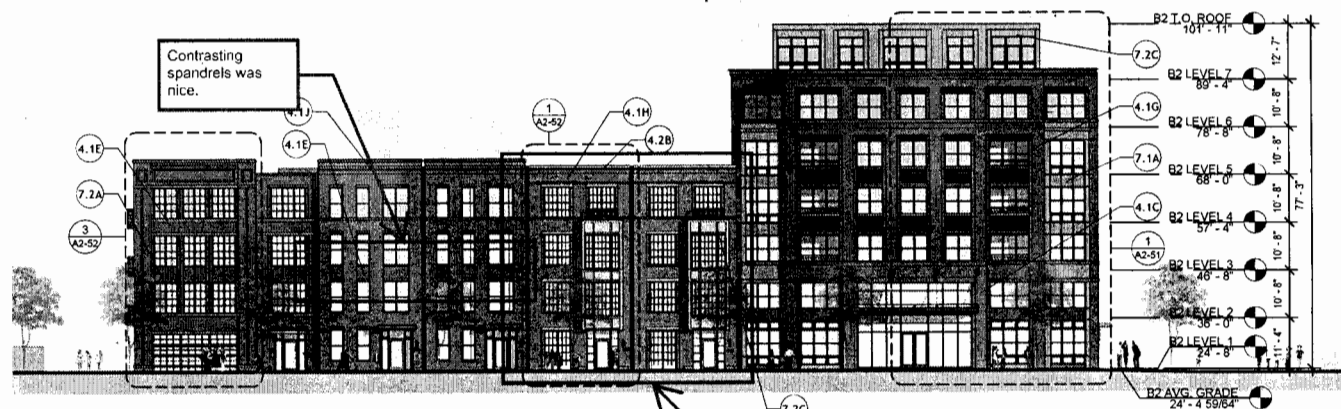


BLOCK 1 - SOUTH ELEVATION - WILKES ST PARK (PRIOR)

The windows here are more successful. The new version is too similar across the facade. Let the divided lights be on the deco part and the larger lights be on the more modern part. It's also on the Rt. 1 side so modern is ok (and better)

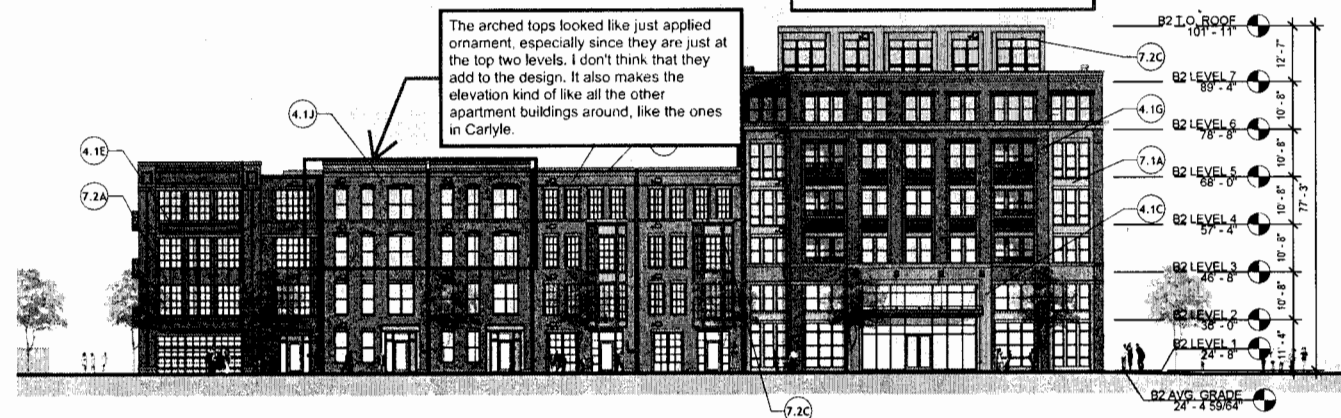


BLOCK 1 - SOUTH ELEVATION - WILKES ST. PARK (CURRENT)



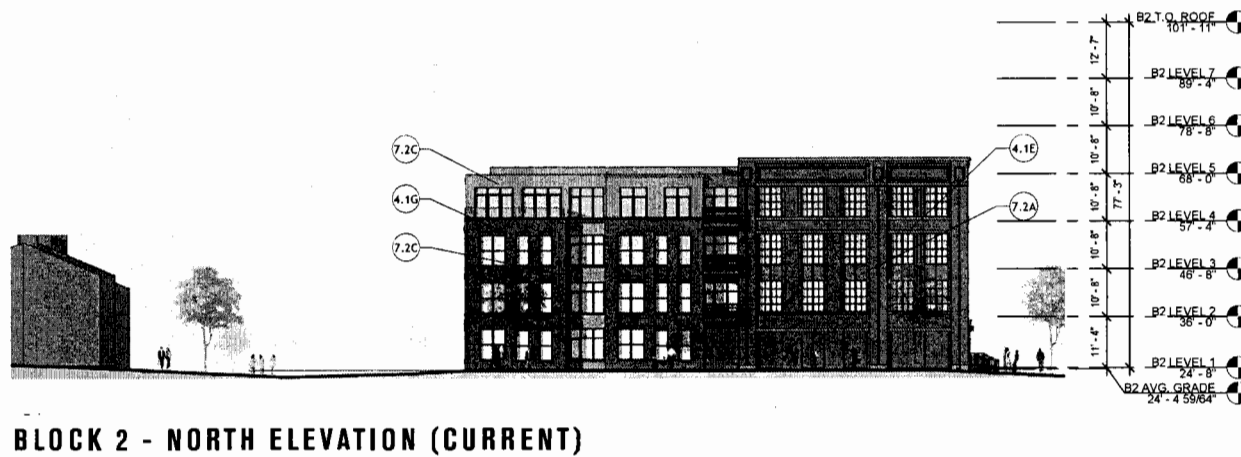
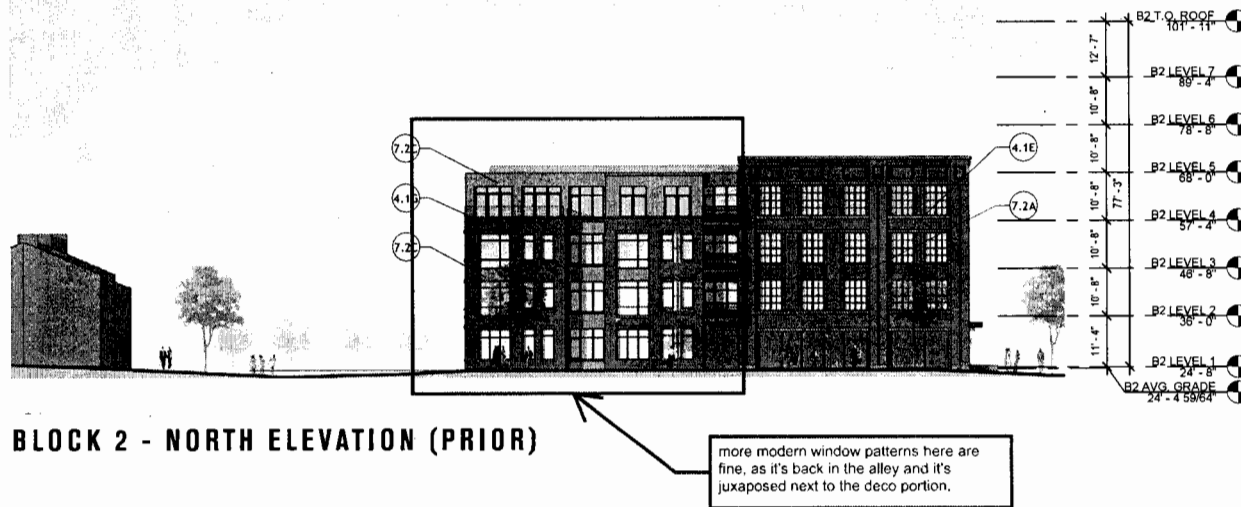
BLOCK 2 - WEST ELEVATION - S. ALFRED ST. (PRIOR)

Preferred the modern box bays. The angled ones look too much like you're trying to copy historic. This faces an entirely new block, so the context is different than if it faced existing buildings. The two bays also worked better.



BLOCK 2 - WEST ELEVATION - S. ALFRED ST. (CURRENT)







Testimony to Alexandria City Council in Support of the Heritage at Old Town

Rezoning #2020-00006
Development Special Use Permit #2020-10032
Transportation Management Plan Special Use Permit 2020-00084

February 20, 2020

Stewart Schwartz, Executive Director

Good afternoon, Mayor and Council. Thank you for serving our city during these challenging times.

My name is Stewart Schwartz and I am the Executive Director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, the leading organization in the D.C. region advocating walkable, inclusive, transit-oriented communities as the most sustainable and equitable way to grow and provide opportunities for all. We are a 24-year-old non-profit with partnerships that span the conservation, affordable housing, social equity, transit, bike/ped, and business sectors. In 2017, we received the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) Regional Partnership Award.

We urge you to approve the Heritage at Old Town.

Alexandria has lost over 90% of its affordable housing over the past two decades. We face a housing affordability crisis in Alexandria and neighboring jurisdictions. Multiple studies demonstrate that we need both more supply and more long-term committed affordable units. This project provides both. Supply is critical to avoid displacement, and a range of tools are needed including leveraging land value and density to ensure we create more affordable units.

We work in multiple jurisdictions in the DC region and we can confirm that the City of Alexandria does its homework. The result here from city and community input is a project that provides the housing we need in a well-designed development, with much improved streetscape, pedestrian connectivity, and park spaces. Alexandria offers a very walkable, mixed-use environment with excellent transit – planned to be even better with the redesigned bus network which will provide frequent all-day, seven day per week service. Far more traffic would be generated through Alexandria if our communities pushed all development out to auto-dependent locations.

The project will buffer the neighborhood from the wide, noisy Route 1 entry to Old Town, and has been designed to step down to the adjacent rowhouses. For nearly 25 years I lived near Braddock Metro in a four-story condo building across from single-family homes, next to townhomes and 7 and 9 story condo buildings, and within sight of much taller buildings. Public housing was just a block away. The neighborhood is wonderful, however, it has lost diversity -- because when those

buildings were built the city did not have the strategies in place to ensure a mix of housing affordability. That's why the new RMF zoning applied here is such an important tool. It enables 197 units of deeply affordable housing by a private developer without a public subsidy, allowing the city to direct its affordable housing funds to other projects, creating additional housing. This level of long-term and deep level of affordability without subsidy is extremely rare and a big benefit of the project.

The pandemic has illustrated just who are our most essential workers and the extreme stress they are under due to high housing prices. The racial equity crisis has demonstrated how poorly we have served people of color in our community and nation. It is time to ensure a more inclusive community for the long-term. We urge you to approve the Heritage at Old Town.

Thank you.

Testimony to Alexandria City Council Supporting Reversal of BAR Denial of Certificate of Appropriateness for Heritage at Old Town (Agenda item 16 22-0041; BAR #2021-00341)

November 13, 2021

The Coalition for Smarter Growth reiterates our strong support for the Heritage at Old Town as approved by the City Council under a special use permit and Residential Multifamily Zoning. We face a housing crisis and the Heritage at Old Town is a well-designed development, providing critically needed housing and affordable housing. Our prior testimony is attached.

I am personally a committed historic preservationist who has spent 15 years restoring an 1846 rowhome. I previously lived in Colecroft in a four-story condominium building integrated with new three-story townhomes and across the street from a single-family detached and two story attached homes. The neighborhood gained from the additional activity and housing supply.

From reviewing the BAR record it appears that the applicant modified their design to address concerns and that the primary outstanding concern of the BAR and many neighbors remains the height, which was previously approved by the Council under the special use permit. The buildings are four stories facing the neighborhood, similar to my former Colecroft residence and other new buildings in Old Town. They are seven stories facing Route 1 – a height and massing appropriate for facing a highly trafficked gateway into Alexandria. The new development also replaces existing non-historic structures with a high-quality design.

CSG concurs with others that the BAR decision exceeds its authority in what they can consider in issuing a Certificate of Appropriateness and undermines the provisions of the Residential Multifamily (RMF) zoning policy which provides the approved density and height for this proposal.

If historic preservation is stretched to deny well-designed and critically needed housing, it will continue to lose the support of the next generation. I personally believe we can both maintain good historic preservation policies AND provide much needed housing. The Heritage at Old Town is such a case – it offers high-quality design, appropriate heights and much needed housing without harm to the historic district.

Thank you.



Stewart Schwartz
Executive Director

Gloria Sitton

From: Stephen Popick <stephenpopick@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, November 12, 2021 5:17 PM
To: Gloria Sitton
Subject: [EXTERNAL]Letter concerning BAR #2021-00341 OHAD , Heritage

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
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I am a resident of Alexandria VA and support increasing affordable housing in Alexandria. From 2000 to 2010, Alexandria added 8,125 housing units with a population rising by 11,715. Yet, from 2010 to 2020, Alexandria added 4,039 housing units with a population of 19,430. The same pattern holds true at the household level, from 2000 to 2010 we built approximately 4 housing units for every new household, but from 2010 to 2020 built 2 housing units for every 3 households coming in.

Cities across the US face mounting challenges with expensive housing and rents, much of which stems from inadequate supply. The Heritage development plan, as I understand it, increases height and density to create new units, including over 40 new designated affordable units. How are we preserving the character of Alexandria if some of our longest running residents and households are forced to move simply because housing costs become too high?

I urge the council to listen to the residents of the Heritage, such as Judith Bishop, who wrote "Affordable housing in the Old Town area is direly needed. It is extremely limited to the point where one cannot have any hope of getting to the top of the wait lists. As far as to density of traffic, these persons needing the units are mostly residents of Old Town and The Heritage already. It is imperative both reasonably and morally that this Board approve the affordable housing preservation project at The Heritage at Old Town."

The BAR decision is a step back for an Alexandria that serves all its residents, both property owners and renters. The Heritage proposal is consistent, as far as I know, with our award winning Residential Multifamily (RMF) zoning policy, we should continue to lead the nation by continuing adherence to this policy.

Stephen J Popick, PhD Urban and Housing Economics.

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Stephen Popick

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