

Statement of Michael E. Hobbs
on behalf of the
Old Town Civic Association
City Council Public Hearing: Open Space
June 21, 2004

Thank you, Mayor Euille, Vice Mayor Pepper, Members of Council. I am Michael Hobbs, President of the Old Town Civic Association, and I thank you for the opportunity to share our views as you address the critical question of open space: how important is it, how much do we need, and how can we most effectively go about preserving and acquiring it.

The Old Town Civic Association considers the preservation and acquisition of open space to be of the highest importance to the people of the City of Alexandria. Open space is important to our physical and mental health; to our natural, visual and physical environment; to our individual and family recreation—in short, to very many of those characteristics which we identify as central to our quality of life. And it is important to our economy: a very large portion of the economy of Alexandria is dependent upon the ability of both visitors and residents to enjoy our unique historic and cultural resources in a community that is visually appealing, and welcoming to quiet enjoyment; but without our open spaces, much of that value is lost. So we applaud your emphasis on open space, the priority you have given it, and the care with which you are approaching it.

Your immediate consideration at this hearing is the Report of your Open Space Steering Committee. We were pleased to have a presentation of that report at the April Meeting of our Association, the same evening that you heard from the Committee at your work session.

Let me address briefly the Steering Committee's recommendations to you at page 8 of their report.

First, the Committee recommends that Council approve an Open Space "Priority Sites" list, as recommended by the Committee, after this hearing. The Committee's detailed "Open Space Priorities and Opportunities" lists were published the same day as our Association's meeting, and neither our membership nor our board has rank-ordered the ten "Priority Sites" listed in the report. We are gratified, however, that two of the ten sites are on or adjacent to Alexandria's waterfront; and we agree that all of the sites are important assets worthy of protection.

How important is the waterfront? It is central to our heritage, to our history as a seaport. Without it, you would need a different cover illustration on the Open Space Committee report itself—and a new symbol for our City's logo. And it is central to the identity of our city today. Alexandria without its waterfront? Imagine Boston without the Charles River esplanade and Back Bay. Imagine Washington without its waterfront parks. Imagine San Francisco without the Golden Gate. And if you imagine Alexandria having moved some distance inland from its waterfront, you are getting dangerously close to Crystal City.

The Committee's second recommendation is that Council approve its proposed criteria and process for revising and adding properties to the "Priority Sites" list. The criteria listed in Attachment 6 to the Report seem to be a useful and thoughtful improvement over earlier iterations, particularly because they now include emphasis on the benefit of the open space site to the people both city-wide and in the nearby neighborhood. We note also that the process contemplates further refinement of the assessment of already-identified sites, and multiple opportunities for civic association and other public input into the identification of new sites.

The third recommendation is that Council "renew its commitment to the 'one cent set-aside' for open space." The Old Town Civic Association did not take a position on that approach when it was first adopted. But it was thoroughly and openly debated then, and is now part of Alexandria's public policy. It would ill behoove Council now to reverse course on that commitment, just as it is beginning to bear fruit; and it would ill-behoove the Old Town Civic Association to applaud the benefits of the Open Space initiative to our City and neighborhood while questioning the mechanism that makes those benefits possible—and we do not.

The fourth recommendation is that Council renew its agreement with the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust for another year. Again, our Association has not addressed that recommendation specifically, but it seems to be a sensible thing to do.

The Steering Committee's fifth recommendation is that Council "explore options for capitalizing the money represented by the one cent allocation in order to obtain additional monies right away for purchasing and protecting land for open space." The Old Town Civic Association strongly supports the concept of issuing bonds to generate funds for open space. As the report notes, both the existing criteria and the Committee's recommended refinements address the abstract "open space value" of the potential sites—not the cost and urgency of protecting that value. The criteria alone do not address the question of whether "(there is) an urgent need to protect the site because of an immediate threat of potential loss of historical, cultural, natural or recreational resource?" It would be an unfortunate result if all of the determination and commitment that Council, the Steering Committee, and the City's residents and taxpayers have invested in this initiative to date were nonetheless to lose the open space value of any of the Committee's ten "Priority Sites," or indeed of any other priority sites identified in the future, because we were unable to address the question of urgency. Capitalizing the monies from the one cent allocation may not alone be sufficient to preserve the open space value of every "Priority Site" thus far or hereafter identified—but it is certainly a strong step in the right direction.

The Old Town Civic Association has an obvious interest in the protection and preservation of Alexandria's waterfront. You will certainly find no disagreement from us with the conclusion in the report that "the City's waterfront . . . is our key open space and recreation asset, and represent(s) a value to the City as a whole." But our support extends not only to open space in our own neighborhood, but to the importance of that asset in every part of our city; and we urge you to make a maximum effort to protect this scarce and all-too perishable resource.

Thank you for your consideration.