

July 18, 2006 Potomac Yard Fire Station & Affordable Housing Task Force Meeting Minutes

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Andrew Hall of the Del Ray Civic Association called the meeting to order at 7:10pm, in meeting room two of the Mount Vernon Recreation Center on Commonwealth Avenue.

The following representatives were in attendance:

Andrew Hall, Del Ray Civic Association, Task Force Chairman
John Starcher, Warwick Village
Dan Abramson,
Colleen Rafferty, Alexandria Planning & Zoning
Amy Tarce, Alexandria Planning & Zoning
Jeff Farner, Alexandria Planning & Zoning
Sylvia Sibrover, Northeast Citizens Association
Mildrilyn Davis, Director, Alexandria Office of Housing
John North, Battalion Chief, Alexandria Fire Department
David Fromm
Duncan Blair
Brian Hannigan, Alexandria Communications Director
Melissa Watson, Lynhaven Civic Association
Amy Slack
Kate Rollins, Old Town Greens
Jim Schwartz, Fire Chief, Arlington Fire Department, City of Alexandria resident
Helen McIlvaine, Alexandria Office of Housing
Tom Welsh, PWBA
Mariella Posey, Northeast Civic Association
Art Dahlberg, Director of Alexandria Code Enforcement
Gary Mesaris, Fire Chief, Alexandria Fire Department
Michelle Evans, Deputy Assistant City Manager

Minutes prepared by: Cameron Hall, Alexandria Fire Department

Fire Station Briefing

After thanking the participants for their attendance, Gary Mesaris, Alexandria Fire Chief, addressed the Potomac Yard fire station proposal. Due to the age of Alexandria's fire stations, the condition of the buildings is poor and many are in need of renovation.

In particular, is station 202, located on Windsor Avenue. It was built in 1926 as the Town Hall for the Town of Potomac. It was converted to the Potomac Truck and Engine Company shortly thereafter. The City of Alexandria obtained the station as a result of annexation in 1930.

Currently housed at station 202 are a frontline engine company, an Advanced Life Support (ALS) medic unit, three hazardous materials response units, and three hazardous materials

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support trailers. Due to storage constraints, the hazardous materials/WMD trailers, a medical support unit, and three SEA containers are stored outdoors.

The developer of the Potomac Yard project has proposed constructing a new, state of the art station with modern ADA compliant living quarters and enlarged bays that will accommodate modern fire suppression apparatus as well as house equipment that is currently stored outdoors at the Windsor Avenue station.

Alexandria will move the fire suppression/HazMat personnel and equipment to the Potomac Yard station, while the EMS functions will remain at Station 202, on Windsor Avenue. Attached are the coverage maps showing the response times associated with this move. The maps show that service delivery is well within department response goals and that the service area would continue to have redundant coverage. The areas of greatest demand remain Potomac Yard and Arlandria.

The new station in Potomac Yard, which will be dubbed station 209, will be located near the "Town Center" which will allow quick access to the main arterials into Del Ray and other surrounding communities. The streets and sidewalks in Potomac Yard will be constructed to be wider to allow for better maneuverability of apparatus. Current plans have the street widths set at 40 feet curb to curb. In addition, the station will face a service street in order to minimize the impact on vehicular and pedestrian traffic.

Other advantages to the Potomac Yard station include a community room for use by Alexandria residents and training for Fire Department staff. The dormitory portion of the station will reflect the changing demographics of the fire department and allow for individual private bedrooms. With the addition of more females in fire suppression, the need to change from common bunkrooms is a necessity.

Potomac Yard Affordable Housing

Helen McIlvaine from the Office of Housing addressed the project as it relates to affordable housing. The proposal from the developer is to include up to sixty housing units above the fire station. The actual terms of the housing has yet to be determined. The options include fixed income condominiums and/or affordable rental units. The goal is to maintain the property as affordable housing in the long term.

The current plan is to serve households that earn approximately \$54,000 annually, which would set the rents about \$1500 per month. Any future residents would need to have correlating incomes. Market rate and discounted rents, as well as tax credit programs are also feasible. There is no current plan to include any program that would include a city subsidy.

Community Concerns and Feedback

The room was opened to an informal round table discussion to address citizen concerns and questions.

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- A major concern addressed by meeting participants was the issue of noise in the housing units above the fire station.

Art Dahlberg, Director of Code Enforcement addressed those concerns stating that new technologies exist that will limit or isolate the building vibration and station apparatus noise. Examples include triple paned windows, bifold, rather than overhead bay doors, and quality insulation. These concerns are already being addressed and will continue with comprehensive sound studies involving qualified sound engineers.

Additionally, Fire Chief Mesaris stated that operational policies and procedures would be adjusted, if needed, to address this issue.

- In earlier meetings on the Potomac Yard project, the decisions about the area of Land Bay H were deferred. The reasons for this deferment are to address the concerns of fire apparatus maneuverability and the location of the fire station. Outreach sessions will be held to guide the decision making process before the proposal is presented to City Council.

With the buildings in the Potomac Yard development constructed closer to the street and with the inclusion of parks and retail centers, the challenge is to find a balance with good urban design, affordable housing, and code compliance. Art Dahlberg stated that the developer has agreed, in concept, to incorporate sprinkler systems in all new buildings that exceed current code standards.

- Helen McIlvaine assured the participants that the affordable housing proposal would include special accommodations for Alexandria police officers, firefighters, medics, and teachers. These members of our community may receive preferential consideration in obtaining these housing units.
- There are plans to renovate station 202 on Windsor Avenue, but the project has been delayed due to the addition of the Potomac Yard development. That project is expected to begin in the fall of 2007. The current state of the fire stations is an issue mainly due to the fact that fire and EMS personnel work in 24-hour shifts. Therefore, they are required to “live” in the station during working hours.
- One challenge for station 202 is the inability for it to house modern fire apparatus due to the size and height of the bays and accommodate the equipment recently acquired through the Homeland Security Grants. Much of this equipment is currently stored outdoors. The current building would need to be razed in order to meet the needs and will not be considered because it is a historical building. Station 208, located on North Paxton is an example of inadequate planning for the future. It was designed as a two bay station that would address the needs of the City when it was constructed, not the needs of a growing community.
- A concern voiced by Tom Welsh on behalf of Del Ray residents is the loss of the Windsor Avenue fire suppression service. With the average age of homes in Del Ray, residents are concerned about fire safety. Art Dahlberg stated that studies have shown that most fires occur due to human error, leaving a stove or candle unattended, for example. Fortunately, residents in the Del Ray community currently have a redundancy of four-minute response service and

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that would continue with the construction of station 209. This means that units from several stations may respond within the four-minute response standard.

The fiscal impact of maintaining the staffing of suppression units at station 202 is a larger concern for the city. Chief Schwartz, a resident of the Del Ray and the Arlington Fire Chief stated that it is more important to have equitable service throughout the city before addressing redundancy. There are currently residents in the Eisenhower Valley section that have no four minute response service and therefore any new hires should be placed in service there first.

Arlington County is currently experiencing some of the same issues with growth in Crystal City. To address this issue, they have considered moving the Fairlington Fire Station to lower Glebe Road. If the station is relocated, the residents of Fairlington will still have at least four-minute response, as will those in Crystal City. Without moving the Fairlington station, residents in Crystal City may have to wait at least six to eight minutes for service. This is an issue of equitable distribution of service and resources.

Michelle Evans, Deputy City Manager of the City of Alexandria suggested studying the cost of staffing and maintaining both station 202 and 209. Conservative estimates are \$800,000 per year in operating costs, which includes recruiting, hiring, and maintaining twelve additional personnel and another one time cost of \$500,000 to purchase apparatus.

- It was determined that if the developer was not proposing to include the fire station in the Potomac Yard plans, the City would then have to come up with the capital to build it at an approximate cost of \$6 million plus the cost of the acquiring the land.
- City resident, David Fromm suggested dividing the two issues of redistributing the resources and constructing the new station. If the resources do not allow for two operating stations, the Windsor Avenue station should remain open and operational while the newly built station in Potomac Yard be used only as storage for the department's equipment and apparatus. He continued that residents in Potomac Yard should be able to raise enough tax funding to afford to operate and staff fire suppression out of station 209.

A copy of the initial draft of the informational brochure was distributed. Feedback is requested at the next meeting.

The participants agreed that the staffing issues at station 202 do not need to be addressed at the current time and a decision is unlikely by the September deadline. As a result the task force set a follow up meeting for Tuesday, July 25, 2006 at 7pm. The location is to be determined by City personnel and the task force members will be notified as soon as possible.