

A statement by Bert Ely to the Alexandria City Council

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Comments on the City's waterfront planning

Mr. Mayor and members of Council, I am Bert Ely, an Old Town resident since 1981. I am here to speak about the City's waterfront planning process. While I belong to several organizations interested in the future of the Alexandria waterfront, I am speaking only on behalf of myself and not on behalf of any interest group. However, I know the concerns I am about to express reflect the views of many Alexandria residents.

My concerns about the waterfront planning process can be summarized as follows: The plan has gone too far down the road based on assumptions and untested assertions – it is being built on a foundation of quicksand, or perhaps it is marine clay. We have seen lots of enticing sketches and heard the painting of pretty word pictures, but we have not seen hard data or heard firm answers to the many questions which any planning process raises. The time has come for Council to say STOP, stop peddling a waterfront vision until questions are answered which will shape what the waterfront in fact will become.

Let me cite specific issues for which we have not heard concrete answers.

First, the outcome of the pending waterfront litigation will greatly impact what happens at the bottom of King Street and in the Potomac. If the Boat Club wins in the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, the dynamic of the waterfront planning process will change greatly. Key elements of the waterfront plan simply cannot be finalized until that litigation is resolved once and for all.

Second, the pretty pictures show docks and piers extending into D.C. waters and into or close to the shipping channel. We have been told that City staff have held discussions with the D.C. government and the Corp of Engineers about obtaining permission to build those structures, but no firm permissions have been obtained, and may not be. The waterfront planning process cannot be finalized until D.C. and the Corps have signed off on specific elements of the plan.

Third, is the all-important money issue. Monday evening, we were shown a cost estimate of \$32 to \$42 million for constructing the public-sector portions of the plan. Several sources of funding to pay for these improvements were listed but not quantified. No maintenance costs were listed; they can be significant for any facility located near or on water nor the cost of repairing docks and other facilities after the next Isabel sweeps down the Potomac. City staff need to put detailed numbers on the table and present a year-by-year cash-flow projection for the waterfront plan so that Council and voters can assess whether the proposed plan is worth it financially.

I was especially distressed Monday evening to hear that the plan assumes the construction of 600 hotel rooms along or near the river, with hotel taxes to pay for a substantial portion of the waterfront improvements. Yet we heard nothing about the likely impact of those 600 rooms on Old Town and its overloaded streets and sidewalks.

Fourth is parking, a perennial problem. We have heard that valet parking is the silver bullet that will ship visitors' cars deep into nearby garages, but we have heard absolutely nothing about what valet parking will cost, who will pay for it, and what will be done with people like me

who absolutely will not use a valet parking service. Worse, valet parking means more cars clogging Old Town streets and more visitors on already crowded sidewalks. The real issue is not a lack of parking spaces, it is too many cars on Old Town streets and too many people on Old Town sidewalks, especially on lower King and Union.

The question I often heard Monday evening was this: Is this plan for the tourists or the residents? Clearly, it is aimed at bringing more tourists to Old Town, it is not for the residents. The time has come to suspend the never-ending sales pitch for the proposed waterfront plan, to get firm answers to the many unanswered questions, to put firm cost and revenue numbers on the table, and to reorient the plan towards the interests of residents, not tourists.

Thank you for your time. I welcome your questions.