



Legislation Text

File #: 21-0749, Version: 1

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: MARCH 3, 2021

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

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

DOCKET TITLE:

Introduction and First Reading. Consideration. Passage on First Reading of an Ordinance Approving and Authorizing the Closure of Wales Alley, between South Union and Strand Streets, to Vehicular Traffic.

ISSUE: Consideration of closing the block of Wales Alley between Strand Street and South Union Street to vehicular traffic.

RECOMMENDATION: That the City Council:

1. Introduce and approve on first reading Tuesday, March 9, 2021, the ordinance (Attachment 2) approving and authorizing the closure of Wales Alley, between South Union and Strand Streets, to vehicular traffic; and
2. Set the ordinance for second reading, public hearing and final passage on Saturday, March 13, 2021.

BACKGROUND: The section of Wales Alley between Strand Street and South Union Street is a one-way alley heading east towards the Potomac River (Attachments 3). The alley is approximately 29 feet wide and is paved with decorative brick pavers. Prior to the pandemic, the southern half of the alley was used for outdoor dining for the adjacent restaurant Virtue Feed and Grain, which was approved through a license agreement in 2016. A five-foot-wide sidewalk is located on the north side adjacent to retail buildings containing Old Town Books and Bike and Roll. The area in between was available for one-way vehicular travel, although traffic on this alley is very light. Other nearby businesses include Starbucks, Mai Thai, Ben and Jerry's, the Old Town Shop, and Windsor of Old Town Salon and Spa. Wales Alley had primarily been used to access the Old Dominion Boat Club's parking lot that was previously on the east side of Strand Street. However, now that the Boat Club has moved, this access is no longer needed.

In Spring 2020, the Virtue Feed and Grain submitted a request to use more of the alley for outdoor dining. Indoor dining was limited due to COVID-19 restrictions, and additional space was needed to meet social distancing requirements. To accommodate this request, the City temporarily closed the alley to vehicular traffic to allow the restaurant to expand further north into the alley, while maintaining pedestrian access along the north side. This expansion was approved through the City's temporary outdoor dining program that was created to allow for additional dining space in the public right of way.

DISCUSSION: Prior to the pandemic, the business community and staff discussed the option of closing this portion of the alley to vehicular traffic. Given the decorative nature of the alley, the existing outdoor dining, the elimination of the Old Dominion Boat Club parking lot, and the proximity to the waterfront, many pedestrians use this alley for walking to and from the park and very few cars drive down it. Furthermore, the alley is not an emergency vehicle easement and is not required to be kept open by the Fire Department. The Fire Department stated that they have no objection to closing this alley to vehicular traffic. Since the alley does not provide any significant value to traffic circulation, and additional pedestrian space and outdoor dining area is beneficial to the waterfront area, staff is supportive of the request to permanently close this alley.

The Traffic and Parking Board reviewed the request at their meeting on November 16, 2020. There were no public speakers on the item and the Board voted to recommend that Council approve this request. The Waterfront Commission reviewed this request at their meeting on November 17, 2020 and also voted to support it. The Old Town Business Association (OTBA) and Virtue Feed and Grain are also supportive of this proposal. Letters of support from the Waterfront Commission, OTBA, and Virtue are provided in Attachment 4. Finally, the Old Town Civic Association was notified about this proposal and did not have any concerns.

The current expanded outdoor dining area at Virtue Feed and Grain is approved through the end of 2021 under the text amendment to the Zoning Ordinance that provided temporary relief to businesses related to issues from the pandemic, which was approved by City Council in December 2021. If the Council approves the closure of this portion of Wales Alley, staff will work with Virtue Feed and Grain to update the license agreement related to their use of the alley for outdoor dining before the expiration of the emergency outdoor dining program. This agreement will come back before the Council for its approval. At this time the terms and conditions of the update to the license extension (length of the license, compensation to the City, terms related to neighboring properties, etc.) remain to be worked out.

At their March 2, 2021 meeting, the Planning Commission reviewed this proposal for consistency with the Alexandria Master Plan. Pursuant to Section 9.06 of the City Charter, the Planning Commission is required to review any changes in the use of streets, such as this proposed change to restrict vehicular traffic. The Commission voted to approve the proposal, finding that closing this portion of Wales Alley is consistent with the Master Plan, in particular with the goals of the Waterfront Plan which call for increasing and improving pedestrian access and connections throughout the waterfront.

Staff is also working with the adjacent property owners to the north and south to quitclaim any easements they may have on the alley. In the litigation related to the alley with the Old Dominion Boat Club, the court did not specifically address the easement rights of these owners. So, in order to ensure a clear title, the City is requesting the two property owners quitclaim easements on the alley.

FISCAL IMPACT: The fiscal impact of this closure is minimal. Signage will be installed to indicate the block is closed to vehicles and the temporary barricades currently in place will remain. At this time there are no plans to construct permanent improvements to the alley to reinforce the vehicle closure. However, this may be considered in the future in coordination with the businesses in the area or as part of future streetscape

improvements in the Waterfront area.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1: Ordinance Cover

Attachment 2: Ordinance

Attachment 3: Map of Proposed Closure

Attachment 4: Letters of Support

STAFF:

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