

City of Alexandria, Virginia

17
1-8-02

MEMORANDUM

DATE: DECEMBER 28, 2001

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: PHILIP SUNDERLAND, CITY MANAGER *PS*

SUBJECT: CONSIDERATION OF THE RECOMMENDATION OF THE CITY FACILITIES NAMING COMMITTEE ON RENAMING THE ALEXANDRIA BLACK HISTORY RESOURCE CENTER AS THE ALEXANDRIA MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE

ISSUE: City Council consideration of the recommendation of the City Facilities Naming Committee on renaming the Alexandria Black History Resource Center as the Alexandria Museum of African American Culture.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council approve the recommendation of the City Facilities Naming Committee on renaming of the Alexandria Black History Resource Center as the Alexandria Museum of African American Culture.

The proposed revised name and mission statement for the institution has been reviewed by the Advisory Group for the Alexandria Black History Resource Center at its June 11, 2001 meeting and there was a unanimous decision to support the change in name. The proposed revised name and mission statement was also presented to the Historic Alexandria Resources Commission at its September 25, 2001 meeting, where it was supported by a vote of 20-1.

BACKGROUND: Since its inception in 1989, the Alexandria Black History Resource Center has grown dramatically. In 1995, two additional sites were placed under the auspices of the Center: (1) the Alexandria African American Heritage Park, a nine-acre park that preserves the site of a 19th-century African-American cemetery, opened in June 1995. The Park is located several blocks away from the Center; and (2) the Watson Reading Room opened in October 1995, next door to the Center. This non-circulating reading room houses the museum's collection of books, videos, documents, and periodicals on African-American life and culture.

The Center works to complete its mission of preserving the history of Alexandria's African-American citizens, as well as providing a forum for issues of concern to all African Americans. Throughout the years, the Center has become a source of pride to all of Alexandria's citizens. With two exhibition galleries on the first floor of the site, and artifact storage and offices below, the Alexandria Black History Resource Center continues to expand educational opportunities for residents, scholars and visitors.

In March 2000, staff from all divisions of the Office of Historic Alexandria began an intensive project to create a permanent exhibition for the Alexandria Black History Resource Center, "Securing the Blessings of Liberty," which will address slavery, reconstruction and civil rights in Alexandria. Based on meetings with the Center's advisory board, the decision was made to consider a new name and mission statement for the Center to better reflect the goals and objectives of the institution as well as its role in the community.

DISCUSSION: The proposed name change was discussed with the members of the City Facilities Naming Committee on December 15, 2001. The Committee voted 2-0 to endorse the staff recommendation. (Councilman Speck was absent from the meeting.) The name change more accurately describes and explains the mission, goals and objectives of the institution. The changes can be broken down into three main areas:

1. The use of the term "Museum" rather than "Resource Center"

The term "museum" refers to collecting institutions which interpret objects, educate the public, and preserve collections and buildings. The institution's mission is to "enrich the lives of Alexandria's residents and visitors, to foster understanding among all cultures and to stimulate appreciation for the diversity of the African American experience." It accomplishes this mission by inspiring the public to explore the integral relationship between Alexandria's African American heritage and other cultural traditions, and by collecting artifacts and archival materials relating to Alexandria's African American heritage within its regional and national context. This in line with the goals and objectives of a museum. A "Resource Center" is a designation often used in schools and has in many cases replaced "library." Additionally, it is important that the institution is recognized as a museum for accreditation purposes, for loans from other collections, and generally for the ability to focus on collections, programs, and education.

2. The use of the term "African American" rather than "Black"

The term "African American" is now the more appropriate usage and is suggested by most style books.

3. The use of the term "Culture" rather than "History"

This change recognizes the institution's focus on more than just the history of the African American community. The institution has hosted numerous exhibitions which include art, photography, and parallel programming and goes far beyond the term "history." For example, the institution offers a program on contemporary African American fiction and poetry, and art exhibitions have included contemporary artists in a number of media. Thus, the use of the term "culture" allows the institution to more adequately interpret and give fuller meaning to the African American experience.

FISCAL IMPACT: None

ATTACHMENT: Mission Statement for the Alexandria Museum of African American Culture

STAFF: Jean Taylor Federico, Director, Office of Historic Alexandria

***MISSION STATEMENT AND STATEMENT OF PURPOSE FOR THE
ALEXANDRIA MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE****

The Alexandria Museum of African American Culture (AMAAC) formerly the Alexandria Black History Resource Center (ABHRC) is located at 638 N. Alfred Street, in the Parker-Gray district of the City. In 2002 the Resource Center underwent a name change and adopted a new mission statement. The museum's new mission is to enrich the lives of Alexandria's residents and visitors, to foster tolerance and understanding among all cultures and to stimulate appreciation for the diversity of the African American experience. The Alexandria Museum of African American Culture accomplishes its mission by inspiring the public to explore the integral relationship between Alexandria's African American heritage and other cultural traditions, and by collecting artifacts and archival materials relating to Alexandria's African American heritage within its regional and national context.

As both historic site and museum, the Alexandria Museum of African American Culture includes the formerly segregated Robert H. Robinson Library, the Watson Reading Room, and the Alexandria African American Heritage Park. The Robert Robinson Library was originally constructed in 1940 following a sit-in at the segregated Alexandria Library, now known as the Kate W. Barrett Library. The Robert H. Robinson Library now serves the community as museum gallery space devoted to exhibiting local and regional history. The reading room, established in 1995, provides an environment for learning about the diversity of African American cultural traditions. A nine-acre green space and wetland, the Alexandria African American Heritage Park offers a place for celebration, commemoration and quiet reflection. The museum demonstrates the inter-relationship of regional and global African American heritage and fosters cultural understanding and respect. Institutional objectives include maintaining the historic fabric of the Robinson Library, collections management and acquisition of objects and archival materials of Alexandria interest, exhibitions, lectures and children's programming. The museum operates as an agency of the government of the City of Alexandria.

* Currently the Alexandria Black History Resource Center (9/26/01)