



The Honorable Mayor Justin Wilson and Members of the Council
City of Alexandria, Virginia

RE: Torpedo Factory Art Center Action Plan
January 27, 2021

Dear Mayor Wilson and Members of City Council:

The Alexandria Commission for the Arts (ACA) is appreciative of your stewardship to encourage and sustain the arts in Alexandria. The ACA's mandated duty is to "advise City Council with regard to policies that will strengthen the arts and further public access to the arts and cultural matters identified by the City Council." With that in mind, this letter offers the ACA's advice and guidance regarding the *Action Plan for Vibrancy & Sustainability at the Torpedo Factory Art Center* (the Plan).

The Torpedo Factory Art Center (Art Center) is the City's most recognized landmark. As a globally recognized arts destination, the Torpedo Factory contributes to the City's energy, reputation as an arts destination, and economy. The historic space is unique—showcasing and nurturing one-to-one relationships between its working artists and visitors of all ages and economic strata.

As a whole, the ACA supports the Plan, however it would have been greatly improved if broader stakeholder input had been provided up-front, as stated in Council's directives. The ACA would like to highlight our support for the following initiatives outlined in the Plan that we believe are essential to the success of the Art Center:

- **Keeping Working Artist Studios:** We support the Plan's interest in "expand[ing] the artist studio program," as working artist studios, as well as the art school, art store, and galleries are all essential parts of the Art Center. In order to serve as a 21st century arts space, keeping working artist studios front-and-center is paramount.
- **Undertaking an Architectural and Business Plan:** We are excited to see that the City will develop "an architectural plan for the renovation and repurposing of the entire building," as well as "creating a detailed business plan to ensure a sustainable financial future," and ask Council to support further financial initiatives to ensure the success of these future plans.
- **Building a Visually-Enticing Space:** We support establishing the Waterfront as a primary entrance to the Art Center and other opportunities to create a more welcoming space and we ask Council to continue funding requests for these projects.

The ACA also offers the following recommendations to fully provide for vibrancy and sustainability of the Art Center:

- **Developing Greater Input from and Collaboration with Stakeholders:** As the planning process continues, we strongly encourage the City consider the ACA a primary stakeholder as the Council-appointed voice of the citizen and taxpayer moving forward. We emphasize the importance of the City reaching out to various stakeholders, including artists, civic associations, *Visit Alexandria*, the general public, and missing voices. We also believe a continued focus on strengthening communication and collaboration with the tenants of and contributors to the work of the Art Center is critical to long-term success.
- **Creating Benchmarks for Success:** With a plan of this importance, key benchmarks and measurable goals should be made as the planning continues. We encourage the City to create key data points for measuring the success of the plan.
- **Building Equity and Inclusion:** The Plan centers on the focus of the Art Center in Old Town and its orientation to that community and tourists. We encourage consideration of how other Alexandria neighborhoods and multicultural communities are engaged through conversation, programming, and more.
- **Ensuring a Presence for the Performing Arts:** The Center houses many visual artists, but the performing arts are often omitted. As expressed during meetings of the advisory group for the *Arts and Cultural Master Plan (2016-26)*, the need for performing arts venues and gallery space in Alexandria is great and we encourage further integration of Alexandria performing arts groups into the Art Center.

The ACA appreciates the opportunity to provide these recommendations to City Council and hopes the input provided in this letter is incorporated into a revised plan.

The arts have always had a special home here in Alexandria. According to the most recent Americans for the Arts' *Arts and Economic Prosperity 5*, "Arts and culture is a **\$111.8 million industry in Alexandria** supporting 2,628 full-time equivalent jobs, generating over \$56 million in household income to local residents, and providing \$7.5 million in local and state government revenue."

The Torpedo Factory had endured many changes in its 100-year-old history. Since its founding, artists have been at the core of the Art Center and we expect that while the Art Center adapts to the 21st Century, artists must remain at the core. The Arts Commission is optimistic that the historic integrity of the building and its role in sustaining Alexandria as an arts destination for the world, will endure for centuries to come.

Most Cordially,



Brian Kelley, chair
Alexandria Commission for the Arts

cc: Members, Alexandria Commission for the Arts
Mark Jinks, city manager
Debra Collins, deputy city manager
Emily Baker, deputy city manager
James Spengler, director, Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities

Diane Ruggiero, deputy director, Office of the Arts (RPCA)
Matthew Harwood, staff liaison, Alexandria Commission for the Arts

January 29, 2021

Honorable Mayor and members of City Council:

Re: This letter states my personal views regarding the Draft Action Plan for Vibrancy and Sustainability at the Torpedo Factory Art Center (TFAC)

The City website on November 17, 2018, stated that `City Council unanimously approved and adopted a resolution to create a "Vibrancy and Sustainability Plan" for the TFAC. The first item in Council's directive is that this plan was to be developed "in coordination with stakeholders." The website also states that "The City's proposed Action Plan maintains artists and art studios as the core experience and does not recommend converting any part of the Art Center to private, non-arts commercial space such as food vendors." The letter of the Waterfront Commission to Council states that the working artists should be a major feature of the TFAC. This point does not receive the emphasis that it deserves.

As a member of the Commission for the Arts, the Waterfront Commission, and as a leaseholder at the TFAC, I am a "stakeholder." The Commission for the Arts, the Waterfront Commission and the artists in the TFAC were not consulted during the drafting of the Action Plan. The Waterfront Commission's letter of December 22, 2020 points out that its views, and those of the artists at the TFAC, civic associations, local businesses and the general public were not consulted prior to release of the draft. Neither the Archaeology Museum and its office, nor The Art League, are mentioned in the Action Plan, although both occupy space in the TFAC. The second Council recommendation addressed financial matters; neither finances nor the role of stakeholders are addressed in the Action Plan.

The Action Plan addresses other issues that merit discussion. The City and the Torpedo Factory Artists Association (TFAA) use different systems for jurying new artists, although both approaches strive for diversity in the artist population and in the work. The primary difference is that the TFAA uses a "blind jury." The work is judged solely on its merit, and the artist is not identified. The City uses a system in which the artist, after an initial blind screening of the work, is interviewed by a panel of jurors. Personal characteristics

and juror biases therefore may enter into the jury's determination. I agree with the Waterfront Commission that some functions of the TFAC "may be appropriate for the City to manage, others may be more appropriate for the artists themselves." In the interest of maintaining the quality of the art, which is the foundation of the TFAC's reputation, I submit that the jurying of new artists is a function more appropriately managed by the artists and conducted by a totally "blind jury."

Use of the TFAC as a venue for the performing arts is another subject that should be addressed. I see the TFAC as an adjunct, rather than a primary space for musical and theatrical work. There have been plays, dance and musical performances at the TFAC, and they have been well received. It must be kept in mind, however, that the lighting, seating and acoustics of the building necessarily limit the scope of performances.

The Action Plan also raises possible new uses of space in the TFAC. The core experience at the TFAC should remain the working artists. But the Action Plan is unclear with respect to their role, inasmuch as it suggests that space on both the first and third floors might be repurposed. Finally, the Plan lacks a "mission statement." I think that a mission statement should be agreed upon before decisions are made as to how to use the TFAC space.

I agree that expanding the scope of activities at the TFAC for City residents is an appropriate objective. It should be kept in mind, however, that it is tourists coming to Alexandria for its art and history who patronize its hotels, restaurants and shops. It is their expenditures that boost the City's economy. Albeit somewhat dated, the Fuller report, commissioned by the TFAA and released in 2017, characterized the TFAC as an "economic powerhouse," and stated that it was "Alexandria's strongest catalytic force in generating tourism year round."

There is merit in the Waterfront Commission's point that the City's approach to management of the TFAC should be revisited. The Commission has long advocated creation of a new agency dedicated solely to the waterfront, with the TFAC as its "crown jewel." Such an agency, while interacting with other City departments, would focus only on the waterfront.

The Waterfront Commission's letter to Council states that "the artists must have a meaningful, collaborative role in the [TFAC]." I agree. It cannot be overemphasized that the heart and soul of the TFAC is the people who work there. And efforts to monetize the TFAC must be aligned with the interests of the artists who supply its lifeblood. (And some of its funds. The rent from both the artists' studios and from special events in the building is earmarked in a special account to pay salaries of City employees detailed to work in the building.)

The Action Plan introduces several proposals that I believe are compatible with the interests of the working artists at the TFAC. Those objectives are:

- Creating collaboration with community and arts organizations
- Instituting family "make-it" events
- Creating pop-up offerings
- Encouraging business development seminars
- Continuing post-graduate residencies
- Maintaining the TFAC as a waterfront "anchor" and a "lively draw"
- Changing the primary entrance to Torpedo Plaza

With these common objectives, I hope that the City and the artists can work out a collaborative and congenial relationship. I appreciate Council's giving me this opportunity to share my thoughts.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan Cohen