

Ramsey Homes Saturday March 12th, Docket Item 8

I was dissatisfied that the city council listened to 6 hours of testimony Feb. 20th and then chose to reverse its vote. Repeating the hearing means some opponents and some proponents of the project can now not attend, and their voices will not be heard. I thought reversing the vote was unfair to the people who came on Saturday and did not even know that the vote could be rescinded. I believe that the information should have been shared with all colleagues before the meeting and this surprise is not helpful to the trust between council members. I also believe the Mayor and the City Attorney should be able to trust each other, and so the City Attorney's relationship to all council members should be equal, and all information known prior to a meeting should be shared. It is also the kind of thing that builds public mistrust, and it lacked transparency.

But of course we must move forward. After re-reading the work plan and some of the articles on the city council and planning commission meeting, I would suggest that the following things:

1. **That the DSUP not be passed on Saturday, and that it not be brought back till September or October**, giving a reasonable amount of time to work with neighbors and preservationists and for ARHA to come up with an alternative plan that has been given the same consideration as the plan they have already proposed. If the original and an alternative plan are brought forward they should be done with equal due diligence. Otherwise it will automatically be weighted to the more complete plan, the one that is already done.
2. Considering that the DSUP for 53 units was **not** recommended by the planning commission and would not have received enough votes at council, it is my advice to not move forward on that proposal, and **only move forward on alternative proposals** that include preservation. ARHA says soft costs, such as planning, are included in the overall cost of the project and so additional planning and study could make their plan less competitive (see 3. threshold issues in the workplan) so save money and just bring forward alternatives. City Council asked for a Hybrid Options, which is one reason the plan was not approved when it came back to council. If Council wants options, bring back both Hybrid options, the one and two building option.
3. **The alternative plan should provide better open space, more appropriate play space for children, tree canopy, better parking accommodation and come closer to a wish for less density** by neighbors on whom this will have the most effect. The alternative plan should also be revised for units to all have a street entrance, and door, and no central hallway which should save space). They should have the appearance of a single family. It seems like this would certainly make the project more attractive, fit into the neighborhood, etc.

4. I reiterate my opposition to the re-zoning. In threshold issues (3) in the work plan the first paragraph says "it is likely that an appraisal, particularly if it is premised on a re-zoning that allows 53 multifamily units, will indicate a much higher value than has been presented publically, with potential implications for a future tax credit application and feasibility or a future acquisition of one building for preservation by a non-ARHA entity."

I think any rezoning makes preservation less likely, and that the increased price of the property, presently 3.8 million, will be used against preservation, in that ARHA has said the value of the property is in the land, and that is what they are trying to leverage, that they will be less willing to give away one of the 4 buildings or preserve one or more buildings. In fact, it was said by ARHA board members that it is more likely they will propose some use, such as Day Care, that supports the project, as opposed to disposing of the building. Also, **only a different, lower zoning category would be necessary for a plan with fewer units, so I am not sure why the present proposed zoning should be passed now and decoupled with an approved plan.**

Also, **upzoning in order to add value to the property is not warranted, and even though ARHA would need council and HUD's approval to sell the property, there is no gurantee that these hurdles cannot be met.** The chosen zoning includes commercial (CRMU) so if the propeerty is sold it could then be retail and residential, completely changing the makeup of this block. Surely other property owners will see this as a precedent to upzone their properties to add value.

5. The work plan says this will be a collaboration between "all parties" so I suggest an advisory committee of 'all parties' be formed and that it include nieghbors and preservationists who are not on City Council or ARHA, including:

1 member of the neighborhood

1 representative of Civic Association (West Old Town Civic Association or Old Town Civic)

1 member of Preservation organization (either HARC or HAF)

1 member of an African American Preservation Group (Like Society for the Preservation of Black History)

6. Don't consider Ramsey Homes in isolation to the other ARHA projects in the pipeline. Without knowing the entire scope of ARHA's redevelopmet plans it is nearly impossible to anyalyze this individual project. I have wondered why with 5-6 other projects coming forward, why 30 units (a 3 story building and preserving one building?) could not be built here with the stipulation that city council would allow extra units, and perhaps an extra floor at one of the other projects. Or why all the additional units could not be moved to another project.

7. Consider adding to the Black History Museum, giving them much needed space, and funding more in line to other Alexandria Museums. This is the only Museum in the Parker Gray Historic District, but it has very little information on the history of the neighborhood. The Black History Museum, presently uses its basement for storage and office space. There is money in the ARHA budget for historic preservation, and mitigation will be required in the section 106 process. I think that resource should be used to rehab one building, and restore to its original appearance. It's highest and best use would be to expand the resources and capabilities of the Black History Museum. It would be a place for innovative ideas that could serve to educate the public and serve Alexandria's economic interest in tourism. Heritage tourists stay longer and spend more. It is not fair to say that it lacks visitors if it lacks the resources to attract visitors.

8. City Council should not reject any possible ideas, and be willing to consider any out of the box ideas, including transferring the property to a non-profit housing agency, or some other use. I would prefer to see all four houses saved, and the open space preserved, but I am not sure how to get there without some solution we have not yet thought of or discovered. I hope that the rezoning or master plan amendment would not preclude considering other options.

I want to say a personal thanks to those who have supported saving Ramsey Homes and that preserving history is certainly not only about those no longer living, but about those generations yet to come, who can learn from what we preserve in our lifetimes. It was just announced that Mercy Street on PBS will be filming a second season in Alexandria. It is great that there is a series that is focusing not just on white lives, but the stories of African Americans in Alexandria as well. Mayor Allison Silberberg mentioned it in a tweet:

#MercyStreetPBS will be back for another season! It is a wonderful show that examines the great history of our city.

But it is not the complete history of Alexandria, and maybe Ramsey home represents another side of the story of Alexandria. We are preserving World War 2 defense history, African American Housing, and a piece of the historic Parker Gray neighborhood.

Boyd Walker

Testimony by Bill Hendrickson at City Council public hearing,
March 12, 2016, docket item 8

Good morning. My name is Bill Hendrickson and I chair the Historic Alexandria Resources Commission. HARC was created by the Council to provide advice on preserving the city's historic and cultural resources. We take that mission seriously. We don't believe that every structure that might be considered historic can or should be preserved. But in the case of the Ramsey Homes, we find the historical as well as architectural research compelling. I think that those who actually read this research will find it compelling as well.

The research indicates that the Ramsey Homes were well built, are still structurally sound, and could be rehabilitated into 21st century dwelling units that even those who don't need housing subsidies might want to live in.

It is unfortunate that the redevelopment proposal came first and only then the historical research. This indicates that city policy is lacking in determining in advance which structures are worth preserving to avoid conflicts.

In this case, all we have asked is that a good faith effort be made to examine alternatives to ARHA's plan that would preserve one or more of the buildings. I am disappointed, however, that the resolutions that have been proposed for consideration today apparently call for examining only one alternative. Why be so rigid and lock yourselves in? Why not be more creative?

I strongly support the Council's policies on affordable housing, even though they have had limited success in preserving existing affordable housing units or creating new ones. relative to the enormous number we have lost.

I also support your policy to retain the existing number of public housing units. But keep in mind that this policy has also contributed to the increasing gentrification of the city, because ARHA's model has been to use the proceeds from the building of a large number of market rate dwellings to subsidize the rebuilding of the public housing units. This is the model ARHA apparently plans to use in the future. The Ramsey Homes proposal is an exception. Should that be the case in the future or should we be more creative in approaching this so that we might be able to build more affordable housing and not just market-rate housing on these sites?

What concerns me above all is that everything appears to be dictated by ARHA's financing needs, including the current proposal, and Council always seems to go along. Yet during this process, ARHA has made claims that it has not supported with evidence, and thus it is difficult to tell how credible it is. Greater transparency would help, especially for an organization that receives substantial taxpayer subsidies. The Council needs to be asking much harder questions about all of this. You seem to have begun that, but you have a way to go.

To conclude, let me repeat that HARC believes the Ramsey Homes are historically and architecturally significant, that one or more of them should be preserved and rehabilitated, and that a good faith effort needs to be made to explore multiple alternatives for doing so. Thank you.