

RE: Docket item 15 (Other Business) *Informational Update on the OHAD Architectural Survey & Sidewalk Material Survey*

To the Chair and Members of the Board of Architectural Review

I have had the opportunity to read the staff update regarding sidewalk maintenance and replacement in the Historic District. I find the report encouraging and I am pleased to see the issue of materials and placement addressed in a sensible and comprehensive approach. Maintaining historic or historically appropriate sidewalk materials (as well as curbs and alleys) has been a problem I have raised with staff in the past, in part because I recognize an ongoing internal disconnect between T&ES/ maintenance on the one hand and Preservation Management staff (and our preservation commissions) on the other regarding how and when Alexandria's cityscape should be preserved. I also routinely see City crews (and private contractors) removing original historic curb and street fabric and replacing them with modern materials, as well as the patchwork of sidewalk materials (not to mention the alleys). It is frustrating to residents who work hard to restore, preserve and maintain our common historic cityscape when they see their streets and sidewalks held to a different standard, and one that often undermines their community efforts. We have little historic fabric left, and what we have has been subjected to steady erosion as maintenance crews cut corners in an effort to either save money, or because they are not sure how to deal with the existing fabric and resort to using inappropriate materials or methods. We now have an unpredictable and unattractive jagged sidewalk streetscape, often broken visually multiple times in a single block. Some of this is of our own doing, and we can fix it with the right policies

Aesthetic and authenticity issues are just one aspect of why historic or appropriate materials should be preserved and, where possible, expanded. Historic materials are often LESS costly in the long run because they last longer – such as brick sidewalks, some of which have not needed replacement in decades (the block at Gadsby's Tavern is one example lasting probably from the 1930s, but there are many other blocks which have endured for decades – I've had a brick sidewalk in front of my house since the early 1990s with no repairs). Furthermore, these materials are less susceptible to compromise by frost and freeze heaving and even breaking than is concrete. I might also mention that these historic materials are often more environmentally sound as they are more porous, thus responding to the urgent need to reduce run off and channeling. The latter point has been raised as part of the City's plan to increase "green" surfaces in streets and alleys.

For these reasons, I support a written and enforced City policy regarding streetscapes, to include sidewalks, curbs, alleys, and other materials. I suggest that the agreement reached informally regarding sidewalks be institutionalized in writing as an important first step towards a comprehensive plan and policies addressing the historic district as a whole.

I would like to add a couple of considerations:

Enhance predictability and accountability – A written and enforced policy helps assure residents that they can rely on staff and crews to adhere to preserving existing fabric, and to replacing inappropriate materials areas opportunistically. What I fear is a policy that cannot or will not be implemented and enforced. Ensure some oversight and monitoring of streetscape maintenance for Preservation Staff,

and add means for residents to reliably report problems to a go-to staff POC or otherwise “backstop” our already overworked inspectors.

Threshold – what area of replacement triggers the installation of brick sidewalks? Who makes that call?

Training – Training crews and supervisors that these policies exist and how to implement them will be critical, especially with high turnover. In addition, it is sometime clear that the crews are unfamiliar with how to install, repair or maintain historic sidewalks and other surfaces. I catch them using Portland cement mortar in sidewalks, or simply dumping cobbles or other stone materials. I should point out that we have a far larger inventory of cobblestone areas than simply a couple of blocks of street. These include street gutters and alleys, and even under long swaths of our streets extending well past route 1), and crews don’t have training to deal with them as utility repairs are made or streets are repaved.

I strongly support this initiative and approach to enhance and restore our historic streetscape.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Elizabeth “Indy” McCall

Chair, Alexandria Archaeological Commission

Co-Chair (with Danny Smith) Historic Alexandria Resources Commission

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