



Legislation Text

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City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: FEBRUARY 3, 2021

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

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

DOCKET TITLE:

Public Hearing and Consideration of an Action Plan for Vibrancy and Sustainability at Torpedo Factory Art Center.

ISSUE: Consideration of the Action Plan for Vibrancy and Sustainability at Torpedo Factory Art Center.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council:

1. Receive the proposed Action Plan for Vibrancy and Sustainability at Torpedo Factory Art Center (Attachment 1); and
2. Schedule the proposed Action Plan for public hearing and approval on February 20, 2021.

BACKGROUND: Throughout its 45-year history, the Torpedo Factory Art Center (“Art Center”) has enjoyed a long and distinguished history culminating in the 1970’s and 1980’s as a model for placemaking and a not previously seen before way for the public to experience an artist at work. Today the Art Center welcomes more than 500,000 national and international visitors each year.

Today in the 2020’s, however, the public has increased ways to experience art in the areas new museums and also see art being made across the region including Arlington Arts Center, the Workhouse Arts Center in Fairfax, Pyramid Atlantic in Silver Spring, VisArts art center in Rockville, and Artechouse in Washington, DC.

Creating a welcoming and engaging experience with interactive events that attract new, diverse audiences is essential to the future success of the Art Center in the 21st Century.

The Art Center is comprised of over 76,000 square feet of space, approximately 40% is leased as studios

approximately 30% is public and utility space, approximately 10% leased as galleries, 5% leased as classrooms and 2% as leased offices. The Art League is the single largest leaseholder in the Art Center with over 9% of dedicated space for administrative offices, classrooms, and a member gallery (see map in Attachment 2).

On November 17, 2018, City Council unanimously approved and adopted the following three recommendations:

- Direct the City Manager to develop, via a public process in coordination with stakeholders, a Torpedo Factory Art Center Vibrancy and Sustainability Plan, and bring that plan to City Council for consideration.
- Recognize that substantial capital funding, in the order of \$10 million to \$15 million, will be required in the decade ahead in order to address current and future Torpedo Factory Art Center facility deficiencies, as well as to address to-be-determined future program needs; and
- Affirm that the City of Alexandria Office of the Arts will continue as the long-term managing entity responsible for management and operations of the Torpedo Factory Art Center.

While the management of the Art Center by the City since 2018 has brought stability and renewed public excitement making it possible to launch this new action plan, the City also needs to strengthen the relationship with the Alexandria community and the broader artist community throughout the region to ensure the Art Center's success.

To achieve the Council directed objective of creating a Vibrancy and Sustainability Plan, the City contracted with Smithgroup and Chora, two well-known, respected, and experienced consulting groups that work with industry leading art institutions, to develop an Action Plan to move the Art Center forward.

To begin the development of the Action Plan, the consultant team reviewed over a dozen existing documents and prior reports about the Art Center and identified six overarching themes with specific recommendations for the City to consider and undertake within each theme. The final document "A Study of the Studies: Themes and Recommendations for a Vibrant and Sustainable Torpedo Factory Art Center" guided the creation of the Action Plan (Attachment 3).

DISCUSSION: The Action Plan outlines three interconnected Core Strategic Directions (CSDs) which are derived from the *Study of Studies* and the related recommendations as well as with conversations with community organizations including Visit Alexandria and the Alexandria Economic Development Partnership.

Each of these CSDs have a series of related actions and outcomes to ensure that the Art Center proceeds steadfastly in these strategic directions. Parallel to the executions of this action plan, a long-term plan will be developed to include a full strategic plan for the Art Center with a new architectural design for the whole building, a sustainable financial plan and business model, and a strategic plan to guide the development of the Art Center over the next five years to ten years and beyond.

Core Strategic Directions

The Action Plan is comprised of 3 Core Strategic Directions (CSDs):

1. Re-establish the Art Center's Identity for a 21st Century Audience.
2. Curate the Building, with a focus on the first floor, for improved visitor experience and Artist/Studio program.
3. Establish Policies and Procedures that Identify the Art center as a High Performing Organization and rebuild the Art Center's role as a leader in the country.

Based on the recommendations of prior studies and the current Art Center management, the Action Plan is designed to achieve priority results and outcomes to establish a foundation for a renewed Torpedo Factory Art Center. The overall goal is to improve the efficiency of operations and sustainability of Art Center while also broadening and deepening its connections to the community and re-configuring the first-floor spaces to create a more dynamic public experience of the Art Center. Additionally, the Action Plan allows for the Art Center to continue to maintain and celebrate the historic nature of the building and continuing to keep working artists as its core focus.

Plan Feedback

Staff has made presentations to stakeholder and community groups regarding the plan including Waterfront Commission, Alexandria Commission for the Arts, Archaeological Commission, Recreation and Parks Commission, Visit Alexandria Board of Governors and Art Center leaseholders. Other groups such as Historic Alexandria Resources Commission were encouraged to review the plan and provide feedback. Staff also hosted two community meetings for feedback. Groups and individual written feedback is included in Attachment 4.

In most instances, the response to the Action Plan was positive. Groups wanted to ensure that artists would remain as the central part of the Art Center and that the history of the building would continue to be celebrated and be incorporated into any new designs. There was also feedback requesting that additional consideration be given to finding opportunities to allow for performing arts to be incorporated into the space.

Over the years, the City has been approached by various groups who have been interested in providing alternate, non-arts functions for the Torpedo Factory, especially for portions of the ground floor. Staff asked a number of these entities who have made prior inquiries to provide answers to a series of questions regarding their ideas. The answers to the questions, along with any additional information provided, was shared on the City's website along with the Action Plan. Additional information from private entities obtained by Alexandria Economic Development Partnership (AEDP) was also included. None of these answers or concepts represented a proposal. During community meetings, no questions or requests for additional information regarding these answers was asked or requested. Public reaction to the concept of non-arts functions was minimal, and even then mixed. One concept that seems to have wider support would be to study alternative uses for the Art Center roof. This is a large horizontal shaped space that could potentially be substantially repurposed into alternative use(s) ranging from a simple outdoor viewing and event space to an indoor meeting/event or commercial space. It should be noted that these concepts may or may not be physically or economically feasible, but a preliminary study would need to be undertaken to determine what options would be available.

Plan Implementation

While the impact of COVID-19 has delayed the roll out of the Action Plan, the steps outlined remain relevant and should begin to be undertaken in 2021 to ensure the Plan remains relevant. Staff has been working with other City departments to ensure a safe environment for artists, visitors, and staff of the Art Center.

To accomplish the actions and outcomes outlined in the Action Plan, the first floor would serve the public by

creating dynamic spaces where visitors can make their own art, view quality, newsworthy art exhibits, and engage with artists in an innovative way through the creation of engaging spaces including a glassblowing studio with equipment obtained from the recently closed DC GlassWorks, an expanded City-managed Target Gallery, a hands-on maker space, and a public meeting/conference/multipurpose space.

Over time, various leased spaces within the Art Center would need to be repurposed including some current studio, office, and gallery spaces. New criteria will be established through a revision of the current Operating Rules and Procedures for spaces on the first floor to ensure a more engaging experience with the public. Incentives such as lower rent will be considered for studios on the first floor in comparison with art on the upper floors in exchange for enhanced public engagement. Such steps have already been taken with the strategic move of Printmaker's Studio from the third floor to the first floor which provides a more engaging experience for visitors on the first floor and large, flexible space for rentals, programs, and classes on the third floor.

In June 2020, all leaseholders received a lease renewal option through March 2022 with no rent increase (current rent is \$16.39 per square foot per year and is inclusive of utilities, marketing, custodial services, programming, staffing, etc.). To ensure vibrancy, equity, and transparency within the Art Center and in keeping with industry best practices, the first-ever review/re-jurying process will be implemented at the Art Center beginning in June 2021 for leases expiring in March 2022 and would occur through a staggered renewal process.

The process for jurying/re-jurying will be managed by staff (non-voting) through an open and transparent process throughout to ensure that the quality of art is the highest standard as reviewed through a "blind" review while equity/diversity, the artists' ability to interact with the public, and ensuring opportunities for artists at all stages of their career are also built into the overall process. All artist portfolios and applications would be reviewed and scored by a panel of artist professionals. Staff will identify studios to be juried/re-juried taking into consideration an even distribution throughout the building and the tenure of artists with artists who have been juried recently receiving longer lease renewals. Original founding members of the Art Center would continue with no re-jurying.

Staff will explore and test alternative marketing and business tools to allow for greater entrepreneurial and fundraising flexibility. The Art Center will maintain an independent and unique marketing/brand strategy and tools within the larger City framework to continue to attract visitors, artists, and history lovers to the building.

FISCAL IMPACT: Implementation of the Artist Selection Process is not expected to have a fiscal impact on the operations of the Art Center, but the amount of leased space will be evaluated as well as the rental rates, to ensure the Art Center continues to have its operations largely supported by leased space rentals, with a vibrant art scene that ensures artists of all levels have equitable and affordable access to studio spaces.

The FY 2022 proposed capital budget will include funding of \$845,000 for implementation of the Action Plan including the first and third floor renovations, study on how to achieve a more welcoming waterfront entrance, consideration of rooftop alternative uses, as well as funds for short term capital maintenance and repairs. Additional capital investment will be requested through future CIP budget processes for ongoing capital investment needs, a feasibility study for longer term improvements as well as an Archeology Museum space need analysis would be undertaken in FY 2022. Many Torpedo Factory building systems and elements are at or beyond their useful life, so major capital reinvestments are likely needed in the years ahead. The outcome of these facilities studies will guide the preparation of CIP requests for FY 2023, FY 2024 and FY 2025.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Action Plan for Vibrancy & Sustainability at Torpedo Factory Art Center
2. Current space allocation map at Torpedo Factory Art Center
3. A Study of the Studies: Themes and Recommendations for a Vibrant and Sustainable Torpedo Factory Art Center
4. Proposed Plan Public Feedback

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