

Background

Alexandria has a long history as a seaport city. Incorporated in 1749, it was a major shipping center for tobacco as early as 1631, for wheat after 1770, and for imports from England during the colonial period. Alexandria competed effectively with the ports of New York, Boston and Baltimore. During this time, the area known as Old Town was built by individual ship owners, merchants, artisans, and prominent area families. Brick and frame townhouses covered a several block area. Commercial activity centered along the King Street axis running west from the waterfront, and along the waterfront itself, where warehouses, wharves and docks, and shipyards were located. A canal lock was built in the nineteenth century as part of the C&O Canal network running through Washington to Cumberland, Maryland.

In the years following the Civil War, the city's role as a thriving seaport declined as railroads became the primary transport mode. Alexandria was not able to integrate itself into the new national trading networks being established.

The waterfront became the site of industrial uses, while many buildings used in the port's heyday were abandoned. In the 1900 to 1920 period, Navy ship-building took place at the southernmost end of the waterfront at Jones Point. Ford Motor Company constructed an auto plant which operated in the 1920's. The four massive buildings called the Torpedo Plant were built at the foot of King Street to manufacture war munitions. Texaco built a tank farm further north, and large coal piles for a power plant formed the northern terminus of the waterfront. Other industrial uses included an arsenic plant.

a cement factory, and a rendering plant (Exhibit 1). The waterfront was effectively separated from the residential Old Town area, which was also undergoing a decline (as many downtowns declined after World War II with the movement to the suburbs). By the end of WW II, industrial uses on the waterfront also declined. The Torpedo Plant was closed, and the Ford Plant became a storage area for U.S. Government files. Port activities were limited as the Potomac ship channel became too shallow and narrow for many ships.

Meanwhile, interest in Old Town was reviving. Historical societies and individual property owners began rehabilitating houses. The City undertook urban renewal projects, but unlike many other U.S. cities, it was sensitive to the historic character of the downtown. Many structures were saved and new structures were built in character with their surroundings. The late 1960's and 1970's were boom years for Old Town. A large share of older buildings have been renovated (including more than 900 structures built prior to 1880) and there is a thriving commercial district in the heart of the historic area. Old Town began attracting visitors from the entire metropolitan area, and then from other states and countries as it acquired an image like that of Charleston and Savannah. (Exhibit 2)

With Old Town rehabilitated and thriving, city planners and City Council noted that the waterfront, an industrial wasteland, detracted from the Old Town atmosphere. At the same time, they recognized its potential to provide a linkage between the city and the river. Economic pressures for redevelopment, resulting from the waterfront's proximity to Washington and National Airport, also prompted consideration of the waterfront's future.

A title suit, initiated in 1973 by the Federal Government, laying claim to all land between the 1791 high-water line and the bulkhead line established by the U.S. Corps of Engineers in 1939, halted all development plans for the waterfront. Seventeen waterfront properties were affected by the suit. Neither City plans nor Federal plans for the waterfront could be implemented until a settlement was reached. This gave city planners time to develop a waterfront concept and plan, and to work toward its implementation one step at a time. The City made improvements to land it owned on the waterfront, and worked with developers to obtain projects consistent with the adopted city plan as each disputed title reached settlement.

Since 1977, the City has conducted parallel waterfront efforts: preparation of an official waterfront plan, and taking action toward redevelopment of the Torpedo Plant.

The Waterfront Concept and Plan

The City's concept of the waterfront envisioned a unified mixture of residential, commercial, waterfront mixed use, open space, and recreational land uses. Existing port facilities were to be upgraded to add atmosphere, variety, and interest, and serve as a reminder of Alexandria's history as a seaport. The open space system along the shoreline should include a continuous promenade and linkages to nodes of waterfront activity and Old Town's commercial and residential areas. Use of public transit should be maximized, and vehicular traffic should be one block inland from the waterfront.

The concept was adopted in April 1977, when the Alexandria City Council approved ten general waterfront policies:

- 1) land along the river suitable for open space and recreational purposes should be available for public use,
- 2) there should be convenient public access along the waterfront,
- 3) a continuous pedestrian promenade and bikeway should be developed between Daingerfield Island and Jones Point,
- 4) Daingerfield Island and Jones Point should remain Federal recreation and open space areas,
- 5) residential development should be limited to no more than 40 dwellings per acre,
- 6) uses east of Union Street and along the waterfront should primarily include marinas, shops, restaurants, markets, and other water-oriented uses,
- 7) existing port and river-related activities should continue,
- 8) obsolete and incompatible industrial uses should be replaced,
- 9) the natural shoreline should be maintained, and

10) a comprehensive system of circulation alternatives for the waterfront area should be considered as waterfront land uses are determined.

These policies are still in force and are reflected in the development that is occurring, despite the several rounds of plan preparation that resulted from Federal intervention during the waterfront title suit.

The planning staff's first plan based on the 10 waterfront policies, drafted in 1978, provided for three distinct waterfront sectors:

- o The North Waterfront would emphasize mixed use development, including residential and commercial office clusters, preservation of open space, acquisition of the Alexandria Canal Tidal Lock to serve as a focus for a historic park, and preservation of the active port facility at Robinson Terminal.
- o The Central Waterfront consisted of activities focused around the Torpedo Plant complex, including mixed uses and open space, and a waterfront commercial node involving a restaurant ship and transient boat docking facilities.
- o The South Waterfront was to have a residential townhouse character and an upgrading of an existing marina, along with a continuation of the 25-50 foot wide pedestrian/bike path planned for the entire waterfront.

In 1979, the National Park Service developed a study of the Alexandria Waterfront in response to the City's draft plan with a view toward protecting the

Potomac shoreline as a gateway to the nation's capital. The Park Service's concept was to maximize open space, and did not provide for residential or commercial uses. These recommendations diverged substantially from the City's previous plans. However, as part of efforts to reach an out-of-court settlement of the U.S. Justice Department's Title suit, the City engaged in a joint planning effort with the National Park Service. The result was a joint land use plan published in April 1981.

The joint plan provided for 27.9 acres of space/recreation uses, 6.6 acres of waterfront mixed use, and 5.0 acres of water-dependent mixed use within the riverfront area which is in dispute. Extensive public hearings were held, affording citizens and businessmen the opportunity to comment on the plan. The joint land use plan provided a basis for the development of amendments to the City's Consolidated Master Plan. City Council approved these in the fall of 1982. As a result of these efforts, the title to disputed properties has been settled in several cases, and agreements are pending on the remaining properties.

Selective Acquisition of Key Properties

The City took the first step in revitalizing the waterfront by acquiring the Torpedo Plant from the Federal Government in 1970. The Torpedo Plant complex (Exhibit 3) was to provide the first node of activity on the waterfront, generate interest in overall redevelopment, and focus planning efforts. In 1974, as part of Alexandria's preparations for the nation's bicentennial, the building closest to King Street was transformed into an arts center, providing studios and exhibition space for artists of all types, including potters, weavers, painters, enamelists, and metal workers. No structural changes to the building were made, and improvements were limited to repainting, carried out by the

artists themselves. This seemingly modest reuse of the building provided a focal point for tourism in Alexandria, and demonstrated the natural linkage of Old Town to the Waterfront. From that point on, developers and city residents alike became very active in proposing alternatives for the waterfront. City planning staff and the City Council have been prompting and guiding development ever since.

In July 1978, the City issued a Torpedo Plant Prospectus to solicit proposals for redevelopment of the 380,000 square foot complex. Prospective developers were requested to respond to five major goals:

- o enhancing the Old Town area, including opening the view of the waterfront,
- o relating development to the waterfront, including providing public access,
- o supporting the existing retail community,
- o minimizing negative parking and traffic impact, and
- o providing for a variety of uses in an economically feasible project.

The City reserved the right to ownership of waterfront open space, and required a minimum of 70,000 square feet of gross floor area to be dedicated to the Art Center. The City also requested developers to consider improvements to waterfront open space areas by providing public plazas, market stalls, transient

boat docking, exhibit areas, pedestrian and bicycle paths, and other water-oriented activities. Private uses allowed included restaurant, retail, residential, and professional offices, along with parking meeting established downtown parking standards. Finally, the City sought to achieve these development objectives in a financially sound manner, in which revenue received from the sale of land and buildings and from taxes related to the development could support the necessary public improvements.

Four developers submitted proposals. After extensive evaluation, the City Council selected the Alexandria Waterfront Restoration Group as being most responsive to City goals. AWRG's initial proposal, shown in Exhibit 4, provides for a one-third reduction in mass of the complex, demolition of the largest building, modification of remaining facades to reflect the surrounding historical neighborhood, and provision of 70,000 square feet of artists space, 20,000 square feet of retail space, 76,000 square feet of office space, 99 residential units, and a city market. Current plans call for slight modifications to this proposal.

Other land acquired by the City was used to provide open space and access to the waterfront. Texaco donated its land at Oronoco Bay to be used as a park. Founders Park is the result of a land exchange between the City and a developer. Waterfront Park was purchased when Virginia Concrete Company relocated to another site in the City. Southern Railroad donated the land for Pommander Walk Park. These acquisitions formed the main nodes of park land along the waterfront and are separated by nodes of commercial activity.

Capitalizing on Historic and Natural Resources

Alexandria's waterfront is an area of natural beauty, spoiled by man-made industrial development. Looking north from the waterfront, one can see the monuments of the nation's capital; looking south, the wooded hills of Maryland are visible. The Potomac flows gently by.

The waterfront also has historic character created by its former use as the site of a thriving seaport, the presence of attractive colonial warehouses and homes, its proximity to Old Town, and the presence of the Alexandria Canal Tidal Lock. Archaeological excavations along the waterfront have provided evidence of Alexandria's past; artifacts illustrating that past will be displayed at the Torpedo Plant.

In planning for and guiding redevelopment, the City has continually sought to use the area's natural beauty and historic character as driving forces. Its philosophy is that a strong sense of continuity should be fostered between the City, the shoreline, and the river. The open space plan ensures that the water's edge can be used for recreation. Buildings newly constructed on the waterfront, and the redeveloped Torpedo Plant, must provide for public access and for vistas.

The waterfront's history is already an integral part of the area's character, reflected in existing buildings, but the City is making efforts to reinforce the historic feeling. It has obtained funding from the National Trust for Historic Preservation for a plan to restore the Canal Tidal Lock. It has also developed a system of waterfront markers along the pedestrian walkway to point out historic sites and structures.

Targeted Capital Improvements

As early as 1970-1975, the City began waterfront improvements, removing obsolete railroad tracks on Union Street. In 1976, the City developed a waterfront bicycle trail along a railroad right-of-way through the northern end of the waterfront. Also in 1976, the city completed initial capital improvements at Founders Park, just north of the Torpedo Plant complex. These improvements were conducted in cooperation with the Founders Park Community Association and included tree planting, provision of benches, reseeding the lawn area, building a pedestrian walkway and a volleyball court.

In 1978, the City completed development of a passive open space area, now known as Waterfront Park, on the former Virginia Concrete Plant site south of King Street. The landscaped park provides sitting areas and yacht mooring facilities, as well as a dock for a restaurant ship.

Since then, the City has continued its improvements, with a view to completing the planned pedestrian/bicycle path and open space system. There are plans to relocate and improve the rowing facility. As each property on the waterfront becomes available for redevelopment, the City takes action to ensure that its open space objectives are met. The critical improvements that will create a waterfront plaza at the river's edge of King Street and improve the Torpedo Plant docks and piers are scheduled for 1983-1985.

The City is also working on upgrading Oronoco Bay. Construction of key links of the waterfront bikeway/walkway are now underway at the Ford Plant and Jones Point, in cooperation with the National Park Service. The City has recently completed plans for limited improvements at Jones Point.

Working with Developers

City officials have been extremely successful in working with developers to achieve city objectives while permitting economically feasible developments. Two key examples of that process are the Torpedo Plant redevelopment and the construction of the Trans-Potomac Plaza project at the extreme north end of the waterfront.

The developers of Trans-Potomac Plaza, encouraged by the evidence of city investment in the waterfront and sound consistent planning, approached the City early in the development process. The developers worked closely with City staff on the site plan and architectural design of the complex. Almost completed, Trans-Potomac Plaza consists of five buildings of various shapes and heights, constructed of the red brick prevalent in Old Town, and allowing views of the Potomac from the street (Exhibit 5). The complex provides 350,000 square feet of office space.

The City could have undertaken the Torpedo Plant redevelopment on its own, but that would have resulted in an extremely costly development. Instead, city staff worked closely with the selected developer, to the mutual benefit of AWRG and the City. In exchange for the developer's agreement to provide more parking than it originally proposed, the City reduced the purchase price of the buildings, enhancing project economics. The City agreed to provide docks and improve the waterfront land at the Plant, while AWRG agreed to comply with design standards and to provide space for a market and restaurants. As a result of these agreements, the developer has a more sellable project, while the City has development that conforms with its adopted plan. The Torpedo Plant Art Center is being retained and the entire complex will be a revenue generator.

Most landowners are not only complying with the city plan, but are actively contributing to the plan's implementation. The landowners are being granted continued ownership, but in exchange give open space easements and make improvements at the river's edge of their property. Because these improvements are an integral part of each property owner's development plans, the City will not incur the expenditure of maintaining waterfront open space on privately owned land. Other landowners have donated money to the City for park improvements.

The Future

A bright future is in store for Alexandria's waterfront. With an adopted plan, the settlement of the title suit, and the cooperation of waterfront landowners, the waterfront can only improve. Piece by piece, property by property, the plan elements are being achieved. The concept that took form in 1977 is being actualized in 1983. The open space and pedestrian/bicycle circulation system is near completion. Major office developments are already partially occupied, and the Torpedo Plant demolition and reconstruction is underway. Other projects are on the drawing boards.

The next step is to animate the waterfront so that it is active not only during office hours, but on weekends and year-round. The two-day waterfront festival held in June 1982 was a big success and is likely to become an annual event. Visiting ships, including a cruise ship, the Coast Guard's Eagle, and military vessels from foreign countries dock in Alexandria and attract visitors from the entire metropolitan area. The City is planning to provide bus service from the waterfront to the Metrorail stations, facilitating access by visitors from Washington and reducing automobile traffic on the waterfront and in Old Town.

The Waterfront is now identified as a prestige location. Several national associations have moved their headquarters from Washington or other cities to the new buildings being constructed on the Waterfront. This is generating interest in development of high quality hotels for business travelers. The solid core of business uses will support Old Town restaurants so that there is activity in the City at night as well as during the day. Enough momentum has been generated that the waterfront cannot but successfully provide what its planners envisioned: an active, attractive area, achieved at a relatively low cost to the City Government, providing recreational and commercial opportunities for residents and businessmen.

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