



Legislation Text

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File #: 16-5746, Version: 1

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City of Alexandria, Virginia

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MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** OCTOBER 19, 2016

**TO:** THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

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

**DOCKET TITLE:**

Consideration of a Grant Application to the Virginia Land Conservation Fund, and Acceptance of a Grant Award of \$900,000, to Acquire Real Property Known as the Murray-Dick-Fawcett House Located at 517 Prince Street for Historic Preservation Purposes.

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**ISSUE:** Council consideration of a grant application to the Virginia Land Conservation Fund (VLCF), and acceptance of a grant award of \$900,000 to acquire the real property known as the Murray-Dick-Fawcett House located at 517 Prince Street, for use as a historic house museum and education center.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That City Council authorize the City Manager to:

- (1) Retroactively approve a grant application (submitted on July 28) to the VLCF;
- (2) Accept a grant of \$900,000 awarded from VLCF on September 14 with the understanding that the property be acquired for historic preservation purposes subject to open space, exterior architectural and interior woodwork easements as specified by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources; and
- (3) Execute all necessary documents that may be required.

**BACKGROUND:** The Murray-Dick-Fawcett House, located at 517 Prince Street, has long been recognized as one of the oldest, and most authentic pre-Revolutionary homes remaining in the City of Alexandria. The house was built about 1772 and documented by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in the 1930's, with the architectural drawings prepared at that time now held within the collections of the Library of Congress. In the 1960's the house was included within the Alexandria National Historic Landmark District, receiving the highest designation for historic recognition and protection afforded by the Federal government. Since its original construction, the historic house has had few modifications, and architectural features, woodwork, wall finishes and gas lighting fixtures are still intact within the interior. The adjacent land contains a large garden area and terrace that could provide a beautiful vest-pocket public park one block from both King and South Washington Streets.

Nearly two years ago, the current owner of the property, Joseph Reeder, approached the Office of Historic Alexandria about the possibility of City acquisition of the historic house, offering his home equity estimated at about 50% of the market value, as a donation. At the time, developing the 50% financial match from City funds, required to satisfy the outstanding mortgage seemed unlikely so an alternative was proposed by the Northern Virginia Regional Parks Authority (NVRPA) proposing their acquisition instead. A contract between NVRPA and the owner was eventually developed. That proposal, included within the lease extension for

the Cameron Run Great Waves Water Park was considered by City Council in June, but deferred again until later this year. However, the Prince Street homeowner has declined to renew the NVRPA purchase option, intending instead to list the property for sale on the open market.

**DISCUSSION:** In early July the Office of Historic Alexandria (OHA) became aware of a grant program administered by the VLCF that could potentially provide acquisition funds for the 517 Prince Street property. An application for \$1,250,000 was submitted with the homeowner's support on July 28. As was the case with the NVRPA contract, one of the terms of the sale will be allowing Mr. Reeder to live in the house for the remainder of his life. In September, the City received an award of \$900,000, the highest amount of 23 grants awarded statewide. The required formal appraisal of the land and house will be undertaken and the additional \$350,000 funds required to reach the needed \$1,250,000 will be solicited by OHA. Negotiations of the details of the purchase contract are ongoing.

OHA currently operates seven museum and historic sites and is accredited as a "museum system" by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), one of eight municipally owned-and-operated systems in the United States. Although OHA museums interpret differing aspects of Alexandria's history and pre-history, none of its museums document residential domestic life in the early city. Furthermore, no historic house museum in the City currently traces the life and times of an ordinary 18<sup>th</sup> century working family, whose home included housing for laborers (and possibly slaves) who worked at their adjacent livery stable. OHA feels that acquisition of this significant landmark will complement and enhance the understanding of local history and provide a counterpoint to the "Great Man" view of history prevalent at many historic house museums. OHA proposes to use the site as a museum and education center, generating additional attendance and revenues to support heritage tourism programs in the City. Operation of the historic site will be serviced largely from The Lyceum, one block away, and public parking can also be accommodated at that location.

**FISCAL IMPACT:** The VLCF grant program requires a 50% match of the grant award, which will be provided from the "bargain sale" donation by the current homeowner's equity. Additional grants, gifts and donations of \$350,000 will need to be raised by the City.

**ATTACHMENT:** None.

**STAFF:**

Emily A. Baker, Deputy City Manager

Lance Mallamo, Director, Office of Historic Alexandria