

A statement by Bert Ely to the Alexandria City Council regarding the proposed consolidation of the two BARs

April 14, 2018

Madam Mayor and members of Council I am Bert Ely and I live at 200 South Pitt. Speaking only for myself, I wish to express serious reservations about the Vice Mayor's proposal to consolidate the two boards of architectural reviews. While this proposal may have an initial, superficial appeal, I urge Council to give serious consideration to the numerous reasons not to consolidate the two BARs.

The key reason not to consolidate is that the two districts differ significantly as to their architectural character and history. As the Vice Mayor's April 10 memorandum to Council states, the two BARs administer "distinctly different guidelines." Asking a single BAR to administer distinct different guidelines creates the likelihood that those different guidelines will soon meld, through a single BAR, into what will be, as a practical matter, a single set of guidelines that will serve neither district as well as the present distinct guidelines.

I fully appreciate the concern about the impact of a reduced workload on the Parker-Gray BAR, with shorter meetings and the occasional canceled meeting, but that circumstance can be addressed by scheduling Parker-Gray BAR meetings on an as-needed basis. Such scheduling would be comparable, as I understand it, to meetings of the Board of Zoning Appeals and possibly other city boards and commissions that conduct important city business yet do not have such heavy workloads that they must meet on a regular basis.

Contrary to the Parker-Gray situation, the BAR for the Old & Historic District does have a much heavier workload, dictated in part by the much larger area of the Old & Historic District, but also by the amount of redevelopment activity that has been taking place in the Old & Historic District relative to Parker Gray. That level of redevelopment activity is likely to continue for a number of years.

Given the heavier workload now borne by the members of the Old & Historic District BAR, it would not be fair to add to that workload by having it consider applications now addressed by the Parker-Gray BAR.

While the two BARs should not be merged, Council should consider changes in the make-up of the Old & Historic BAR in two regards. First, there is a concern that architects are overly represented on that BAR, with the consequence that there are frequent recusals by architect-members because of current or past associations with the architects bringing a proposed project to that BAR for approval.

A second concern – architect members are more likely to approve projects proposed by other architects that might not otherwise be approved by the BAR. BAR members trained as architectural historians or with substantial experience in historic preservation make more appropriate members of a BAR.

A third concern is that residents of the Old & Historic District are underrepresented on that BAR, with the consequence that decisions affecting the historic character of the district are made by non-resident BAR members who do not have the commitment to enhancing the historic character of the district that residents of the district are much more likely to have.

In closing, while I, and many others, believe the membership make-up of the BAR for the Old & Historic District should be changed, it would not be desirable to merge the two BARs.

Thank you for your time this morning – I welcome your questions.