



Legislation Text

File #: 18-7356, Version: 1

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: FEBRUARY 7, 2018

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: MARK B. JINKS, CITY MANAGER /s/

DOCKET TITLE:

Presentation of Freedom House at 1315 Duke Street as a Publicly Accessible Museum Through a Loan and Partnership Agreement.

ISSUE: Preservation of Freedom House, which has local and national significance to slavery, as a publicly accessible museum

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council authorize the City Manager to sign a loan agreement with the Northern Virginia Urban League in regard to the Freedom House historic building at 1315 Duke Street consistent with the terms and conditions of the attached Interim Museum Preservation Proposal.

BACKGROUND: Freedom House at 1315 Duke Street which is a 8,850 square foot building that was constructed circa 1828 served as the headquarters and slave pen of the largest slave trading firms in the United States in the first half of the 19th Century. It is an historic structure that has national and local significance to slavery.

The surviving building, once part of a block-large complex, is one of the last vestiges of American slave trading businesses. Between 1828 and 1861, it is estimated that a million enslaved African Americans passed through this landmark, victims of human trafficking, in America's desire for slave labor.

While the location of the 1828 Franklin and Armfield slave pen has great significance to Virginia's slave history, its reach is wider stretching to the Deep South - where slaves were needed to harvest cotton, and labor on sugar and rice plantations. Before John Armfield and Isaac Franklin sold the business in 1836, they had control of half of the coastal slave trade from Virginia to New Orleans with Armfield managing the trade in Alexandria while Franklin was based in Louisiana.

During the boon days for the slave trade, the building at 1315 Duke Street could be compared to a small city.

The complex included a hospital, kitchen, laundry, tailor, and pens for male and female slaves, outdoor courtyards and a residence. Other slave traders operating out of 1315 Duke Street included: Kephart & Co. (1836-1845), Bruin & Hill (1845-1852), Millan & Grigsby (1852-1858), Price, Birch & Co. (1858-1861). Slave trading ended when Union troops occupied Alexandria in mid-1861.

Possible loss of this site to private ownership would deprive historians, and those interested in slave history the understanding of an important aspect of our Nation's and City's heritage. This site should remain accessible to the public, so what was once a place of horrors may be held for the public trust.

The Northern Virginia Urban League (the "League") is the owner and operator of Freedom House. The building contains the offices of the League as well as houses the museum space that occupies the lower level and part of the first floor. Under the proposed agreement, the museum space would be expanded on the first floor in order to provide visitors with a better understanding of the history of slavery and 1315 Duke Street.

The League has been operating and financing both its services to the Northern Virginia community and operations of the museum space as part of its mission. The League service emphasis has been largely focused on at-risk and promising youth. In recent years, as grant funding has become scarcer, the League has been challenged by both paying for its services to youth, who are its main mission, as well as operating and staffing a museum which is accessible to the public. As a result, the League is at a crossroads in regard to making choices about its future range of services and has determined that it cannot financially be both a service organization as well as a museum operator.

In order to generate interest in the building/ museum, the Office of Historic Alexandria (OHA), in collaboration with the League, implemented Saturday hours for greater access to 1315 Duke Street. With public museum access launched on February 3, 2018, patrons are now able to visit the museum, from 1:00 to 5:00 pm every Saturday in February (3rd, 10th, 17th and 24th). Guides now provide a historic overview and permit 15 guests into the museum every 30 minutes (fire safety code restrictions limit patrons in the Museum on the lower level to 15). While people are waiting, there is a reflection area on the first floor with books on slavery and emancipation and an area with a screen presentation of Alexandria's other African American heritage sites. A small gift shop is open and free brochures of Alexandria's related historical sites are available.

After February, and upon a formal agreement with the League and the City, expanded access to the site is proposed to be offered to the public from March - September 2018 with regular museum hours Thursday through Sunday. There will also be related programming at OHA sites, on-site special events, and specialty walking tours that begin at 1315 Duke Street.

In order to keep the museum, which could be closed if the League could not continue to afford to pay for both of its missions (services and museum), and therefore would not be open to the public, it is proposed that the City enter into a Loan and Preservation Partnership Agreement with the League. Via this Agreement, up to \$63,000 in a bridge funding loan would be provided by the City to the League to fund for 9 months the monthly \$6,000 mortgage payment on 1315 Duke Street as well as to pay up to \$1,000 per month in utility expenses. These mortgage and utility payments proposed to be funded by the City will allow the League time to stabilize its finances, fundraise, and work with the City to establish a long-term plan for the future.

In exchange for the loan, the League would permit the City to operate an expanded museum space (first floor and lower level) with expanded educational exhibits and staffing to permit longer and more predictable hours for the public. This expansion started on February 3 as part of Black History month, with expanded hours and on-site guides. It is intended that the museum space would operate under City management. From the initial

February 3 museum opening public reception, it appears that the expanded hours will be utilized by the public. The upcoming 9 months with expanded museum hours will allow the City to gauge public interest in visiting this museum. Visit Alexandria has been engaged in promoting Freedom House's expanded hours.

The proposed loan of up to \$63,000, similar to affordable housing loans, would have flexible repayment terms and conditions. It would be intended that a capital fundraising campaign that is contemplated would be the preferred source for loan repayment and building capital maintenance. If repayment out of the capital campaign is not possible, then the loan would be subject to repayment over time out of League operating funds. After the first 36 months a 2% annual interest rate would apply, and after 72 months the loan would be required to start to be repaid. It is also possible that the value of in kind service contributions to the Alexandria community and/or the value of in kind use of the museum space by the City could eventually be credited towards the loan amount.

Providing City assistance in some shape or form for privately owned historical museum structures has been a periodic policy and financial choice of the City. For example, the Apothecary Museum which is now operated at City expense was donated to the City by a nonprofit that was having financial difficulties funding its operations and keeping the museum open; Gadsby's Tavern and Museum was donated to the City by the American Legion in the 1970's in exchange for the City becoming responsible in perpetuity for the capital maintenance of the American Legion wing of Gadsby's; The Lee-Fendall House was granted \$50,000 by the City in order to assist that museum with addressing pressing physical structural issues, and the Reeder House was recently purchased with a unique combination of open space and historical preservation grant funds. Historical structure museums are usually not financially breakeven operations and as such require either public or private ongoing funding to remain solvent. Therefore, the Freedom House financial situation is not unique for a history based museum.

FISCAL IMPACT: The proposed loan amount would be comprised of \$6,000 in mortgage assistance and up to \$1,000 in utility costs. These payments would occur over a 9-month period and total no more than \$63,000. The funds for this loan would derive from the Office of Historic Alexandria's current FY 2018 budget where staff turnover has created potential budget capacity to fund this loan.

ATTACHMENT: Proposed Interim Museum Preservation Proposal

STAFF:

Emily A. Baker, Deputy City Manager

Laura Triggs, Deputy City Manager

Gretchen Bulova, Acting Director, Office of Historic Alexandria

Audrey Davis, Museum Director, Alexandria Black History Museum