

Docket Item #5
BAR CASE #2005-0288

BAR Meeting
May 3, 2006

ISSUE: Concept of four condominium buildings

APPLICANT: Robert S. Brandt, Inc.

LOCATION: 900 N. Washington St

ZONE: OCM

BOARD ACTION, MARCH 1, 2006: On a motion by Mr. Smeallie, seconded by Ms. Neihardt, the Board voted to defer the application for restudy. The vote was 6-0.

REASON: The Board felt the proposed scale, mass, and architectural styles were not appropriate for Washington Street and needed to be restudied. The Board was particularly concerned about the segment of the project located at the corner intersection of North Washington Street, Montgomery Street, and Powhatan Street.

SPEAKERS: Howard Middleton, representing the applicant, spoke in support
Ellen Pickering, Roberts Lane, spoke in opposition
Steve Bannigan, project architect, spoke in support
Lawrence O'Connor, representing Historic Alexandria Foundation, spoke in opposition
Mary Ellen Posey, representing the North East Citizen's Association, spoke in support
Poul Hortel, Alexandria resident, expressed concerns with the project

(Insert sketch here)

I. Executive Summary

A. March 1, 2006 BAR Hearing:

At the last hearing, the board deferred the proposal to address the following:

- Explore options to minimize visibility or relocate the Montgomery Street parking garage entrance.
- Explore ways to reduce the perceived scale of the building on Montgomery Street.
- Reduce the height of the building on North Washington Street.
- Refine or minimize the collage of architectural styles..

The proposal has been considerably revised since the last hearing attempting to address comments by the BAR, staff, the National Park Service, and public. The changes to the plan and massing have resulted in numerous positive elements that include:

- Reduced overall buildings heights.
- Elimination of the parking garage entrance visible from Washington Street.
- Additional ground level open space.
- A full building break on Montgomery Street.
- A building break on Columbus Street.
- A mid-block pedestrian connection.

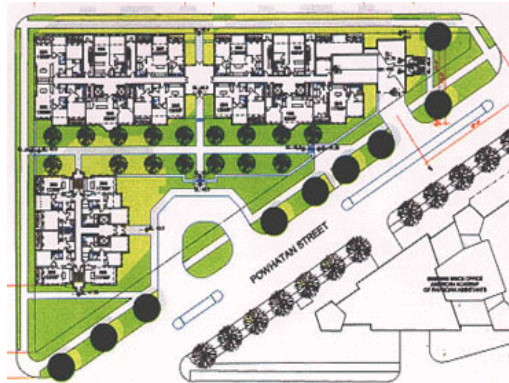


Figure 1 Proposed site plan

B. Response to Issues Raised:

Issue # 1: *Explore options to minimize visibility or relocate the Montgomery Street parking garage entrance.*

Applicant Response: The applicant has relocated the entrance to the parking garage from Montgomery Street to Powhatan Street. Two attached townhouses are proposed to be constructed over the entrance to screen the opening from Powhatan Street.

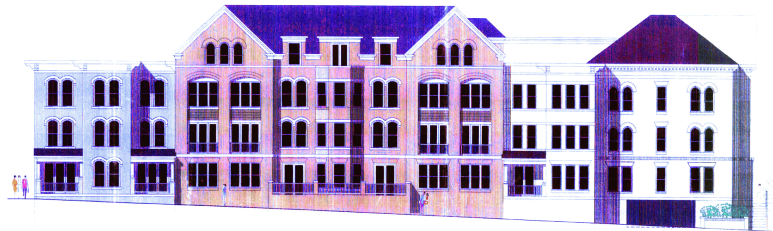
Staff Response Staff commends the applicant for this revision and feels the entrance off Powhatan Street is less visible from Washington Street and also enables the building on Washington Street to be lowered in height as discussed in more detail below. The applicant has proposed units to screen the garage entrance and has recessed the entrance on Powhatan, all of which will help to minimize its visibility from Powhatan Street. While staff believes the townhouse elements require some additional refinement, the approach is effective and helps to screen the parking and enables the proposal to relate well to the scale of the adjoining neighborhood.

The response addressed the issue raised.

Issue # 2 : *Explore ways to reduce the perceived scale of the building on Montgomery Street.*

Applicant Response: The applicant has revised the site plan and the building massing to provide a full 37-38 ft. wide building break on Montgomery Street.

Staff Response: The response by the applicant is a positive change to the proposal. The proposed building breaks reduce the perceived length, mass and scale of the proposal. In addition, the break enables a mid-block pedestrian connection and enables visibility into the internal courtyard.



Previous Montgomery Street Elevation

The response addressed the issue raised.



Proposed Montgomery Street elevation

Issue # 3 *Reduce the height of the building fronting on North Washington Street.*

Applicant Response: In response to the comment, the applicant has lowered the height of the building by approximately five feet. This was accomplished by sloping the underground garage to follow the topography of the site. This approach enabled the east wing of the garage to be below grade, which eliminated the “raised” portion of the garage, thereby lowering the building on North Washington Street.



Previous North Washington Street Elevation



Proposed North Washington Street elevation

Staff Response: Lowering the height of the building and eliminating the raised entrance on North Washington Street are positive revisions to the plan. Additional refinements, such as providing a more substantial cornice between the third floor and the fourth would also help to reduce the perceived height of the building. Overall, the proposed building, details, painted brick of the building appear to be of high quality and appropriate for Washington Street. However, because of its location on Washington Street and the visual prominence of the building, it is essential that all of the building materials be extremely high quality, such as true divided light windows, stone and brick, all of which will be reviewed as part of more detailed review of the building.

The response addressed the issue.

Issue # 4 : Refine or minimize the collage of architectural styles.

Applicant Response: In response to the comments by the Board, the applicant has revised the plan to be four functional buildings and three architectural styles.

Staff Response: In response to the comments to simplify and minimize the proposal, the applicant in some ways has oversimplified the buildings, especially on the Columbus Street frontage. Because of the smaller scale and finer grain of buildings on Columbus Street and within the adjoining neighborhood, staff is recommending additional architectural refinement to introduce a more human scale to the facades and provide relief to the repetitive facades by providing elements such as:

- Variation in color between each of the buildings.
- Variation in fenestration, proportions and rhythms (such as bays).
- Functional entryways to reinforce the apparent townhouse scale.

While changes in colors, bays and introductions of functional doors and other appropriate elements are relatively simple revisions, they will go a long way towards reducing the perceived mass of each of the buildings on Columbus Street.



Figure 6 Proposed North Columbus Street elevation

This items requires additional architectural refinement - design.

C. Summary:

The proposed revisions to the site plan and general building massing are appropriate for the site and the general the context of the adjoining neighborhood and Washington Street. However, the design of the buildings especially those on Columbus Street requires additional architectural design. Staff supports the proposal, site plan and general massing. There will need to be changes to ultimately bring the proposal into compliance with the Washington Street Standards as discussed in more detail below.

II. Background - Proposal:

The project is located directly across the street from the “gateway” building of the Physicians Assistants Building. Directly across the street, the c. 1960 Jefferson Building has received a Permit to Demolish by the BAR. To the south of the project site, the block contains a gas station. To the west of the site along Columbus Street are smaller scale, two-story townhouses.



III. Changes to the Proposal:

The project has evolved from a series of connected building segments to four functional buildings, with two of the buildings connected by a shared one-story lobby. Open space has been reconfigured, creating an open courtyard space with an allee of trees, between the building fronting North Washington Street and the buildings sited closer to North Columbus Street. The entrance into the underground parking garage has been relocated from Montgomery Street to Powhatan Street. The project is using design references from styles found on historic buildings located along Washington Street.

IV. Community:

Since the March 1, 2006 BAR meeting where the application was deferred for restudy, the applicant and City had an April 12th meeting with the National Park Service. The revised plans were also routed to the Park Service and as of the writing of the report, the City has not received comments from the Park Service.

There have been two community meetings with the Northeast Land Use committee since the deferral of the proposal. At each of the meetings the committee has expressed concerns that the proposed design of the buildings create buildings not compatible with the neighborhood. Other concerns raised include the number of curb cuts, the desire to see front porches-entrances on Columbus Street, and the desire to see additional detailing for the buildings.

V. PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

A. North Washington Street along Powhatan:

The proposal consists of a four-story painted masonry building, with two bays recessed in the interior. The two external bays will have widths of 20' while the center bay will have a bay of 12'. The two recessed bays will each be about 5' in width. An entrance door will be located within the center bay, with a covered stoop. The building will have a flat roof with a parapet and heavy cornice. Single windows, some with flat arches, others with curved arches, will be located within the bays. A building break of 37' separates the building from the building which fronts onto Columbus Street.

The architectural expression of the Washington Street building is subdued, but appropriate. The building mass is rendered in a light pastel color that appears to be painted brick, with white trim. The building scale, with little variation in window size or rhythm, could be helped by the addition of a strong cornice line between the third and fourth floors, which would also allow development of a special expression for the fourth floor.

B. Montgomery Street:

Under the prior proposal, this elevation was the most problematic due to the large opening for the entrance to the underground parking garage and the lack of visual interest at the pedestrian level. As stated previously, the parking garage entrance has been relocated to Powhatan Street. Ground level porches have been introduced on the revised buildings and the open space has been revised to create a courtyard area between the two buildings.

Looking north, ground-level covered porches have been incorporated into the primary building fronting North Washington Street. The bay rhythms have been altered to allow for the porches. The bays have widths of 13' with the center bay having a width of approximately 29'. Windows are shown as either single or paired, but are consistent within bays. A retaining wall with several stairs provides pedestrian access to the raised courtyard area within the complex, which sits on top of the underground parking structure.

The building at the corner of Montgomery and North Columbus Street reads as 5 bays, with porches on the outer bays. The bay width is 20' for the three primary bays on this elevation. Single windows are located within the bays. At the fourth floor, french-style doors are visible which provide access to the roof terraces.

C. North Columbus Street

Two buildings sharing a one-story lobby will front the street. The primary building facing North Washington Street is not visible from this vantage. The two buildings fronting North Columbus Street are three stories in height at the street face, with a fourth floor recessed approximately 20' from the face of the building. Rooftop terraces will surround the fourth floor of the buildings fronting North Columbus Street. At the ground level, covered porches are located within most bays. The bays widths range from 13' to 28'. Windows are either single or paired, but are consistent within the bays. The one-story lobby connection shows french-style doors and a flat roof.

The rowhouse units attached to the northern building have single windows and three bays. This building is connected to the other Columbus Street building by a one-story shared lobby. These buildings will also have flat roofs with parapets and heavy cornices. The buildings will be four-stories in height, however, the fourth-story will be recessed from the outer face of the buildings, with the exception of a section on the eastern side of the building that aligns with the outer face. Covered porches will be located on the ground level in several of the bays.

The entrance to the underground parking garage has been located off of Powhatan Street at the northern end of one of the buildings. To help mitigate the appearance of the garage opening, the applicant has shown a component of the building that reads as two townhouses, which will be constructed over the garage entrance.

The space between the two buildings on Columbus and the rest of the site has been developed as a wide pedestrian axis, with sidewalks and planting that connects the mid-block of Montgomery Street with the northern section of Powhatan. The space between the buildings on Powhatan, which was first shown as a parking lot, has now been developed as a turnaround/drop-off which serves all three buildings, and could include a limited amount of short-term or guest parking (on the order of five cars.) The public park shown at the north end of the block in the previous scheme has been eliminated.

The Columbus Street buildings, both rendered in red brick with white trim, with identical masses and skylines as seen from Columbus Street, present an unrelieved expanse of repetitive bays and windows that stretches over two hundred and sixty feet, facing what is a small-scale and quite varied neighborhood across the street. Although there are townhouse-scale elements worked into the elevation (bays, porches and doorways,) the doorways are fire exits, and not entries as they

appear to be.

The townhouse elements that terminate the west side of the project are raised up high to allow clearance for the garage entrance below, and occupy a strong vantage point overlooking the large urban space created by the intersection of Powhatan, Columbus and First Street. The scale of this piece seems dwarfed by the open space, though, and would benefit from additional height. If Applicant deems the addition of more residential space at this location undesirable, they could still consider the addition of a strong roof form to give this element greater importance and prominence, as its location seems to recommend.

VI. STAFF ANALYSIS:

Fundamentally the proposal with underground parking, a significant amount of ground level open space, building breaks, and setbacks adjacent to the adjoining “gateway” building are all positive and desirable elements. However, to comply with the Washington Street Standards additional refinement is needed for the buildings on Columbus Street based on the following requirements of the Zoning Ordinance.

Sec 10-105 (2)

- d. “... architectural features are historically appropriate to the existing structure and adjacent existing structures.”
- e. “... similar features of the preexisting buildings or structure, if any, and to buildings and structures in the immediate surroundings.”

Sec. 10-105 (1)

- v. “Building should appear from the public right-of-way to have a footprint no larger than 100 feet by 80 feet.

Sec. 10-105 (1)

“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 ...”

There is a clear direction from the Standards and the Washington Street Standards to be compatible with adjoining buildings, and that buildings should appear no larger than 100 feet by

80 ft and to incorporate elements such as changes in color and fenestration, wall surfaces and color. Currently the footprint of the Columbus Street building is 120 ft in length. Staff is not recommending an additional building break to meet the maximum length but rather elements such as changes in color fenestration, wall surfaces to enable the proposal to comply with the Washington Street Standards and to be more compatible with the adjoining buildings on Columbus Street.

Overall, the proposal is a good one and the site is one that the City and community have expressed a desire to see redevelop. The applicant has worked with the Board, staff and the community to revise and address comments. We anticipate that the on going working relationship will continue to be the case as this proposal proceeds.

VII. COMPLIANCE WITH THE WASHINGTON STREET STANDARDS:

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.

Sec. 10-105 (3)(a) of the Zoning Ordinance outlines the elements of the Washington Street Standards, which includes the following.

Sec. 10-105 A (3) (a) (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 architectural merit.

Traditional Building Character:

The proposed elements of primarily masonry and stone are compatible with the traditional building character on Washington Street and within the District. The proposal creates four buildings when viewed from North Washington Street, by using recesses, open space, building breaks, and varying heights. The 30-foot setback of the building on North Washington Street helps the building to compete less with the adjoining “gateway” building.

Mass and Scale:

Overall the three story elements on Columbus Street and the four story elements on Washington Street relate well to the scale of the adjoining buildings and the context of the adjoining neighborhood.

Design and Style:

The applicant should consider additional refinement such as changes in materials, changes in fenestration and changes in color for the buildings as discussed in more detail below.

Sec. 10-105 A (3) (a)(1)(i)

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

The applicant has used architectural elements such as square and angled bays, simple cornices and watertables, double-hung rectangular and arch-topped windows, porches with Doric columns, and simple balustrades, as typically found along Washington Street. These elements are consistent with styles of historic buildings of the period which are found on North Washington Street or within the District.

Sec. 10-105 A (3) (a)(1)(ii)

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.

Appropriate Size, Location:

The size of the two and three story buildings on Columbus Street and the four story building on Washington Street are compatible in size and location to other buildings on the street.

Appropriate Style:

The applicant should consider additional refinement such as changes in materials, changes in fenestration and changes in color as discussed in more detail below.

Sec. 10-105 A (3) (a)(1)(iii)

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

With additional refinement of the architectural elements the proposal will be complementary to historic buildings which are found on the street. The applicant should consider architectural refinement to the buildings on North Columbus Street and to a lesser degree the building on North Washington Street.

Sec. 10-105 A (3) (a)(1)(iv)

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.

The revisions to the massing such as the full building break on Montgomery Street and Columbus Street, overall decreased height and building step-backs on Columbus Street help to create separate buildings and a general massing compatible with buildings in the neighborhood and on Washington Street.

Sec. 10-105 A (3) (a)(1)(v)

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.

Of all the standards, this is the one where the proposal requires additional refinement. The standard is intended to ensure that larger buildings:

- be designed to look separate;
- not be designed as collectively more massive than buildings on the street, and
- the scale of buildings is reduced through the use of styles, facades and setbacks.

While the overall massing of the building on Columbus Street is appropriate, the proposal does not comply with the standards as outlined above.

In addition, the standards require that buildings *appear* no larger than 100 feet by 80 feet. Currently, the buildings on Columbus Street have footprints of approximately 70 ft. x 122 ft (south) and 70 x 160 ft. (north) which exceeds the maximum and is clearly perceivable from the public rights-of-way. Further, because the two large blocks share a one-story lobby, their combined length is in excess of 260 ft, and the total extent of linked building mass along Columbus Street is in excess of 300 ft. This is in the context of existing two-story structures on the west side of Columbus Street with total lengths on 36 ft, 28 ft., 18 ft, 70 ft, 111 ft, and 54 ft.

The one-story lobby element contributes to the perception of extreme building length. The applicant should explore the possibility of refining the lobby entrance as part of the provision of entrances and refinement for the North Columbus Street facade.

Additional refinements to the proposal on North Columbus Street, such as changes in material, articulation of the wall surfaces, changes in fenestration patterns, varying color and varying roof heights could enable the buildings to *appear* no larger than 100 ft. x 80 ft. This approach is consistent to what was done for the project on 800 South Washington Street and was approved by the Board.

Sec. 10-105 A (3) (a)(1)(vii)

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.

The general approach to massing is appropriate for Washington Street, the neighborhood and the proposed architectural styles. The applicant should consider refinements to the cornice and color and materials on the fourth level to reduce the perceived heights.

Sec. 10-105 A (3) (a)(1)(viii)

New or untried approaches to design which result in new buildings or additions 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 project largely meets this standard. Some problematic elements may be lessened with additional architectural and material refinements.

Sec. 10-105 A(3) (a)(2)

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 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.

Overall, the applicant has successfully met this Standard. Staff would encourage the applicant to explore ways on the North Columbus Street elevation to reduce the widths of some of the 28 ft. wide bays, and create a scale that is more compatible with the existing fabric.

Sec. 10-105 A (3) (a)(3)

Building materials characteristic of buildings having historic architectural merit within the district shall be utilized. The texture tone and color of such materials shall display a level of variety, quality and richness at least equal to that found abundantly in the historic setting.

The proposed building materials are consistent with the district and Washington Street although additional refinements are needed.

Sec. 10-105 A (3) (a)(4)

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.

The fenestration of the proposed project complies, although additional refinements should be considered.

VIII. CONCLUSION:

Staff supports the proposal and general massing based on the following:

- Continued refinement of elements such as architectural design, styles, color, fenestration, introduction of operable entrances, porches for the units on Columbus Street.
- Refinement of the detailing of the cornice and fourth floor fenestration for the building on Washington Street to help to reduce the perceived height.
- Refinement of the roofs for the townhouses at the corner of Columbus Street and Powhatan Street.

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 At least one stairwell shall discharge directly to the exterior of the building. The current design does not facilitate this requirement.
- 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.

- C-1 A separate tap is required for the building fire service connection.
- C-2 Provide an Emergency Vehicle Easement in the proposed circle for access to the building which backs to Montgomery Street. EVE shall meet minimum turning radii requirements. Elevated surfaces utilized for this purpose shall be AAHSTO H-20 load rated.

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 structures 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.
- F-1. 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.