



E tu, ParcView?

Affordable housing project draws support from Planning Commission, concern from neighbors

BY CODY MELLO-KLEIN

Another controversial project that has raised concerns about density, parking and safety, but which would considerably boost Alexandria's supply of affordable housing, will come before City Council at Saturday's public

hearing.

Known as ParcView II, the proposal by Wesley Housing, an affordable housing nonprofit, would involve almost tripling the current ParcView Apartments at 5380 Holmes Run Parkway from a single 14-story affordable housing complex with 149 units to three buildings with 373 units. The proposed project would involve adding two new nine-story buildings, which would house 227 new

affordable units on what is now an above ground parking lot. The existing building would then be refurbished.

ParcView II would expand the apartment sizes from one- and two-bedroom units to include some three-bedroom units as well. The project would also expand the scope of affordability from units that are priced between 50% to 60% of the area median income to

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PHOTO/CODY MELLO-KLEIN

The ParcView II project would expand the existing ParcView Apartments from a single 14-story, 149-unit building in order to add two nine-story buildings that would house 227 additional affordable housing units.

Painting the full picture

Freedom House Museum aims to reopen in April

BY OLIVIA ANDERSON

With its purchase of Freedom House several years ago, the City of Alexandria took tangible steps to ensure that its African American history is not forgotten. Now, following a long closure due to the global COVID-19 pandemic and several renovations, the Freedom House Museum is getting ready to reopen its doors.

Although there is not a hard date yet, Alexandria Black History Museum Director Audrey Davis said that the updated museum is tentatively set to open in April.

According to Davis, plans are moving along fairly smoothly, aside from some minor supply chain issues. Staff is currently reviewing proofs of the exhibit design and adding new lighting, paint coatings and an HVAC system.

"We're just pulling all these pieces together. Some things have to happen in stages and we have to wait for one part to be done before the next part can move on. Our goal is to open in the spring and we're keeping our

fingers crossed that is still going to happen," Davis said. "But we will be open this year. That's our guarantee."

Located at 1315 Duke St., the Freedom House Museum was once the site of one of the largest domestic slave trading firms in the country. Starting in 1828, Franklin and Armfield began operating out of the building, bringing enslaved people from the Chesapeake Bay area and forcing them to slave markets by foot or ship.

Although Franklin and Armfield was the first company to operate out of that building, many others followed suit until the Union Army occupied Alexandria on May 24, 1861. Freedom House now marks the last vestige of a large complex that trafficked enslaved men, women and children who would pass through the building on the way to bonding in the deep south.

"It was a very lucrative business," Davis said. "It's a very important part of American history and Alexandria's role in the domestic slave trade, which a lot of people don't think about as much."

While many people are

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familiar with the transatlantic slave trade, where enslaved men and women were transported from Africa to America, not as many are well-versed in the workings of the domestic slave trade.

Davis speculated that this lack of awareness could be due to a variety of factors, such as the desire to ignore the former existence of slavery or, if people do acknowledge slavery, a lack of understanding of the mechanisms and logistics behind how it worked.

“A single person [owned] another human being, but how did that person get there? How

were they bought? Were they separated from their family? They don’t always understand or see the connections that happened,” Davis said.

Freedom House, however, aims to bridge the gap of understanding through telling the full story of Alexandria’s fundamental role in the domestic slave trade.

The city purchased the site from the Northern Virginia Urban League, which owned and maintained the building and created the original museum in 2008 to educate the public on internal slave trade. The city’s Office of Historic Alexandria began its collaboration with NVUL in

February 2018.

The two partnered closely in ensuring museum upkeep and growing attendance. One concern city officials harbored when the building went up for sale was a private entity potentially acquiring the building and not making it accessible to the public, since it represents an integral piece of the nation’s history.

“It would have been an unknown. We didn’t know for sure, or what it could possibly be turned into. It really is a sacred site; it’s hallowed ground. There are many things you wouldn’t want there,” Davis said. “This is really a sacred building and it’s a building that needs to be accessible to many, many people because slavery is a core part of American history and we don’t need to forget that.”

With former city manager Mark Jinks spearheading the effort, the city successfully purchased the building in March 2020 for \$1.8 million.

Mayor Justin Wilson said at

“ This is really a sacred building and it's a building that needs to be accessible to many, many people because slavery is a core part of American history and we don't need to forget that.”

– Audrey Davis, director, Alexandria Black History Museum

the time of the purchase that Freedom House is “vital to telling Alexandria’s story.”

“What happened at 1315 Duke St. had a terrible and lasting impact on America. Freedom House encourages us to speak truth to power and delve deeper to confront the hard, honest truths about race, class and equity in this country,” Wilson said.

According to Davis, the renovated museum will place a heavy emphasis on those who were enslaved rather than the business and business owners.


“While we will talk about how it operated and how the

different traffickers operated, the most important thing to us is talking about the voiceless men, women and children who went through that building heading into years of horrible bondage, torture and abuse,” Davis said.



In order to effectively center Black voices, the museum will refrain from using legacy language such as “slave master” or “slave mistress” and instead focus on telling the stories of those to whom slavery was forced upon.

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PHOTO/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
The Freedom House Museum is tentatively scheduled to reopen in April after being closed due to the pandemic and ongoing renovations.

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Davis said the museum’s renovations are being done with the goal of enhancing accessibility. For example, the core slave trade exhibit will move from the basement to the first floor in order to increase access. Additionally, visitors will now be able to travel up two levels, which “very rarely happened before,” Davis said.

The second floor will include a traveling exhibition from the Virginia Museum of History and Culture, titled “Determined,” that the museum will supplement with African American history, stories and artifacts specific to Alexandria.

Guests can then travel to the third floor, which features an African American Historic Site exhibition called “Before the Spirits are Swept Away.” This exhibit is filled with paintings by late artist Sherry

Sanabria. The other part of this exhibit will be located at the Black History Museum, due to a generous amount of painting donations.

The museum also plans to implement an elevator system and bathrooms compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, so that visitors of all mobility levels can access every floor.

With both the renovations and the museum as a whole, Davis said the intention is to educate the public, remember the forgotten and paint a full portrait of the reality of domestic slave trade.

“Our opportunity with Freedom House is creating a museum dedicated to telling the story of the domestic slave trade and everything that it entailed from start to finish, and really focusing on those who were enslaved,” Davis said.

-oanderson@alextimes.com



PHOTO/VISITALEXANDRIA

The Freedom House Museum was once the site of the largest domestic slave trading firm in the United States, from 1828 to 1861.

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