

Docket Item # 13  
BAR CASE #2005-0288

BAR Meeting  
March 1, 2006

**ISSUE:** Concept approval of a 57-unit condominium building

**APPLICANT:** Robert S. Brandt, Inc.

**LOCATION:** 900 N. Washington St

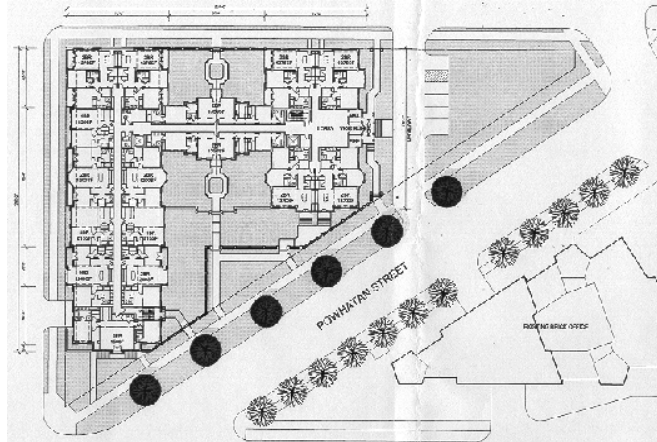
**ZONE:** OCM

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## **I. Executive Summary**

The applicant is requesting concept approval of a 57-unit condominium building on a triangular shaped block at the intersection of North Washington Street with Powhatan Street and Montgomery Street. North Columbus Street borders the project on the west. The project site is located at an important and visually prominent location on North Washington Street.

Due to the unusual triangular shape of the block on which the project is located, the applicant and Staff looked at the precedent set by the buildings that front North Washington Street and are bordered by Powhatan Street. The existing large open spaces off of Powhatan Street connected to the existing buildings that front North Washington Street helped to guide the decision to incorporate recessed green spaces on the project along Powhatan Street. In addition, this siting approach helps to mitigate the perceived mass and scale of the



**Figure 1** Proposed site plan

project as viewed from North Washington Street and Powhatan Street. The project does maintain a street wall appearance along Montgomery Street, while a recessed open space area is incorporated on the North Columbus Street elevation.

The applicant and Staff met with various Alexandria civic associations to discuss the project and receive input. The applicant has worked with the City and community to revise the architecture to be more traditional in style and elements. A clear comment from the community was that the building design should be traditional buildings that recall the elements of exemplary buildings of the District. Staff concurs that the design of the buildings should be a traditional design, in the fact the Washington Street Standards require that new “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.”

In a concept review, the Board is looking to see if the scale, mass, height, use of solids and voids, projections, and recesses are appropriate and visually compatible to the historic context of the Old and Historic Alexandria District while meeting the Standards and Guidelines, and in this case, the Washington Street Standards.

Because of the size of the proposal and the visual prominence of this site, any development for this location requires appropriate mass and scale and extremely high quality building design, in addition to compliance with the Washington Street Standards.

Staff is recommending approval of the proposed project with the following conditions and concerns:

A. Mass and Scale:

1. On the Montgomery Street elevation, restudy design at the ground level in order to provide design elements for the pedestrian's perspective rather than a blank wall.
2. Explore means to diminish the appearance of the large opening into the underground parking garage. Refine the garage entrance and consider using rustication typical of the rest of the building element.
3. Explore means to reduce bay widths on the project segments that mimic townhouses, to reflect the typical 15-to-20 foot bay width typically found on townhouses in the Old and Historic Alexandria District.

B. Design:

4. When using specific architectural styles as design reference point, make sure elements are characteristic features of that specific style.
5. Make sure design features such as heavy cornices and brackets are terminated at a logical point, and not just end.
6. As the project progresses to the design details and materials review, the applicant is advised to remember that this "gateway" location merits the need for exemplary architecture in detailing and materials, especially at the southeast corner, which will be the most visible from North Washington Street. In addition, because of the visual importance of the roof shapes on this project, especially as a mean to mitigate mass, special consideration to the use of high quality roofing materials need to be emphasized.

C. Archaeology:

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7. The following statement must appear in the General Notes of the site plan so that on-site contractors are aware of the requirement:

Call Alexandria Archaeology immediately (703-838-4399) if any buried structural remains (wall foundations, wells, privies, cisterns, railroad tracks or ties, 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.

## **II. ISSUE:**

The applicant is requesting concept approval for the new construction of a 57-unit condominium building, that will read as three distinct buildings, from the vantage point of North Washington Street. The project is located directly across the street from the “Gateway” building of the Physicians Assistance Building.

Consistent with the Board’s policy, Staff is bringing a concept review before the Old and Historic Alexandria Board of Architectural Review. In a concept review, the Board is looking to see if the scale, mass, height, use of solids and voids, projections, and recesses are appropriate and visually compatible to the historic context of the Old and Historic Alexandria District while meeting the Standards and Guidelines, and in this case, the Washington Street Standards.

The applicant and Staff met with various Alexandria civic associations to discuss the project and receive input. The applicant has worked with the City and community to revise the architecture to be traditional in style and elements. Staff concurs that the design of the buildings should be a traditional design, since the Washington Street Standards require that new “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.”

### **Mass and Scale:**

1. Height: The applicant has maintained the required 50' height limit for the building. The different elements or components of the building, that read as separate buildings with different architectural styles, have different roof shapes and configurations that assist in modulating the perception of mass.
2. One of the defining characteristics of the Old and Historic District is the variation of building styles and massing that occurs within each block, which give the district a sense of variety, richness, and architectural texture. This is due to the buildings within each block having been constructed over periods of time that result in each block being a collection of buildings and architectural styles, roof shapes, and materials that are character-defining elements of the district and give it a unique sense of place.

### **General Design Comments:**

The appearance of the proposed complex is that of a collection of three primary buildings, with facade widths facing North Washington Street of approximately 70 feet. The applicant has provided historic examples of buildings found along Washington Street that have served as inspiration for the new construction.

The project is using design references from Federal, Second Empire, and Italianate styles. In the next phase of review of the project, design details and materials will be closer examined. However, some character features such as window styles and cornice lines will need further refinement in the design phase of the project.

**A. North Washington Street along Powhatan:**



**Figure 2** Proposed Powhatan Street elevation

From North Washington Street looking west, the new complex will appear as a series of three connected, but architecturally different buildings.

At the corner with Powhatan Street, Montgomery Street, and North Washington Street, the first segment of the building will have Federal design features. This segment will be three-stories, with a hipped roof. The width of this section is 70'8". The pedimented projecting pavilion will have single windows aligned vertically and horizontally. A double door with an arch is accessed from the street level by a double stair raised stoop. Each of the other bays, either side of the central pavilion, will have paired windows. The windows on the second and third floors will be arched while the first floor paired windows will have flat arches.

The second segment is recessed approximately 125' from the facade of the first section. The second segment of the complex will also have Federal design influences. This segment will have a width of 66'4", with the three bays 19', 26', 19' respectively, looking west. It also will have a hipped roof, with a small-louvered cupola element. The pedimented projecting pavilion will contain three bays, each with single windows aligned vertically and horizontally.

The third component of the building has Second Empire design motifs, and is oriented to have its primary facade facing north, along a new semi-private drive. The width of the elevation viewed from North Washington Street is 69'8", with three bays with widths of 6', 24', and 16' respectively. The central portion will contain two bays, with covered porches with double-door entries. A Mansard roof with paired dormer windows is used, characteristic of the Second-Empire style. The first floor has tall paired French-style doors, with flat arches. The paired windows on the second and third floors have rounded arches. The windows in the center section are paired, while the windows within either bay are in triple.

**B. First Street:**



**Figure 3** Proposed First Street elevation

Looking south, the complex will read as three different buildings, continuing the architectural styles introduced from the North Washington Street perspective.

The dominant section is the Second Empire influenced component, with its asymmetrical facade, characterized by a tower element and a covered porch area which serves at the main entrance into the building. This segment is four-stories in height but under the 50' maximum height. This elevation of the Second-Empire influenced building has three bays, of widths of 15'4", 26', and 25' respectively, looking south. The primary entrance into the building will from the First Street elevation, utilizing a covered porch.

Recessed from First Street, the other segments of the building maintain the appearance of the Federal influenced sections, with paired and ganged windows aligned vertically and horizontally. A segment of the building will have a fourth-floor contained with the intersecting gable and hipped roofs.

The last segment of the building has elements of the Italianate style, with a flat roof, heavy bracketed cornice, and paired windows. It has a three bay configuration of widths of 13'4", 12'8", and 10'10" respectively looking south.

**C. Montgomery Street:**



**Figure 4** Proposed Montgomery Street elevation

Looking north, the first element section reads as an Italianate building, three-stories in height, with a flat-roof, and three bays with widths ranging from 10'10" to 12'10". Two covered porches are located on the ground level.

The next segment is the most visually prominent section viewed from Montgomery Street and has elements of a large Federal-style building, with large bays on the ends, and smaller bays and recesses internally. This section has a hipped roof and is three and a half stories in height. The bays width range from 12' 4' to 25'. The elevation is characterized by grouped and paired windows, some with arched lintels. Balconies are also found on this segment. The most challenging features of this element is the lack of pedestrian interaction at the ground level.

A small segment of two bays with a flat roof separates the large segment and the side of the Federal-influenced segment that fronts North Washington Street. A large recessed garage entrance into the underground parking garage is visually prominent on this elevation. Above the garage entrance are windows aligned vertically and horizontally.

**D. North Columbus Street**



**Figure 5** Proposed North Columbus Street elevation

Looking west, the project continues to read as three distinct buildings with three different architectural styles, and with the use open space to off-set the mass of the building. The first

segment of the building, the Second Empire-styled element, wraps the corner, and continues the Mansard roof element. This segment is composed of four bays. The two outer bays contain paired windows, with the bay located closest to the interior open space having arched windows. The smaller interior bays have covered porch entrances to provide access for pedestrians into the residential units.

The second element of the building reads as a mirror image of the Federal-influenced element, and maintains the central pedimented projecting pavilion, as well as the single windows aligned vertically and horizontally. The hipped roof with a small slated roof element also is evident. A raised open space with a wall enclosure defines the space as pedestrians enter the covered portico of the second segment of the building.

The third segment of the building is comprised of four bays and echoes the configuration of the Second Empire element, but with a different roof line and shape. This segment has a low pitched roof with a strong cornice line, including brackets, resembling roofs that are characteristic of the Italianate style.

### **III. HISTORY:**

There are two buildings extant on the site: 901 North Columbus Street, the former Smoot Lumber Planing Mill, and 900 North Washington Street, the former Alexandria Shell Gasoline Service Station.

See docket item # 12 for further history narrative.

### **IV. ANALYSIS:**

The following Washington Street Standards found in Section 10-105(3) are applicable:

1. 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 merit.

**As a whole, the project succeeds in mitigating the mass by creating the perception of three distinct buildings when viewed from North Washington Street, by using recesses, open space, and varying heights and roof shapes. The project attempts to acknowledge yet not compete with the existing “Gateway” Building of the Physicians Assistance buildings across the street. The most problematic component of the project is the Montgomery Street elevation. Due to the topography, the project as proposed does not provide pedestrian interaction at the ground-level. As proposed, the Montgomery Street elevation of the project will have large expanses of blank wall space at the ground-level. While the upper floors are nicely detailed and the use of projections, recesses, and balconies break the large expanse, more attention and detail needs to be given to what the pedestrian experiences at the ground-level. Another problematic element of this elevation is the large opening to provide access to the underground parking garage. Staff would encourage the applicant to examine ways to lessen the appearance of the huge void or seek ways to screen the opening.**



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

**Following the Washington Street Standards, the applicant has used architectural styles and design signatures found on Washington Street as a guide in developing the appearance of the project, including Federal, Italianate, and Second Empire. Staff recommends that the applicant pay special attention to the consistency of features characteristic of a particular style in the design phase of the project.**

3. 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 applicant has made efforts to mitigate the impact of the project on the much smaller scale historic residential buildings located across North Columbus Street. At this corner, the project transitions down in height and has the appearance of a three-story Italianate rowhouse with very low-pitched of flat roofs.**

4. The design of the new buildings and additions to existing buildings shall be complementary to historic buildings which are found on the street.

**As stated under Standard 2, the applicant has utilized architectural styles and design characteristics found along Washington Street. The immediate area along North Washington Street in which the project is located is characterized by projects constructed in the later parts of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Across the street, at 901 North Washington Street is the circa 1960 Jefferson Building which was recently approved by the Old and Historic Alexandria Board of Architectural Review for demolition. On that block, the Board has reviewed a preliminary concept plan for a commercial project. While the concept plan for that project was deferred by the Board for restudy, it shows that this area of North Washington Street will be characterized by early 21-century projects that should be compatible with the historic structures found on Washington Street.**

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

**See Discussion under Standards 2 and 4**

6. 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 footprint of the project is approximately 200' x 200'. The applicant has attempted to mitigate the mass by using three primary architectural styles to give the appearance of 4 different buildings. The applicant has also incorporated the use of recesses, open space, and building setbacks to further mitigate the mass of the project. The use of differing roof shapes further diminishes the appearance of the overall mass of the project.**

7. The massing and proportions of new buildings or additions to existing buildings designed in an historic style found elsewhere along Washington Street shall be consistent with the massing and proportions of that style.

**Needs refinement. See Discussion under Standards 2.**

9. Facades of a building generally shall express the 2– to 40- foot bay width typically found on early 19<sup>th</sup>-century commercial buildings characteristic of the Old and Historic Alexandria District, or the 15- to 20-foot bay width typically found on the 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 applicant has broken the facades into at least three elements or segments of differing architectural styles. The widths vary from 26' to 70'. However, within each segment, the applicant has used differing bay widths and projects to further mitigate the long expanses of wall surfaces. Staff is concerned that on segments of the project that mimic townhouses, such as the Italianate influenced segment at the corner of Montgomery Street and North Columbus Street, the bay widths are somewhat wider than the 15-to-20 foot bay width typically found on townhouses in the Old and Historic Alexandria District. Staff would encourage the applicant to see if it is possible to reduce these bays widths by a 1 foot or so.**

11. 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 doors openings to solid wall) shall be used in building facades.

**Appears to be met. Some refinement needed at pedestrian level on Montgomery Street.**

## **V. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff recommends approval of the concept plan, with the following conditions and concerns to be addressed:

### **A. Mass and Scale:**

1. On the Montgomery Street elevation, restudy design at the ground level in order to provide design elements for the pedestrian's perspective rather than a blank wall.

2. Explore means to diminish the appearance of the large opening into the underground parking garage. Refine the garage entrance and consider using rustication typical of the rest of the building element.

3. Explore means to reduce bay widths on the project segments that mimic townhouses, to reflect the typical 15-to-20 foot bay width typically found on townhouses in the Old and Historic Alexandria District.

B. Design:

4. When using specific architectural styles as design reference point, make sure elements are characteristic features of that specific style.

5. Make sure design features such as heavy cornices and brackets are terminated at a logical point, and not just end.

6. As the project progresses to the design details and materials review, the applicant is advised to remember that this “gateway” location merits the need for exemplary architecture in detailing and materials, especially at the southeast corner, which will be the most visible from North Washington Street. In addition, because of the visual importance of the roof shapes on this project, especially as a mean to mitigate mass, special consideration to the use of high quality roofing materials need to be emphasized.

C. Archaeology:

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7. The following statement must appear in the General Notes of the site plan so that on-site contractors are aware of the requirement:

Call Alexandria Archaeology immediately (703-838-4399) if any buried structural remains (wall foundations, wells, privies, cisterns, railroad tracks or ties, 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.

## CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

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

### Code Enforcement:

- F-1 Buildings are proposed to be under 50 feet in height. Should buildings exceed the 50 foot height limit, ladder truck access will be required.
- F-2 The structure will be required to be equipped with an automatic fire suppression system.
- F-3 Two fire department connections will be required.
- F-4 Submitted plans do not show one stair discharging directly to the exterior. Provide door access directly to the exterior of the structure from one egress stair.
- F-5 Show fire line and water lines.
- F-6 Identify ADA accessible route from surface parking to front lobby.
- R-1 Handicap parking spaces for apartment and condominium developments shall remain in the same location(s) as on the approved site plan. Handicap parking spaces shall be properly signed and identified as to their purpose in accordance with the USBC and the Code of Virginia. Ownership and / or control of any handicap parking spaces shall remain under common ownership of the apartment management or condominium association and shall not be sold or leased to any single individual. Parking within any space identified as a handicap parking space shall be limited to only those vehicles which are properly registered to a handicap individual and the vehicle displays the appropriate license plates or window tag as defined by the Code of Virginia for handicap vehicles. The relocation, reduction or increase of any handicap parking space shall only be approved through an amendment to the approved site plan.
- R-2 The applicant of any building or structure constructed in excess of 10,000 square feet; or any building or structure which constructs an addition in excess of 10,000 square feet shall contact the City of Alexandria Radio Communications Manager prior to submission of final site plan. The proposed project shall be reviewed for compliance with radio requirements of the City of Alexandria to the satisfaction of the City of Alexandria Radio Communications Manager prior to site plan approval. Such buildings and structures shall meet the following conditions:
- a) The building or structure shall be designed to support a frequency range between 806 to 824 MHz and 850 to 869 MHz.
  - b) The building or structure design shall support a minimal signal transmission strength of -95 dBm within 90 percent of each floor area.
  - c) The building or structure design shall support a minimal signal reception strength of -95 dBm received from the radio system when transmitted from within 90

- percent of each floor area.
- d) The building or structure shall be tested annually for compliance with City radio communication requirements to the satisfaction of the Radio Communications Manager. A report shall be filed annually with the Radio Communications Manager which reports the test findings.

If the building or structure fails to meet the above criteria, the applicant shall install to the satisfaction of the Radio Communications Manager such acceptable amplification systems incorporated into the building design which can aid in meeting the above requirements. Examples of such equipment are either a radiating cable system or an FCC approved type bi-directional amplifier. Final testing and acceptance of amplification systems shall be reviewed and approved by the Radio Communications Manager.

- R-3 Based on a history of sound transmission complaints, it is recommended that all dwelling units have a STC rating of at least 60.
- C-1 A separate tap is required for the building fire service connection.
- C-2 Applicant must provide Emergency Vehicle Easement on front entrance of building.
- C-3 New construction must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-4 The developer shall provide a building code analysis with the following building code data on the plan: a) use group; b) number of stories; c) type of construction; d) floor area per floor ; e) fire protection plan.
- C-5 The developer shall provide a separate Fire Service Plan which illustrates: a) emergency ingress/egress routes to the site; b) two fire department connections (FDC) to the building, one on each side/end of the building; c) fire hydrants located within one hundred (100) feet of each FDC; d) on site fire hydrants spaced with a maximum distance of three hundred (300) feet between hydrants and the most remote point of vehicular access on site; e) emergency vehicle easements (EVE) around the building with a twenty-two (22) foot minimum width; f) all Fire Service Plan elements are subject to the approval of the Director of Code Enforcement.
- C-6 The final site plans shall show placement of fire easement signs.
- C-7 A soils report must be submitted with the building permit application.
- C-8 Prior to submission of the Final Site Plan #1, the developer shall provide a fire flow analysis by a certified licensed fire protection engineer to assure adequate water supply for the structure being considered.
- C-9 A Certificate of occupancy shall be obtained prior to any occupancy of the building or

portion thereof, in accordance with USBC 119.0.

- C-10 The public parking garage (Use Group S-2) is required to be equipped with a sprinkler system (USBC 903.2.11).
- C-11 The public parking garage floor must comply with USBC 406.2.6 and drain through oil separators or traps to avoid accumulation of explosive vapors in building drains or sewers as provided for in the plumbing code (USBC 2901). This parking garage is classified as an S-2, Group 2, public garage.
- C-12 Enclosed parking garages must be ventilated in accordance with USBC 406.4.2. Show vent locations.
- C-13 Prior to the issuance of a demolition permit or land disturbance permit, a rodent abatement plan shall be submitted to Code Enforcement that will outline the steps that will taken to prevent the spread of rodents from the construction site to the surrounding community and sewers.

Alexandria Archaeology:

- F-1 During the nineteenth century, the Alexandria Canal Company owned much of this property with the exception of a small strip along the southern edge parallel to Montgomery Street. In 1877, the Hopkins Insurance map shows belonging to Richard Burke in this southern strip. Buildings associated with the canal were situated on the property to the west of this lot, and Powhatan Street was the Alexandria and Washington Turnpike with a railroad track running down the west side. In the twentieth century, the property was part of the Smoot Planing Mill, and some of the mill structures were replaced by a service station. This twentieth-century development would probably have destroyed evidence of most of the nineteenth-century activity on the lot, but it may be possible that portions of some deep features, such as a well or privy, could remain intact.
- C-1 Call Alexandria Archaeology immediately (703-838-4399) if any buried structural remains (wall foundations, wells, privies, cisterns, railroad tracks or ties, 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.
- C-2 The above statement must appear in the General Notes of the site plan so that on-site contractors are aware of the requirement.