


City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: DECEMBER 8, 2005

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER 

SUBJECT: HISTORIC PRESERVATION UPDATE

ISSUE: Updating the Council on historic preservation issues, particularly focusing on procedures in regard to expansion of the historic district.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council receive this staff report.

BACKGROUND: Recently we described Alexandria “as a city rooted in its past while planning for its future.” Over the years, Alexandria has been a prudent steward of our invaluable architectural inheritance that has provided the City with its distinguishing characteristics. In addition to the City’s role and the two Boards of Architectural Review, committed historic preservation groups, such as the Historic Alexandria Resources Commission and the Alexandria Historical Restoration & Preservation Commission have been involved for years. To maintain and enhance the value of the historic past, the City must be constantly vigilant to ensure that the past and the City’s culture are preserved. To that end, the Council has asked the Department of Planning and Zoning (P&Z) in collaboration with the Office of Historic Alexandria to undertake an exploration of next steps necessary to expand the historic districts and update the City’s 100 Year-Old Building list.

DISCUSSION: The purpose of this report is to outline for the Council, P&Z’s current preservation initiatives.

Community Outreach

A continuing challenge is to educate the community and, in particular, new and established property owners within the historic districts regarding the responsibilities of being located within an historic district. To that end, we are creating a new, periodic historic preservation newsletter highlighting emerging current preservation issues to supplement the current extensive outreach program that includes:

- Annual letters to historic district property owners;
- Notice in tax assessment mailings;

- Postcards mailed to all new property owners;
- Historic district brochure that was sent this past year with annual letter; and
- Expanded website with guidelines, applications, etc.

Evaluation of Expansion of the Historic Districts

P&Z is exploring the feasibility of expanding the existing two historic districts, specifically in the Upper King Street area and along Cameron Street, west of Patrick Street. The initial work is underway to survey properties and identify potential new boundaries.

Historic Structures

Some 32 buildings are located outside the two historic districts in other parts of the City that are on the 100-Year-Old-Building list. These buildings are protected from demolition and exterior changes to the same extent as all buildings within the historic districts. However, the department has preliminarily identified another 77 buildings across the City that potentially qualify for the 100-Year-Old-Building list. Richard Bierce, a noted area historian, has been engaged to document the age of these buildings and determine whether they meet the criteria for being proposed to be added to the list.

Analysis of Zoning Regulations

P & Z has identified a provision in the zoning ordinance that potentially may have a negative impact on the historic districts. Current allowable FAR provisions may allow additional density that is not consistent with the context of the district, while at the same time may be a strong impetus for redevelopment and the resultant desire to demolish historic buildings or buildings that are key to the historic district context. Staff is analyzing and identifying areas where this is an issue.

City Council Support

City Council has recognized the importance of historic preservation and over the last year has taken action to ensure preservation of our historic assets:

- Denying the demolition of Gunston Hall
- Supporting the Boards of Architectural Review in decisions preserving architectural detail (1302 Michigan Avenue, 707 S. Washington Street, and 101 Queen Street)
- Fostering commercial vitality while maintaining the character of the historic district – the King Street Retail Strategy.

Ongoing work to preserve Alexandria's historic buildings includes a myriad of tasks and the following major ongoing efforts.

A. REGULATING HISTORIC PRESERVATION: Alexandria's strong regulations govern changes in the two locally regulated historic districts: the Old and Historic Alexandria District and the Parker-Gray Historic District. Article X of the Zoning Ordinance and the adopted Board of Architectural Review (BAR) *Design Guidelines* guide the two Boards of Architectural Review in making decisions about the changes that applicants bring before them. The BAR has the authority to approve demolitions within their respective historic districts and certificates of appropriateness

for exterior changes that can be seen from a public right-of-way. In addition, the Old and Historic Alexandria District BAR has the authority to approve demolitions and certificates of appropriateness for structures currently included on the 100 Year-Old Building list. For major development projects, the BARs also review projects at the concept stage for mass and scale before they go before the Planning Commission and City Council.

Staff in P&Z assists the two Boards by reviewing applications and making recommendations on 450 docket items a year (almost 38 applications a month). In addition to ongoing consultation with the Office of Historic Alexandria, the staff follows a rigorous process to analyze applications using professional standards of review and evaluation.

B. EXPANSION OF THE HISTORIC DISTRICT: Although the Old and Historic Alexandria District was established in 1946, there have been adjustments to the boundaries over time to expand the mantle of protection to additional historic resources.

Alexandria's vibrant economy both provides a sound financial underpinning to our historic resources and holds a potential impediment to their continued existence. Investors and developers need clarity as to what is encouraged and allowed in our commercial areas. The Planning & Zoning Department intends to evaluate the potential expansion of the Old and Historic Alexandria District to protect more of our historic resources. Specifically, P&Z is looking at expansion of the district in two areas:

- Upper King Street
- Along Cameron Street, west of Patrick Street

Work has already begun to survey properties and identify potential new boundaries in both areas. Once the research is completed, an inclusive process of public discussion will be undertaken as outlined below.

There are a series of procedural and formal steps in the process of expanding the historic district designation:

- Survey properties that appear to have architectural or historic value and prepare a list for further analysis.
- Establish a preliminary new boundary.
- Prepare detailed documentation of each building, including photographs, architectural features, and history.
- Have discussions with property owners to determine whether they are receptive to their properties being designated and coming under historic preservation rules.
- Schedule public meetings and discussions with the broader community.
- Prepare a zoning map amendment for properties to be included in the new historic district boundaries.
- Conduct a public hearing before the Planning Commission and City Council.

C. 100 YEAR-OLD BUILDINGS: The Department is undertaking work to update the 100 Year-Old-Building list. Where we are today is that there are 32 buildings that are located outside the two locally regulated historic districts that are on the 100 Year-Old-Building list. Under

Section 10-300 of the zoning ordinance, these designated buildings are protected from demolition and exterior changes to the same extent as all buildings within the historic districts.

In addition to the buildings already on the 100 Year-Old-Building list, P&Z has identified, through an initial survey, 77 other buildings that have the potential to be included on the 100 year old building list. P&Z has hired an architectural historian, Richard Bierce, who is documenting the age of the buildings and determining whether they meet the criteria listed above. Once this research is completed, then discussions will begin with the property owners for this set of buildings.

A second step to be undertaken is to then expand the area of analysis to include additional buildings not yet identified as 100 years old, and those that are approaching that age. The focus of this effort will be to provide an early warning system to the City of those properties that embody architectural features significant to the dynamic evolution of the city's streetscape, as well as possibly to change the standard to 90 or 75 years.

The steps to officially designate a building to be on the 100-Year-Old-Building list are as follows:

- Survey properties that are likely to be 100 years old and appear to have architectural or historic value and prepare a list for further analysis.
- Document the age of the building.
- Determine whether the property meets two of the following criteria:
 - Is it on the National Register of Historic Places?
 - Is it on the Virginia Landmarks Register?
 - Does it exemplify or reflect the architectural, cultural, political, economic, social or military history of the nation, state or community?
 - Is it associated with persons of national, state or local prominence or with events of national, state or local historical significance?
 - Is it a good example of local or regional architectural design or does it exemplify local craftsmanship, making it valuable for a study of a period, style or method of construction?
 - Is it the work of a nationally recognized architect or can it be attributed to a local architect or builder of local prominence?
 - Does it foster civic pride in the City's past or enhance the City's attractiveness to visitors?
- Prepare detailed documentation of each building, including photographs, architectural features, and history.
- Discussions with each property owner to determine whether they are receptive to their properties being designated and coming under historic preservation rules. If there is resistance from the property owner, further discussions may be necessary.
- Public meetings and discussions with the broader community.
- Staff recommendation on a list of buildings.
- Public hearing before the Planning Commission.
- Public hearing before the City Council.

D. ANALYSIS OF EXISTING ZONING REGULATIONS:

The Planning & Zoning Department identified an area in the zoning regulations that may be inadvertently affecting historic preservation; that is the issue of Floor Area Ratio (FAR). P&Z is in the process of looking at the FAR and density regulations in the various zoning districts that are in the historic area. Too high an allowed FAR or density in a zoning district that includes historic properties that we want to maintain and preserve may be the impetus for a property owner to propose demolition and redevelopment.

An example of an FAR that may be too high is the Gunston Hall property. The current FAR of the existing historic buildings on the property is less than 0.60. However, the RCX zoned property allows an FAR of 1.25, more than twice the existing density, making the site a prime property for redevelopment. On the other hand, if the zoning were in the 0.60 range, it is less likely that the property owner would consider redevelopment, and might then retain and restore the older buildings.

To address this situation which may exist throughout the City, one of the first steps in the work program is to analyze the FAR, density, and other zoning regulations in the historic areas and come back to the Planning Commission and City Council in the Spring with a report and recommendations that will reduce this threat to our historic heritage by removing a built-in economic incentive to demolish and rebuild.

CONCLUSION:

Over the centuries, the City of Alexandria has been a prudent steward of the invaluable architectural inheritance that is its distinguishing characteristic. However, each era faces new challenges in ensuring that these assets continue to thrive and prosper. Today, the challenge before us is increasing vigilance of all those tasked with preservation: the historic community, the citizens, the developers and the City. The work program above outlines the major steps that need to be taken immediately to ensure that future generations can enjoy this marvelous setting which surrounds us.

P&Z has been meeting with various members of the historic preservation community and will be meeting with staff in the Office of Historic Alexandria and the Boards, Commissions and other organizations who have historic preservation responsibilities to discuss to confirm the significant preservation issues, and identify potential steps to be taken.

Upper King Street Preservation Group

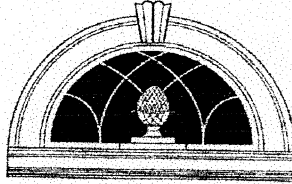
1307 King St.
Alexandria VA 22314
703-732-7269

Dear Honorable Mayor, and Members of the Alexandria City Council,

As Chair of the Upper King St. Preservation Group, I would like to tell you about our support for expanding the Old and Historic District to the upper King St. area, from south side of the corner of King and Peyton to the King St. Metro. Currently we have a district that goes up the middle of the street so that buildings on one side are offered a degree of protection that buildings on the other are not. It is also important that we have one standard for what is architecturally appropriate from the River to the King St. Metro. The Old and Historic District is the 3rd oldest Historic District in the United States and is vitally important for the preservation of George Washington's and Robert E. Lee's hometown. We also ask, now that this has been introduced, to prevent as much as legally possible the removal of any resources, archeological or structural, that are currently in the proposed area, and that have not yet been disturbed.

We would like to bring to your attention a few points regarding this discussion:

1. The proposed demolition of all or part of 7 addresses in the 1500 to 1600 block of King St. is unacceptable given that these are our crucial resources that would contribute to expanding the Old and Historic District.
2. The proposed expansion of the Old and Historic District and the possible loss of historic resources, including buried archeology, are connected. We believe it is because of our efforts to draw attention to the importance of Upper King St., and the contributions to the story of Alexandria, that expansion of the Historic District has been put on the fast track.
3. We urge the city to work with private groups, such as ours, that have done extensive research of the area, in creating the documentation needed to expand



Old Town Civic Association

P.O. Box 21333
Alexandria, Virginia 22320

December 13, 2005

The Honorable Mayor and Members of Council
City of Alexandria
301 King Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

Dear Mayor Euille, Vice-Mayor Pepper, and Members of Council:

Old Town Civic Association notes with appreciation the inclusion on tonight's City Council docket of two items relating to the preservation of Alexandria's historic resources, and commends them to Council's positive consideration.

Working toward the preservation of the historic and residential character of Old Town was the central purpose in the founding of our association more than fifty years ago, and we are proud to have served as a champion of the Old and Historic Alexandria District ever since. Without Alexandria's unparalleled architectural, social and cultural history, our City would lose much of its unique character, and perhaps its most important asset would be grievously devalued.

But we also recognize that our efforts and those of others interested in protecting that historic heritage would be of little effect if they remained static—frozen in time and space—rather than cognizant of the value of historic resources throughout the City (not just within the formal boundaries of the Old and Historic District), and through our entire history (not just the 18th century).

It is for this reason that we applaud the report of the Historic Alexandria Resources Commission and the staff report on Historic Preservation as important steps toward a comprehensive review and strengthening of the City's strategies for preserving its historic heritage.

The HARC report (Docket Item #13) summarizes a number of specific recommendations that the Commission has advanced over the past seven years. It might be very worthwhile for Council and staff systematically to review those recommendations to ascertain which have been fully accomplished, and what specific actions would be required in the future to accomplish those others which are determined to have merit but which have not yet been implemented.

The staff report on Historic Preservation (Docket Item #21) summarizes several elements of staff's initiative to review and strengthen the City's ability to protect its historic resources, including regulation of historic preservation within the existing historic districts, possible expansion of the districts, updating the 100 year-old buildings list, and analyzing the impact of

existing zoning regulations on this objective. OTCA salutes this important initiative. We are pleased to have participated in the initial discussion of the initiative with the Planning and Zoning Department, and look forward to its continued progress.

As we noted in our statement on the historic preservation issues involved in the proposed demolition of a portion of a building in the 1500 block of King Street, the present regulatory framework, developed in steps over a period of decades, may not be adequate to our needs going forward, and may have important gaps. In particular, we questioned the logic of including buildings on one side of a city block within the full protection of the regulatory regime of the Board of Architectural Review, while buildings across the street—which may be of the same or comparable historic vintage or architectural merit, and which will in any event closely impact the protected buildings—might have no protection at all.

Just as physicians endeavor to “first, do no harm,” we urge that the City’s policy should strive to assure that the history of its old, existing structures—wherever they may be located—is fully understood and has been carefully evaluated before they are demolished. The approaches described in Manager Hartmann’s report seem to us to be important steps toward that end, and we applaud this initiative.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michael E. Hobbs". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

OLD TOWN CIVIC ASSOCIATION
Michael E. Hobbs, President