

Docket Item #8
BAR CASE #2004-0031

BAR Meeting
August 18, 2004

ISSUES: Conceptual Review of New Condominiums and Townhouses

APPLICANT: Basheer & Edgemoore

LOCATION: 915 South Washington Street

ZONE: RCX/Residential

BOARD ACTION, MAY 19, 2004: Deferred because the demolition application was not approved.

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

A. Conceptual Approval:

One of the reasons that the historic district was initially created within the City was to maintain the historic character of Washington Street. Staff believes that the proposed mass and scale are inconsistent with other buildings within the historic district and along Washington Street and the recently approved Washington Street Standards. Staff acknowledges that the proposed site plan is well designed, retains many of the mature trees, retains a significant amount of open space, and provides a full building break and considerable setbacks on Washington Street. In addition, the buildings are well designed and incorporate historic materials and proportions. The proposal also provides a transition in scale between the proposed condominiums and the existing townhouses on Columbus Street.



Site Aerial

However, the primary concern of staff is the height and the lack of variation in the roofline for the buildings on Washington Street. The height of the proposed buildings is approximately 50 feet for the length of the entire frontage on Washington Street. The proposed height is comparable to buildings such as the Saul Center and Sutton Place Gourmet building.



Washington Street Elevations

The Washington Street Standards require new buildings to be compatible in terms of mass and scale, with buildings of historical architectural merit on Washington Street and within the district. The majority of the buildings of historical significance within the district are two to three stories in height, with notable exceptions such as the Cotton Factory building. Staff is not opposed to four-story elements on the site if appropriately designed, particularly if located at the corner of



OUTLINE OF PROPOSED CONDOMINIUMS

Saul Center, w/ Overlay of Outline of Proposed Condominiums

Washington and Church Streets. A taller building element at that intersection could serve as a gateway element for the southern entrance to the City, similar to the gateway element and buildings on the northern entrance to the City on Washington Street. However, to construct four story buildings along the entire frontage on Washington Street is inconsistent with the character of the historic district, Washington Street and the Washington Street Standards, as discussed in more detail below.

B. Mass and Scale:

One of the characteristics that adds to the variety, richness and texture of the District, is the variation of building styles and massing that occurs within each block of the District. This is due to the buildings within each block having been constructed over time that result in each block being a collection of buildings and architectural styles, and roof form that are character defining elements of the district. This proposal, though well designed, has the appearance of a single, massive development, primarily due to the continual roofline and consistent Victorian style for much of the building on Washington Street.



Prince Street Rowhomes Emulated by Proposal

C. Conclusion:

The proposed footprint, setbacks, open space and tree retention are consistent with the Washington Street Standards that encourage the retention of open space and the “openness” that are provided by the garden style apartments on the southern portion of Washington Street.

Although the term “gateway site” is often overused, this is a true gateway site into the City and the historic district. Staff has continually told the applicant that the buildings are too tall and the roofline needs to be more varied, although the applicant has chosen to proceed with the current proposal. The applicant contends that the proposal is a “by-right” plan and that the zoning entitles an FAR of 1.25 and a 50 foot building height. However, in order to ensure conformance with the Washington Street Standards, the BAR has considerable discretion to recommend lesser building heights, mass, and scale than what is otherwise permitted by zoning. A reduction in FAR and a more varied roofline are necessary to comply with the Washington Street Standards. Staff does not support the “transfer” of FAR removed from the buildings on Washington Street



Varying Roof Height on Cameron Street

to the proposed townhouses on Columbus Street as discussed below. The National Park Service also believes that the mass and scale of the building should be reduced. Staff recommends that a considerable amount of restudy be conducted to evaluate at a minimum the following elements:

- A significantly more varied roofline on Washington Street, including several three-story elements that relate to the architectural style for each unit as discussed in more detail below;
- More variation of architectural styles on Washington Street;
- Individual entrances for each of the “townhouse” units on Washington Street;
- Elimination of the “skylight” roof treatment on Washington Street;
- Refinement of the fourth level of the building on the corner to appear more as a frieze;
- Elimination of the balconies on Washington Street;
- Operable doors for each of the “townhouse bays” on Washington Street; and
- The proportion of the first floor windows will be revised to have more historic proportions.

Any redevelopment of this site will establish a precedent for other new buildings on Washington Street. Therefore, it is essential that the mass, scale and building elements be well designed and of a scale that is compatible with the historic character of Washington Street and the Washington Street Standards.

II. BACKGROUND:

The 2.0 acre site occupies an entire city block and is bounded by Washington Street on the east, Columbus Street on the west, Church Street on the south, and Green Street on the north.

The site contains a total of eight three story brick garden apartment buildings with a total of 56 apartments. Of the 56 apartments, 40 contain one bedroom, while the remaining 16 are two bedroom units. The existing units do not contain any on site parking spaces, and the residents of the units therefore park on the surrounding streets.

The site contains a significant amount of open space and numerous mature trees that range from 10" to 52" caliper. The larger caliper trees are located on the central portion of the site, in the area of the existing internal courtyard, and in the northwest portion of the site.

The applicant is proposing to demolish the existing Gunston Hall Apartments and is requesting conceptual approval for 60 new dwelling units. The applicant is proposing two condominium buildings containing a total of 48 dwelling units and 12 townhouses. The condominium buildings are proposed to face Washington Street and will extend along the full length of the block, between Church Street and Green Street. Two levels of parking would be provided beneath the condominiums. The townhouses will front on South Columbus Street and will have detached garages at the rear.

III. PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

A. South Washington Street

The main entrances to the condominium buildings will be from South Washington Street, and are located in the middle of each of the proposed structures, approximately 37 feet from the street curb. This setback creates a front lawn and open space area for the project similar to other garden style apartments built in the late 1930's and early 1940's that exist on the Parkway. The condominiums are proposed to be four stories with an average finished height of 43 feet.



Washington Street Elevations

Each of the condominium buildings is depicted with bay window projections that provide detail and variation to the structures. The northern building utilizes a five bay formula, while the southern building utilizes a three bay formula. The roof materials vary from standing seam metal

to synthetic slate shingle. A combination of gables, flat and mansard roofs are utilized to provide variation to the structures. In addition, several cast iron railing balconies are depicted throughout the frontage. The materials are varying types of brick generally, but materials will be further refined at time of final review.

B. South Columbus Street

The townhouses fronting on South Columbus Street will be a total of 3.5 stories in height and are at a lower grade than the two-story townhouses on the western side of South Columbus Street. The homes will be approximately 35 feet in height. The entrance to the homes is approximately five to six steps above grade. The top floors of the townhomes are depicted with dormer windows with varying roof styles and materials. The proposed townhouses provide a good transition between the proposed garden apartments and the existing townhouses. The townhouses are proposed to be constructed of brick materials with standing seam metal, and synthetic slate shingle roofs.



Columbus Street Elevations

C. Church Street:

An elevation of the proposed Church Street frontage depicts the four story southern condominium building, a detached garage, and the three and a half story end unit townhouse that faces South Columbus Street. The southern condominium building in this location is massive in comparison to the one story garage. The slope of this side elevation creates further disparity between the condominium building and the garage as a higher amount of the condominium building is exposed. An unbalanced transition is created between the proposed condominium building and the proposed garage.



Church Street Elevation

The condominium building is depicted as having a variation between a mansard roof and a flat roof from this elevation, while the garage and townhouse are shown with a standing seam metal roof. The materials are a combination of several face brick types. Cast iron balcony railings are also intermingled into the elevation design.

D. Green Street:

The elevation from Green Street depicts the four story northern condominium building, a three and a half story townhouse, and a detached garage for the townhouse. The materials match those of the Church Street elevation. However, the Green Street condominium elevation depicts a solid mansard roof for the entire frontage with Green Street. The townhouse and garage both contain standing seam metal roofs. The slope is also more favorable for the transition to the proposed townhouses from this elevation.



Green Street Elevation

E. Interior Courtyard and Tree Preservation:

The condominiums and townhouses are proposed to be located around the perimeter of the site, allowing a courtyard to be created at the interior of the site. The applicant is proposing to retain four of the five largest trees, retaining one 26" caliper and two 42" caliper pin oaks at the center of the site and one 52" caliper willow oak at the corner of Green and Columbus Streets, but removing a 40" caliper willow oak that sits next to the 52" willow oak. Most of the smaller trees on the site are slated for removal, but 6 of the 7 street trees along Washington Street will be retained.



Existing Gunston Hall Courtyard

IV. STAFF ANALYSIS:

The subject site is one of the most visually prominent sites on Washington Street and serves as an important gateway entrance for the City and the historic district. This proposal is also the first application for a large redevelopment on South Washington Street since the Washington Street Standards were adopted in 2001. Overall, staff believes the proposal is well designed and incorporates materials and design elements that are appropriate for Washington Street. However, the concern of staff is not the design but rather the overall mass and scale along Washington Street as well as the lack of variation in the roofline. The two large buildings on Washington Street, albeit well designed, are larger than buildings of historical architectural merit within the district.



Example of Typical Garden Apartment Scale and Mass

The graphics at the right display the character and scale of existing garden apartments in this portion of the protected George Washington Parkway. These are two examples of the scale and mass that are found just two blocks away from the subject property on the Parkway. In comparison with the applicant's proposal, these apartments are much less imposing, and have established an appropriate character. The applicant's proposal is at a height and scale that is too massive for the character of Washington Street.



Existing Gunston Hall Apartments

A. Mass and Scale:

The general design of the site plan is predicated on the retaining of large mature trees and open space in the interior of the block and at the northwest corner of the site. The proposed development locates two large L-shaped multi-family buildings along Washington Street separated by a 50-foot break; a series of 12 two-and-a-half-story townhouses are located at the western side of the property along Columbus Street and provide by virtue of their domestic scale, detached garages, and architectural character, a reasonable transition to the two-story developments to the west.

As the Board will recall that, in the case of the redevelopment of the neighboring lot at 800 South Washington Street, staff and the BAR agreed that the retaining of the existing one- to two- story retail buildings not only enabled the existing retail tenants to remain in operation but also enabled the maintenance of a relatively modest scale of 15 to 25 feet along Washington Street.

In contrast, this application proposes two buildings on Washington Street, approximately 50 feet tall. There are very few examples on Washington Street of historic buildings of architectural merit which approach a height of 50 feet. Those which do exist occupy a relatively small portion of the block frontage, whereas the current proposal is essentially two 50-foot-tall buildings on Washington Street for the entire length of the block. Furthermore, the buildings at 50 feet are roughly twice the height of the existing garden apartments across Washington Street and represent a much larger scale in terms of architectural style.



Cotton Factory

A principal approach of by the architect has been to articulate the length of the buildings along Washington Street as individual elements differentiated stylistically as high-style rowhouses recalling a style of the late-19th century. While few examples of these buildings exist in Alexandria, there are some examples of houses of similar scale and ornateness on Prince Street; the manner is more typical of what might be seen in the Kalorama and Embassy Row neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. The length of the Washington Street elevation is characterized primarily by this pattern of rowhouse elements, typically in bays of roughly 27 feet, three stories high with a mansard roof with dormers. The bases of each of the house elements are rusticated as would have been typical in houses of this scale and general costliness. The notable exception to this pattern is on the corner of Washington and Church Streets, where a fully four-story building element anchors the composition. This element, located as it is at what will be (upon demolition of the gas station across Church Street) the first image as one enters Alexandria on the George Washington Memorial Parkway from the south; its architecture evokes a refined neoclassical style more typical of Regency-era London or the



“Typical” Building of Architectural Merit on Washington Street



Washington Street Cross-Section

revivalist urban projects of McKim Mead & White in New York. While somewhat lacking in precedent as a building type, scale, and style in historic Alexandria, the building is handsome in

its proportion and creates a strong well-defined gateway element to the City—but constitutes a great departure from the more modestly low-scale and visually open character that exists currently on this site.

Staff is not opposed to four-story elements for some portions of the frontage along Washington Street and has recommended to the applicant that variation in the roofline along the street frontage helps to break up what could be perceived as a block-long project with a continuous roofline. Thus, staff supports retaining a portion of the four-story elements—including the large pavilion at the corner—but to eliminate about one-third of the units along the frontage of Church, Washington, and Green Streets at the fourth floor; the other third of the units could remain as mansard elements to create the desired variation on all the street frontages. Further, staff recommends widening the gap between the two buildings by removing some of the mass on the corner of the northern building to increase views to the interior of the site.

B. Zoning:

As previously discussed, the applicant contends that the current zoning permits an FAR of 1.25 as proposed and a height up to 50 ft. The applicant also contends that the Washington Street Standards permit building heights up to 50 ft.

While it is true that the zoning permits a floor area ratio (FAR) of 1.25 for the site, the BAR has a considerable amount of discretion in approving buildings within the district, to ensure that the buildings are compatible with the character of the historic district and comply with the Washington Street Standards and criteria for approval within the district. In this case, staff does not believe that the proposed massing is appropriate on Washington Street and recommends elimination of a portion of the building resulting in a two to three level building, with some elements allowed to be as high as four stories. Following this recommendation, approximately 17,000 square feet of the buildings on Washington Street would be eliminated, resulting in a 1.05 FAR for the site. As to the 50 foot height limit, staff is not opposed to some four story elements on Washington Street. Staff supports the proposed four story element on the corner of Church and Washington Streets.



Existing Columbus Street Townhomes

The idea has been raised that a portion of the FAR from the condominium buildings could be “transferred” to the proposed townhouses on Columbus Street. Staff does not support the floor area transfer, as the existing townhouses on Columbus Street are comparable in mass and scale to the townhouses presently proposed by this application. To provide some additional variation, staff would support some modest increases for one or two of the units, if the revisions added additional variety to the units and massing.

C. Washington Street Standards:

The Washington Street Standards were created to maintain the memorial and historical character of Washington Street. In addition, the Standards were established to ensure that larger projects would be designed as a series of buildings, would be of an appropriate mass and scale, and design of new buildings would be based upon existing buildings of historic merit.

As discussed in more detail below, the proposal in some ways does comply with the Standards. However, the standards require that buildings be compatible in terms of mass, scale, design, and style with historically meritorious buildings on Washington Street. The subject proposal is for two 50 foot tall buildings on Washington Street. The proposal is similar in overall mass and scale to the Saul Center on North Washington Street, although the proposed building is set back approximately 20 feet farther from Washington Street than the Saul Center. Staff believes that this continual mass, height, and roofline do not comply with the Washington Street Standards. While the applicant has provided architectural elements such as projecting bays, and the fourth level in many of the units is designed as a dormer, there are not any historical buildings of architectural merit on Washington Street that are four stories for an entire City block.

Therefore, staff is not opposed to four story elements on Washington Street, although as discussed there should be variation in the roof heights consistent with typical blocks within the district.

The key Washington Street Standards that pertain to a conceptual review of this application are listed below:

- *Construction shall be compatible with and similar to the traditional building character, particularly mass, scale, design and style, found on Washington Street on commercial or residential buildings of historic architectural merit.*

New buildings are required to be of a scale compatible with buildings of historic architectural merit located along Washington Street, and the massing and scale of the buildings should be similar to the specific historic buildings utilized as prototypes for the new development. As previously discussed, the majority of historic buildings in the district have two to three stories, although there are exceptions such as the Cotton Factory, well to the north. Additionally, there are no examples on Washington Street of entire block frontages that are four stories in height. Even the buildings on Prince Street that the applicant is emulating are three levels, although the applicant has applied these styles to a four-story building mass.



208 N. Washington St.

Staff is recommending that the buildings on Washington Street be reduced in mass and scale to be predominately three stories, with a varied roofline. This would enable the new buildings to be more compatible with the existing buildings on Washington Street, including the nearby garden apartments.

- *New buildings and additions to existing buildings shall not by their style, size, location or other characteristics, detract from, overwhelm, or otherwise intrude upon historic buildings which are found on the street.*

The site is located at a visually prominent gateway entrance to the City and the historic district, and a building that is not appropriately designed for this site will potentially impact this portion of Washington Street and the perception of the district. Therefore, staff supports the provision of a taller building at the corner of Washington and Church Streets as a focal element for this portal entrance to the City. As the BAR is aware, the adjoining gas station and office building will be demolished, creating an extended view of the site, particularly the southeast corner of the site. Therefore, a building at this corner will have a significant impact on Washington Street. The proposed buildings are significantly taller than the adjoining garden style apartments and the majority of buildings within the historic district. Therefore, staff believes the proposed continual height of approximately 50 feet and lack of variation in the roofline will detract from the existing character of this portion of Washington Street and will create an unacceptable precedent for Washington Street.



Old Town Gardens

A fundamental concept of the Washington Street Standards is that for the southern portion of Washington Street, the scale, character and openness of the garden style apartments would be retained as a “garden district” as Washington Street transitions to the more bucolic and open portion of Washington Street. Staff believes the height and mass of the proposed building are inconsistent with this fundamental premise of the Standards.

- *The massing of new buildings or additions to existing buildings adjacent to historic buildings which are found on the street shall closely reflect and be proportional to the massing of the adjacent historic buildings.*

As stated earlier, the massing of the proposed condominium buildings at four stories is out of character with the existing three story garden style apartments that are located on both sides of the seven hundred block of South Washington Street as well as on the east side of the 800 block of South Washington Street. The proposed units are not proportional to the massing of adjacent historic buildings.

- *New buildings and additions to existing buildings which are larger than historic buildings which are found on the street shall be designed to look separate and shall not give the impression of collectively being more massive than such historic buildings. This design objective shall be accomplished through differing historic architectural designs, facades, setbacks, roof lines and styles. Buildings should appear from the public right-of-way to have a footprint no larger than 100 feet by 80 feet. For larger projects, it is desirable that the historic pattern of mid-block alleys be preserved or replicated.*

The principal building elevation components have been configured as a series of projecting and receding bays that establish a rowhouse rhythm of separate units. The end units, at the corners of Washington and Church Streets and of Washington and Green Streets, have been designed to appear as larger, multiple-family buildings. The applicant has created a variation of styles, but was unable to reduce the perceived mass due to site constraints. The site constraints include retention of existing trees, and therefore have limited the layout options for the site.



Prince St. Rowhomes

- *Facades of a building generally shall express the 20 to 40 foot bay width typically found on early 19th century commercial buildings characteristic of the Old and Historic Alexandria District, or the 15 to 20 foot bay width typically found on townhouses characteristic of the Old and Historic Alexandria District. Techniques to express such typical bay width shall include changes in material, articulation of the wall surfaces, changes in fenestration patterns, varying roof heights, and physical breaks, vertical as well as horizontal within the massing.*

The bay spacing throughout the two condominium buildings meets this criterion.

- *Elements of design consistent with historic buildings which are found on the street shall be emphasized.*

At this conceptual review stage, it may be somewhat premature to review specific design elements. However, staff is concerned that the elements of the condominium buildings that have been called out in the design documents do not “emphasize” design elements of historic buildings found on Washington Street.



Old Town Gardens

While it is true that the design details chosen for the condominium buildings have concrete rooting in design details found in the Old and Historic Alexandria District, the vast majority of these individual elements that are called out are not located on historic buildings found on Washington Street. Because the

intent of the Washington Street Design Standards appears to be so specific as to where design inspiration for details is to be found, it is the opinion of staff that this Design Standard is not met. Therefore, staff concludes that the condominium building design details need to be reworked so that a majority of design elements result from historic buildings found on Washington Street.

- *New or untried approaches to design which result in new buildings or additions to existing buildings that have no historical basis in Alexandria or that are not consistent with an historic style in scale, massing and detailing, are not appropriate.*

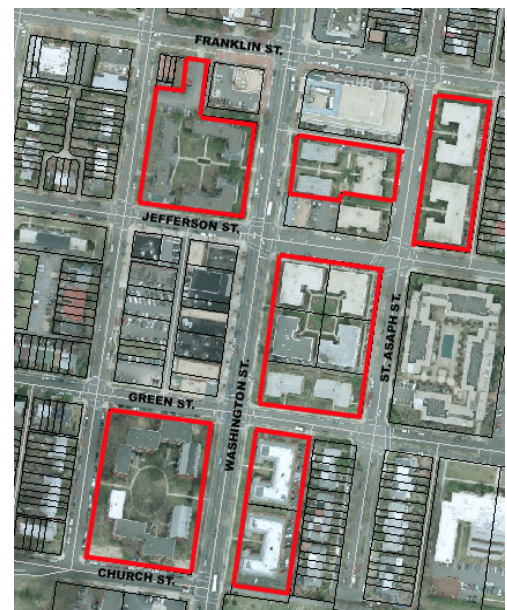
The approach being proposed with this development is appropriate to the historical basis in Alexandria. The applicant is proposing a townhouse facade for the condominium buildings where the width of the proposed divisions is in scale with existing townhouse development in the Old and Historic District. However, the townhouse motif chosen for the condominium buildings is largely unconvincing as presently proposed, as the individuated townhouse elements do not have entry doors – each building has only a single entry point. Thus, as an attempt to mimic townhouses, the condominium buildings fail to be visually convincing and betray their actual use as a pastiche of individual buildings.

- *Construction shall reflect the traditional fenestration patterns found within the Old and Historic Alexandria District. Traditional solid-void relationships exhibited within the district's streetscapes (i.e ratio of window and door openings to solid wall) shall be used in building facades.*

The current design of the project exhibits traditional solid-void relationships that are found on other buildings in the historic district. The design of the architecture is such that it is not in the garden style seen elsewhere in the South Washington Street corridor. The design provides a townhouse facade, whereas other garden style units are designed as singular brick structures.

D. Precedent

This proposal represents the first major redevelopment project on South Washington Street that has been reviewed since the Washington Street Standards were adopted in 2001. The action that is taken on this application will establish a precedent for applications which are considered in the future. The proposed development is out of character with the surrounding area in terms of scale and building massing, and the development can only occur if the existing garden apartments are demolished. A significant concern is that if this development is approved as proposed, it will open the door for similar developments within the Washington Street corridor. Over time, this could well result in the elimination of the garden style apartments from the corridor and a



Garden Apartments in Area

dramatic change in the character of the area.

E. National Park Service

The National Park Service (NPS) reviewed the proposed demolition and concept design with respect to their appropriateness to the George Washington Parkway. The NPS views the existing apartments as contributing to the historic character of the Parkway and is recommending that the request for demolition be denied. Additionally, the NPS is concerned that the proposed new development is of a mass and scale that is inconsistent with the garden apartment character that was established upon the completion of the Parkway, and that the development will not provide an appropriate transition between the rural character of the Parkway to the south and the urban character that begins farther to the north. The NPS is recommending that the conceptual design not be approved as presently proposed.

V. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the concept proposal be deferred for restudy to address the following:

- A significantly more varied roofline on Washington Street, including several three-story elements that relate to the architectural style for each unit as discussed in more detail below;
- More variation of architectural styles on Washington Street;
- Individual entrances for each of the “townhouse” units on Washington Street;
- Elimination of the “skylight” roof treatment on Washington Street;
- Refinement of the fourth level of the building on the corner to appear more as a frieze;
- Elimination of the balconies on Washington Street;
- Operable doors for each of the “townhouse bays” on Washington Street; and
- The proportion of the first floor windows will be revised to have more historic proportions.

CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

Legend: C - code requirement R - recommendation S - suggestion F- finding

Code Enforcement:

No comments.

Alexandria Archaeology:

- F-1 This property was the site of a 19th-century brickyard. An archaeological investigation was completed on this lot. Although the work did not result in the recovery of significant archaeological resources relating to the brickyard, there is a possibility that some evidence of the brickyard activities may be discovered during development.

- R-1 Call Alexandria Archaeology immediately (703-838-4399) if any buried structural remains (wall foundations, wells, privies, cisterns, etc.) or concentrations of artifacts are discovered during development. Work must cease in the area of the discovery until a City archaeologist comes to the site and records the finds.

- R-2 The above statement (in R-1) must appear in the General Notes of the site plan so that on-site contractors are aware of the requirement.