

10-17-20

submitted by Stafford
WardCity Council Public Hearing – October 17, 2020

Docket #10, File # 21-0259

BAR #2020-00197 OHAD: Public Hearing and consideration of an appeal of the Board of Architectural Review's (BAR) September 2, 2020 decision to approve a Permit for Complete Demolition at 450 South Patrick Street, 900 Wolfe Street, and 431 South Columbus Street.

Property Owner: Stafford A. Ward, 600 Block South Columbus Street

Bottom Line: As a property owner in the 600 Block of South Columbus Street, I am in support of the APPELLANT in their appeal of the BAR's September 2, 2020 decision to approve a *Permit for Complete Demolition* of three properties owned by the APPLICANT.

Rationale: This property owner's support is based on the following three points:

1. A decision by the City Council to uphold the BAR's September 2 approval to demolish the APPLICANT's properties by the September 2021 relocation timeline would place the health and safety of the 244 Heritage residents at risk for contracting the novel coronavirus that causes the COVID-19 illness.
 - a. At present, there is no conclusive assessment by any U.S. public health official that the COVID-19 illness will significantly subside by September 2021 to proceed with the relocation of Heritage residents by September 2021.
 - b. Per the Office of Housing's *Housing Relocation Assistance Policy*, Heritage residents would need to be informed of the relocation by January 2021 which would be three months prior to the end of the City's Declaration of Local Emergency on March 31, 2021.
 - c. **Thus, the City Council should place a temporary delay on the APPLICANT's Permit for Complete Demolition of the Heritage properties until a COVID-19 vaccine is publicly available to all City of Alexandria residents.**
2. In response to Question #5 in the 21-0259 Staff Report, Staff remarked on page 8 that the "four buildings do not have architectural or cultural significance that would warrant their retention in the city," and "Heritage of Old Town is [a] poor choice for preservation..."
 - a. Staff did not provide sufficient documentation, or a detailed explanation to support either of these claims against any baseline City of Alexandria policy standard as to what constitutes "architectural or cultural significance," or why the Heritage is a "poor choice for preservation."
 - b. **Thus, the City Council should place a temporary delay on the APPLICANT's permit until such evidence or standards are transparent to City of Alexandria residents.**
3. Per page 12 of the *South Patrick Street Housing Affordability Strategy* adopted by Ordinance #5165 on October 13, 2018, "development applications that involve displacement must be accompanied by a relocation plan." **Thus, the City Council should place a temporary moratorium on the APPLICANT's permit until a relocation plan is presented to the City's Landlord-Tenant Relations Board, and transparent to City of Alexandria residents.**

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submitted by
Albert Perea

To the Members of the City Council:

We have lived in the 300 block of South Alfred Street since December 1986, and we are among the signers of the petition asking Council to overrule the BAR decision to grant permission for the demolition of the Heritage residential complex in our neighborhood.

Like most of our neighbors, we applaud the unanimous BAR decision to reject the second concept proposal for a new Heritage development. We agree with them that the proposed development would be grossly out of scale with our neighborhood, which consists primarily of single-family, two- and three-story townhomes. In terms of scale and density, ours is like other residential neighborhoods in Alexandria, such as Del Ray and Rosemont, except that we have townhomes, while they have detached homes.

Yet, also like most of our neighbors, we object strongly to the BAR decision in that same meeting to grant permission for demolition of the existing Heritage complex.

Here are key points we would draw to your attention:

1. The existing Heritage complex includes 144 affordable housing units, many of them occupied by families with young children.
2. If Council does not overrule the BAR demolition decision, the residents in all 144 affordable housing units will be relocated to other *existing* affordable housing units somewhere in the area. There will be no immediate construction of 144 new units.
3. There is no guarantee that they will be relocated to comparable units for that indefinite period of time.
4. Because there is no approved plan for a new Heritage development, those families will be relocated indefinitely, probably for years, with no idea when they would be able to return to this neighborhood.
5. Our understanding is that many of those residents work in Old Town, and can walk to their jobs. Who knows where they will be relocated to, and what that will mean for their daily commute?
6. The children in those affordable housing units walk to local schools. Being relocated, most of them will have to change schools, and may not be within easy walking distance of those schools.
7. All of this disruption for those families will take place during a *global pandemic of a highly infectious disease!* No expert we are aware of sees a near-term end to the pandemic. It is possible that those families will be forced to move two or three times during this pandemic, if the existing Heritage is demolished.

Like most of us in Alexandria, we support building additional affordable housing units in our City. That is why we applaud those Alexandria and Arlington

churches that have used their financial and other resources to increase the inventory of affordable housing units.

If Council does not overrule the BAR demolition decision, it will result in a *net loss of 144 affordable housing units for an indefinite period of time*, likely several years.

If Council rejects our petition and reaffirms the BAR demolition decision, a clear and fair interpretation of that Council decision would be that Council members put the financial interests of a New York developer over the interests of all the Alexandria residents who live in those 144 units.

That mass relocation will occur during an election year in Alexandria.

Please, if you care about affordable housing, and if you put Alexandria citizens' interests first, accept our petition and overrule the BAR demolition decision.

Respectfully,

Albert C. Pierce
Mary Ann Pierce

Albert C. Pierce
Mary Ann Pierce
320 South Alfred Street

To the Mayor of Alexandria and Members of the City Council,

The application for demolition asks 8 questions, 5 of which are addressed in this letter; the 3 unaddressed questions, with the Applicant's response, are on the last page for reference. This letter submits rebuttals to 5 of the Applicant's responses to these questions and requests that the Council deny the application for demolition.

Question 1: *"Is the building or structure of such architectural or historical interest that its moving, removing, capsulating or razing would be to the detriment of the public interest?"*

Applicant's Response: "The existing buildings are not designated as historic. As envisioned in the Small Area Plan, the Applicant proposes to maintain the existing number of designated affordable units on-site and rezone the property to Residential Multifamily (RMF)."

Rebuttal:

. The Applicant's response indicates that they propose to base this project on the number of existing affordable units. The actual number of affordable units on the three sites is 140, (South Patrick Street Affordable Housing Strategy, p 7). The project scope should be reduced from 777 to 560 to be consistent with the number of existing on-site affordable units if the ratio of 3 market value units to every affordable unit is approved. The project scope would be less if that ratio were reduced.

. The demolition of the existing "garden apartments" would be detrimental to the public interest because the impact of their demolition is not limited to the physical structures alone but how their interface with the community is harmed. The buildings' interface includes their relation to infrastructure, such as its setback from and connection to streets, sidewalks, adjacent properties and their surroundings, and their orientation to and use of the site to create a physical and visual environment that is appreciated by the public and its residents.

Question 3: *"Is the building or structure of such old and unusual or uncommon design, texture and material that it could not be reproduced or reproduced only with great difficulty?"*

Applicant's Response: "No, the buildings are constructed of relatively modern materials without unusual or uncommon design, texture or material. This design and construction could be easily reproduced."

Rebuttal:

. While the building's structure, which suits and enhances the neighborhood, is replaceable, its siting, its setbacks, its trees and green space can never be replaced or duplicated anywhere in Old Town. Even if there were a site in this area of Alexandria with enough space and setback to reproduce the outdoor amenities, it would take decades to replace the trees.

Question 5: *"Would retention of the building or structure help preserve and protect an historic place or area of historic interest in the city?"*

Applicant's Response: "Retention of the building would not help preserve or protect a historic place or area of historic interest. However, the Applicant intends to incorporate the history of the Bottoms as inspiration for the landscape design of the Wilkes Street Park, which will enhance the historic interest of the site."

Rebuttal:

. An Alexandria staff report for the BAR in November 2016 advised that the Old Town West properties had never been examined archeologically. The south half of the block (901 Wolfe) has the potential to contain significant archeological deposits that pertain to the early growth and development of Alexandria, particularly the advancement of a free African American community. Accordingly, the question of whether and to what extent the area of the planned demolition is archeologically significant needs to be answered by the Applicant.

. The buildings to be demolished may have historic significance as representative of the urban renewal era of affordable housing. They merit more historic research to determine their historic value to the community at large. The value of retaining these buildings should also consider their contribution to making the city a more attractive and desirable place in which to live, a criteria which must be fully addressed in granting a permit to demolish.

. The question concerns not only whether the building or structure but the place or area where it sits has significance. In this case the trees, the grounds and spaces where the community interacts and plays are as important as their buildings and were considered by the architects and incorporated in their design. The Applicant's denial of that value of place seems to deny that anything other than a building itself is relevant and that the building's orientation, consideration for light and air, and its inclusion of social and recreation areas, including a dog park and designated gathering place, has no value. The Applicant's approach to the question does not appear to consider or address the wider issue of the significance of the building's place or area.

. The Applicant's intent to incorporate a history of the Bottoms in the 'Wilkes Street Park' indicates that the Veterans' Memorial Walkway dedicated by Alexandria on Veterans' Day 1979, that occupies that site now and has no value as a historic place or area. When the walkway was dedicated by Alexandria's Veterans' Organizations it was to honor the memory of the deceased Alexandria Veterans of all the U. S. wars. If the Applicant wants to incorporate a park to provide a history of the Bottoms it would be better to include that element as an expansion of the outdoor recreational areas, setbacks and open spaces, integrating it throughout the area for greater impact. If an additional area to recognize the Bottoms was located adjacent to the memorial walkway it would enhance the walkway and provide additional recreation and social gathering spaces for residents and the public.

Question 6: *"Would retention of the building or structure promote the general welfare by maintaining or increasing real estate values, generating business, creating new positions, attracting tourists, students, writers, historians, artists and artisans, attracting new residents, encouraging study and interest in American history, stimulating interest and study in architecture and design, educating citizens in American culture and heritage and making the city a more attractive and desirable place in which to live?"*

Applicant's Response: "The proposed demolition will allow the Applicant to construct approximately 300 units in Block 1 and 174 units in Block 2, which will increase the available market rate and affordable housing in Alexandria, in line with the city's stated goals."

Rebuttal:

. Retaining the existing buildings would preserve the ambience of the neighborhood which is a significant reason for current real estate values. The proposed structures would not stimulate interest in their design or architecture more than what is existing because they are not remarkable, unique or cutting-edge for today. Demolishing the older buildings and replacing them with grossly out-of-scale, modern structures that conflict with the neighborhood will reduce real estate values, the area's attraction, and degrade the resident's general welfare.

. Blocks 1 and 2, in the Old and Historic Alexandria District, contain 172 housing units. The 474 units in the proposed structures would more than double the number of units on the same sites. Retaining the existing buildings would promote the general welfare by preserving the open space, setbacks and mature trees on the site which will be degraded by the new structures minimal setbacks, limited open space, and lack of trees and outdoor recreational space. Demolition would degrade the area making it less attractive or desirable.

. The existing neighborhood homes will be negatively impacted by the massive buildings, the destruction of its mature trees, and reduction of light and moving air. The size of these building's impermeable footprint and their total number of residents will have a significant impact on the area's schools, utilities and roads infrastructure. The years of demolition and construction impacts will decrease adjacent real estate values and make this part of Alexandria less attractive and desirable place.

The final section of the Application asks the Applicant for a "Description of the alternatives to demolition/encapsulation and why such alternatives are not considered feasible."

The Applicant's Response states, "There are no feasible alternatives to the proposed demolition."

Rebuttal:

. The Applicant's response denies the potential for renovating the existing structures which would be far less invasive than new construction, would reuse the existing materials, take less time to accomplish and return the residents to their units more quickly. Renovation would save most of the mature street trees and on-site tree canopy that enhances the site and provides substantial stormwater abatement. Additionally, the outdoor recreation and community areas would be preserved, which significantly enhance the quality of life for the residents. These aspects of renovation and retention of the buildings argue for building retention as a way to improve affordable housing while making the city a more attractive and desirable place to live.

. This demolition involves only 3 of the 9 redevelopment sites of the South Patrick Street Affordable Housing Strategy and will set the tone for the remaining sites. Although the structures in Blocks 1 and 2 fall under the more restrictive rules in the Historic District, the demolition criteria and decisions made for this project will set the precedent for the remaining sites. These sites, like the apartment developments just south of Potomac Yard, announce the entry into Alexandria and in this case Historic Alexandria. For these reasons, the decisions to demolish that are made for this project should be made while considering the future development of all 9 sites.

Thank you for your consideration,

Questions in the Application for a Permit to Demolish not addressed in this document.

Question 2: "Is the building or structure of such interest that it could be made into an historic shrine?"

The Applicant's Response states, "No, there is nothing historically or architecturally significant about these buildings."

Question 4: "Would retention of the building or structure help preserve the memorial character of the George Washington Memorial Parkway?"

The Applicant's Response states, "N/A"

Question 7: "In the instance of a building or structure owned by the city or the redevelopment and housing authority, such building or structure having been acquired pursuant to a duly approved urban renewal (redevelopment) plan, would retention of the building or structure promote the general welfare in view of the needs of the city for an urban renewal (redevelopment) project?"

The Applicant's Response states, "N/A"

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor Justin Wilson and Members of City Council

FROM: Housing Alexandria - Affordable Housing Advocates and Supporters

RE: Appeal of BAR Approval for Demolition Permit to Demolish Four Buildings at Heritage of Old Town B.A.R. Case# 2020-00197

DATE: October 12, 2020

Dear Mayor Wilson and City Council,

We are writing to support the ruling of the Board of Architectural Review (BAR) to approve demolition of four aging buildings at Heritage at Old Town. This demolition is necessary to advance a redevelopment proposal to create over 700 units of new housing at this site. This proposal will replace the existing 219 affordable units for low and moderate income renters, and current residents will have the right of first refusal to return when the redevelopment is completed.

As organizations who provide housing and supportive services for low and moderate income households, we know that quality affordable housing is their greatest need and number one challenge. We are acutely aware of the rapidly diminishing supply of affordable housing stock, and the critical need to expand housing opportunities for very low income earners. In normal times, hundreds of families are one paycheck away from losing their housing and becoming homeless due to rising rents. During COVID-19, preserving the City's affordable housing stock is more important than ever to maintain health and safety for the community.

The proposed development will utilize the newly adopted Residential Multifamily Zoning (RMF) ordinance, which provides bonus density incentives for developers to preserve all existing affordable housing in a redevelopment proposal. Alexandria has lost approximately 90% of its market affordable housing stock, so we applaud City Council for supporting this creative new strategy to mitigate the loss of affordable units.

Subsequent to the BAR ruling, residents in the Old and History District Parker-Gray District appealed the approval for a demolition permit, stating that "The buildings to be demolished may have historic significance as representative of the urban renewal era of affordable housing." There is some irony to the fact that the era of urban renewal was characterized by policies that razed entire communities of color, destroying well-established neighborhoods and the social bonds of the people who lived there. An "urban renewal era of affordable housing" is a discredited approach to urban planning, and should not be invoked as a style to be preserved to challenge this proposal.

The BAR has approved a permit to demolish these buildings. This proposal addresses critical housing needs in the City through the application of zoning strategies approved by City Council. We respectfully request that you uphold the BAR ruling and deny the appeal.

Sincerely,

AHC Inc, Walter D. Webdale, President and CEO
Alexandria Housing Development Corporation, Jon Frederick, President/CEO

Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing, Nina Janopaul, CEO
Carpenter's Shelter, Shannon Steene, Executive Director
Christ Church Alexandria, Melanie Gray, Director of Outreach and Mission
Coalition for Smarter Growth, Sonya Breehey, Northern Virginia Advocacy Manager
Community Lodgings, Lynn Thomas, Executive Director
Economic Opportunities Commission, Geoffrey F. Caldwell, Chair
Fairlington Presbyterian Church, Rev. Julie Wilson-Black, Pastor
Grassroots Alexandria, Jonathan Krall
Habitat for Humanity of Northern Virginia, Jon Smoot, Executive Director
Housing Association of Nonprofit Developers (HAND), Heather Raspberry, Executive Director
Liveable Alexandria: Housing and Transit Advocates, Ken Notis, Chair
Neighborhood Fundamentals, LLC, Michael A. Spotts, President
Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance, Michelle Krockner, Executive Director
Northern Virginia Apartment Association, Patrick Alger, Executive Director
Rebuilding Together DC Alexandria, Katharine Dixon, President/CEO
StoryTech Consulting, Christopher Parente, Founder
The Michaels Organization, Nicholas Bracco, Regional Vice President, Mid-Atlantic
Virginia Housing Alliance, Erik T. Hoffman, Board member
Wesley Housing, Shelley Murphy, President/CEO

Alyia Gaskins, City resident
Barbara Wilmer, City resident
Betsy Faga, Lay Leader, Episcopal Church of the Resurrection
Christina Stacy, City resident
June Stowe, City resident
Mike Doyle, City resident
Robert C. Burns, City resident
Robyn Konkell, City resident

