

As concerned citizens of Alexandria, Virginia, we submit this message to the City Council of the City of Alexandria, on this 14th day of May, 1968, to invite the attention of City Government to some, but by no means all, of the problems that complicate the daily lives of a significant segment of the citizenry of Alexandria. We report on the basis of our contacts with that segment of the population and with a sincere hope that the City will heed our call to action while the time to do so remains.

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## INTRODUCTION

In its recent report, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders reflected findings on the basis of considerable research conducted in 23 cities. A warning was sounded to the nation that certain ills were in need of immediate attention if a repeat of the turmoil of recent summers is to be averted. This message is intended to alert citizens in general, and government administrators in particular, of the great relevance of that report to Alexandria; and to suggest that the turmoil experienced in other cities can occur in Alexandria unless immediate steps are taken. Further, we hope to dispel the feeling that present efforts of the City to assure a decent existence to all of its citizens are adequate.

The failure of the Federal Government to grant Alexandria's Model City application suggests that the responsibility for securing the improvements included in that application rests with City Government. The deficiencies suggested by that application continue to demand immediate attention.

It should be noted, also, that citizens living in the circumstances to be outlined below will find it difficult to comprehend a massive City program to revitalize nearby commercial areas while their needs are subjected to token steps designed to forestall and pacify, rather than to remedy existing problems.

## PROBLEMS

Although the problems to be outlined below are common to individuals and families residing in various parts of Alexandria, the primary area embraced by this message is known as the 16th Census Tract. While our attention is here focused on the areas of (1) pedestrian safety, (2) sanitation, health, and community upkeep, (3) law enforcement and police protection, (4) recreation, (5) city employment, (6) housing, and (7) communication, it is not intended that these items, or the photographs contained in the accompanying appendix, be construed as the only items in need of attention. Nor is it intended that any suggestions made or examples cited be taken to be all inclusive. In fact, it is felt that where community needs are obvious, the responsibility for assuring many of the basic necessities incident to a civilized state of society is that of City Government.

### I. PEDESTRIAN SAFETY

School children, parishioners, and others finding it necessary to use the sidewalks and cross the streets in going to and from commercial establishments, recreational facilities, schools, churches, etc., have, in far too many instances, been denied the benefit of the thought and planning for their safety that a responsible government owes to its citizens.

Inasmuch as the many thoroughfares which pass through the 16th Census Tract are accomplished facts, we here focus our attention on the absence of elementary precautions for the safety of inhabitants of the area.



In 1968, there are streets in the subject area which are still without standard sidewalks and guttering--the absence of which, particularly in inclement weather, forces pedestrians to choose between the hazards of walking in the roadways or walking on unpaved areas where passage is, at best, uncomfortable, and footing unsure.

In some areas, where sidewalks are provided, it is standard procedure for commercial interests (i.e., service stations, car washes, other establishments offering drive-in services, etc.) to obstruct pedestrian passageways with vehicles, thereby forcing pedestrians to the hazards of the roadways.

Recommendations:

We recommend that the Administration take another look at the area, giving consideration to the following:

1. Additional controls to prevent acceleration of traffic speed between distant traffic signals;
2. Availability of pedestrian push button traffic light controls;
3. Clearly marked pedestrian crosswalks at intersections;
4. Coordination of thoroughfare traffic lights in order to aid traffic flow and provide an adequate break in traffic, enabling pedestrians to cross safely;
5. Guard rails along sidewalks where traffic hazards render them necessary;
6. Increased enforcement of existing laws with respect to moving, parked, or stopped vehicular traffic;

7. Installation of sidewalks and curbing.

[NOTE: In many instances, the expenses associated with this step should be placed on the owners of the houses and businesses in front of which sidewalks are not now available. In other instances, where owners cannot afford the assessment, it is suggested that the City consider requesting the aid of community organizations, or bearing the expense itself.]

II. SANITATION, HEALTH, AND COMMUNITY UPKEEP

While recognizing that the conditions herein described are not solely attributable to persons and forces outside the community, it should be noted that much of the problem to be discussed under this heading is accounted for by the fact that, for one reason or another, the City has permitted numerous exceptions to existing zoning regulations to be made. The subject area is dotted with varying types of establishments which are operated by businessmen who, for the most part, do not reside in the area and who accept no responsibility for the well-being and appearance of the community in general, and their establishments in particular. A general practice among many is that of accumulating great quantities of rubbish on and around their premises, with the ultimate result being that it is distributed by prevailing weather conditions to all parts of the community--or worse, permitted to stay as a breeding place for rats and disease. In other instances, where customers of some of the establishments tend to deposit

wrappers and other rubbish on the ground, proprietors make no effort to clean up. In fact, it is not unusual to see motorists drive into the area for the sole purposes of eating and drinking, thereafter depositing their rubbish and bottles in the streets.

The multiplicity of zoning cited above also makes it possible for owners of large vans to impose upon the community by parking their trucks for periods of up to 48 hours, measurably adding to the unsightliness of the area, and posing a substantial threat to the safety of both pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

With respect to the condition of streets and dedicated alleyways, suffice it to say that City cleaning and maintenance efforts are woefully inadequate.

Houses that have, for one reason or another, been vacated are permitted to dilapidate and to serve as fire hazards and convenient breeding places for crime and disease. Often these properties are owned or controlled by persons residing outside of the area, seeking only to maximize profits by holding them for rent or sale while taking no steps to prevent those properties from becoming unsightly hazards to the community. These same owners are, in many instances, the "slum landlords" who are knowingly permitted to collect exorbitant rents for properties which offer few, if any, of the necessities or conveniences deemed by health authorities to be basic.



Recommendations:

To help correct these problems, we suggest that some consideration be given to the following:

1. Curtail encroachments on primarily residential areas by undesirable commercial interests;
2. Eliminate the barriers which presently serve to perpetuate residential segregation by securing enactment of legislation which allows economic factors alone to determine which communities are open to those who seek housing (See Section VI);
3. Enact or reactivate legislation giving City authorities the right to rehabilitate substandard rental housing at the expense of the landlord;
4. Encourage and, where required, assist residents of the area to rehabilitate houses and to observe minimum standards of cleanliness;
5. Promulgate and/or enforce rules and regulations designed to place responsibility for the cleanliness and decency of business properties on proprietors;
6. Promulgate and/or enforce rules and regulations designed to require landlords to bring rental properties up to at least minimum standards of decency;
7. Promulgate rules and regulations to prevent the parking of large commercial vehicles in the area;



8. Secure regular and continuing City maintenance and cleaning of the streets and alleyways in the area;
9. Sponsor or provide incentives for City agencies and organizations to initiate massive campaigns designed to clean up and rehabilitate the area;
10. Take steps to eliminate rats, etc.; and to eliminate the conditions in which they breed; and
11. Take whatever steps are required to prevent vacant buildings from becoming unsightly hazards.

### III. LAW ENFORCEMENT AND POLICE PROTECTION

Police attitudes and practices with respect to residents of the subject area must be accorded a great deal of serious review. At present, no significant efforts are being made to cast the officer in the role of friend to the community. Instead, he is seen by residents as being a bully who responds slowly when acting on their behalf, but quickly--and often abusively--when acting against them.

All too often, area residents have been met with offensive and superior police attitudes, while being led to believe that so long as the occurrence takes place within the community and between its residents, there is no cause for great concern. They have been exposed to the tendency of persons in responsible positions in the Police Department to unjustifiably cast ugly reflections on their community. An example of this kind of indiscretion can be found in a recent page one story reported by a ranking police official to the Alexandria Gazette (see appendix). The story

reported to the newspaper was, on its face, susceptible to great doubt and was, in fact, questioned by officers whose investigation had suggested irregularities. Nevertheless, a school community and an ethnic group were singled out in the subsequent article although no credible evidence to support such reporting existed.

Recommendations:

To narrow the gap presently existing between the community and police, the following suggestions are made:

1. That affirmative efforts be made to recruit additional Negro police officers and cadets.
2. That care be taken not to unjustifiably bring public discredit to the community or its inhabitants.
3. That officers be required to extend the common courtesies to all law abiding citizens.
4. That officers respond as quickly and act as vigorously to enforce laws within the community as is done outside.
5. That some type of community relations division be established to engage in activities, programs, etc., of their own or of already existing community organizations whereby direct and unofficial person-to-person contact with parents and youth of the community can be accomplished. Officers should be made regularly available to participate, speak, or lecture to various community groups. Little understanding can be accomplished when officers merely show up, but make no contribution.

#### IV. RECREATION

While we are aware of the steps being taken to improve recreational facilities, present programs, both in terms of quality and quantity are sorely lacking. At present, little has been done to provide meaningful recreational activities for girls, generally, and young adults, ages 16 to 25, of both sexes. More physical facilities, including swimming pools, for day and night use are needed in areas of high density. Better staffing, again in terms of quality and quantity, are required.

It is not at all difficult to understand that where budgetary considerations are required, City Government may be compelled to cut corners occasionally. However, it is our view that recreation is so basically a City function that it cannot be given such cavalier treatment as to be rendered ineffectual.

#### Recommendations:

Here we make the following recommendations:

1. Construction of more playgrounds and indoor centers with programs designed to attract broader participation;
2. Creation of an advisory group staffed by representatives of the various public and private agencies working in recreation to aid in establishing, promoting, and coordinating recreational activities;
3. Greater use of public school indoor and outdoor facilities;
4. Increased and easily accessible swimming facilities;



5. Initiation of City-wide programs to enlist the efforts of various private bodies in a program of quality recreation;
6. Special efforts to provide attractive recreation programs for a) girls, and b) young adults;
7. Special summer enrichment programs for all age groups;
8. The closing, and designation of certain streets as "play streets" staffed by trained personnel; and
9. The hiring of more recreation employees.

V. CITY EMPLOYMENT

In the recent past, the City of Alexandria has sought to promote the idea that its employment practices are fairly administered. Yet, the most casual observer is able to dispose of that claim with little more than a cursory look at the present staffing of City Government. The explanation offered for current staffing practices tends to suggest that fair employment practices prevail, but the absence of applications or of quality applicants militates against the employment of any more than a token number of minority group persons in positions of substance and responsibility. Consequently, at this writing, only three Negro citizens are on the payrolls of the City police and fire departments combined. A similar sparsity of minority group employees at more substantial positions is also noted. Simultaneously, we are able to observe that the numbers of Negro employees increase in direct proportion to decreased

responsibility and remuneration. Ironically, past discrimination in public schools makes teaching an area to which this observation does not apply. Further, in some of the lower salaried positions generally occupied by minority group persons, the practice is such that although these persons are regularly employed, they are classified as part-time and thus denied the opportunity to participate in programs designed to extend important fringe benefits.

We attribute such failures as are outlined above to the refusal of City Government to take affirmative steps to seek out, inform, and recruit those to whom employment in responsible positions had, until recently, been totally closed.

Recommendations:

We recommend the following:

1. Distinctions which deny fringe and other benefits to certain City employees should be abolished;
2. Prevailing policies regarding the employment of minority group members should be re-examined with respect to both competitive and appointive positions, at all levels of government;
3. Salary standards for lower echelon employees should be re-evaluated; and
4. To remedy the denials wrought by past discrimination, extra effort must be made to expose minority group members to opportunities to work in Government positions.

VI. HOUSING

A very serious problem facing Alexandria's Negro citizens, at every economic level, is the nonavailability of safe, decent, sanitary housing. The unwillingness of City and State Government, financial institutions, private builders and other segments of the home building industry to provide housing that is available to Negroes is in large measure responsible for this condition.

In the 16th Census Tract, most housing is considered to be less than sound, while 23% is actually dilapidated and deteriorated. Twenty-six percent is overcrowded. There are reported to be approximately 600 Negroes on the waiting list for public housing. While the yearly public housing turnover rate for whites in Alexandria is approximately 50%, the rate for Negroes stands at 7.5%. Today, while most white families can find homes at almost any place in the City, it is virtually impossible for a Negro, regardless of his financial ability, to find a home or apartment for sale or rent anywhere in the City, other than in deteriorating areas, overcrowded slums, or potential slum neighborhoods. In addition, City Government has in recent years contributed heavily to a major decline in land available for Negro occupancy by converting land previously occupied by Negroes to its own use for schools, parks and highways without remedying the deficiencies thereby created. Consequently, Negroes seeking decent and sanitary living conditions in a residential neighborhood are often forced to move out of the City.



A greatly neglected aspect of the Negro housing problem is the almost complete unavailability of suitable housing for middle and upper income Negro families who choose to reside in Alexandria. This shortage is primarily accounted for by the conditions which have arisen as a result of residential segregation. The closing of entire communities to Negro families who can afford to live there promotes the increased concentration of Negroes in the few areas open to them, deprives those of modest means of badly needed living space and forces many potentially valuable and talented persons to leave Alexandria in search of better housing. An example of the effect of the housing squeeze in Alexandria may be seen in the fact that among Negro professionals, two of three principals, 60% of the teachers, twelve of nineteen ministers, 6 of the 7 doctors and the eight practicing lawyers live outside the City. For far too many Negroes who grew up in this City, a decision to move "up" in Alexandria has, of necessity, become a decision to move "out" of Alexandria.

Recommendations:

In order to alleviate the critical housing situation facing Negro citizens of Alexandria, we urge that the following steps be taken:

1. That an aggressive program be instituted immediately aimed at encouraging local nonprofit groups and experienced developers to sponsor and develop sales and rental housing using Federal housing tools such as 221(d)(2), 221(d)(3), rent supplement, and any other programs which may be instituted as a result of the Housing Act of 1968.

2. That City Council immediately enact an effective, comprehensive fair housing ordinance.
3. That the City Attorney be instructed to prepare and present to City Council an ordinance establishing a procedure whereby condemned dwellings can be transferred to a designated non-profit group as trustee for the owner, thus allowing the necessary repairs to be made and the dwelling made habitable at the expense of the owner. An example of this procedure can presently be seen in the operation of Chicago Dwellings Association in Chicago, Illinois.
4. That the Department of Housing and Community Development be instructed to begin planning the redevelopment of all substandard neighborhoods with a reuse emphasis on low and moderate income sales and rental housing.
5. That the Department of Housing and Community Development be instructed to present to City Council for their consideration within 30 days a development plan for all publicly and privately owned vacant tracts that lend themselves to the construction of low and moderate income housing. Special consideration should be given to the present Chinquapin Village and Stevenson Avenue sites.

#### VII. COMMUNICATION

Inasmuch as we have observed that City Government is all too often unaware of perfectly obvious public needs; and that the average citizen is more often thwarted in his attempts to find appropriate channels through

which such need can be communicated, we offer the following final two suggestions:

1. That City Council and the various administrators strive to achieve closer personal contact with the flesh and blood problems and needs of all areas of the City, even when pressures are low and elections distant; and
2. That consideration be given to the creation of a paid public office to be filled by one whose functions would be in the nature of those of an Ombudsman.



## CONCLUSION

It is sincerely hoped that City Council will find in this message the same feelings of hope and duty which inspired it; that it will work to make it understood by all citizens that to the struggles and frustrations of less fortunate citizens are tied the hopes and dreams of all citizens; and that in the long run, the gains that can be realized of the concern and assistance for which we have here pleaded will make of Alexandria a truly All-America City in which all Americans find opportunity and fair play and of which all Americans can be justly proud.





AN OPEN FIELD





AN UNPAVED PLAY AREA

Rocks and glass abound here. Residents of the area report many instances of injury to children.



A BREEDING PLACE FOR RATS AND DISEASE

Formerly a part of the City's drainage system, stagnant water is now left to present a health and safety hazard to the community. Note, on the opposite page, the boards which children cross to reach the school in the background.









WHERE DO THEY WALK?

The blockage of pedestrian walkways is so frequent that photographers captured three such occurrences in a matter of minutes. See next two photographs.









A CHOICE CORNER LOT

As of 4/10/68, this lot, easily 120' x 90' in size, was being permitted to jeopardize the health and safety of the community from which it detracts





#### HOUSES FOR SALE

These houses, thought vacant for months, have been permitted to remain open to serve as "hangouts" for all kinds of disreputable persons. Note the stove on the front porch. Note also, on the opposite page, the invitation, extended by the open door, to appliances which could serve as "death traps" for children.









A CORNER CHURCH

This building has been allowed to remain in use in spite of its obvious shortcomings.



#### CORNER TRASH

This trash has been permitted to occupy this street corner site of a razed building for months. When this photo was taken, trashmen had just passed.