

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: APRIL 29, 2015

TO: CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE OLD AND HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA DISTRICT BOARD OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

FROM: HISTORIC PRESERVATION STAFF

SUBJECT: POTOMAC YARD METRORAIL STATION UPDATE

ISSUE

The OHAD BAR is being asked by City Council to comment on a preferred alternative for the Potomac Yard Metrorail Station and to identify potential impacts on historic or cultural resources.

RECOMMENDATION

That the BAR support Alternative B as the preferred station location; to require construction access from Potomac Yard rather than the George Washington Memorial Parkway (GWMP) (Construction Access Option 2); and to include mitigation to the GWMP as discussed in the staff report on the preferred alternative to City Council (Attachment 1).

BACKGROUND

Potomac Yard represents one of the most significant redevelopment opportunities for the City with the potential to achieve a vision for an urban mix of uses near transit. The construction of a Metrorail station has been the basis for transportation and land use planning for Potomac Yard for many years, most recently in the 2010 North Potomac Yard Small Area Plan. The selection of the preferred location of the Metrorail station is an important decision for the City from a transportation, land use and economic development perspective. Discussions regarding this large and complex City project have been ongoing for many years and the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) is the last step in this process before City Council can select a locally preferred alternative for the Metrorail station in Potomac Yard.

Building a new Metrorail station is the key to transforming Potomac Yard into a smart-growth, urban, walkable community with a mix of office and residential uses, high-quality retail, entertainment, and new parks. A new Metrorail station will help accommodate growing transportation demand in the Route 1 corridor within the existing roadway network and will provide additional benefits to the City and region. The DEIS identified and discussed four potential locations identified as: Alternative A, Alternative B, B-CSX Design Option, and Alternative D (Figure 1). The DEIS discusses myriad variety of potential impacts for each location as they relate to cultural and natural resources, visual impacts, environmental impacts and the like. The most relevant sections for the BAR are the chapters on Visual Resources (3.8) and Cultural Resources (3.9) and are attached (Attachment 2).

The complete DEIS can be found here:
www.alexandriava.gov/potomacyard/default.aspx?id=56902#DEISDocument

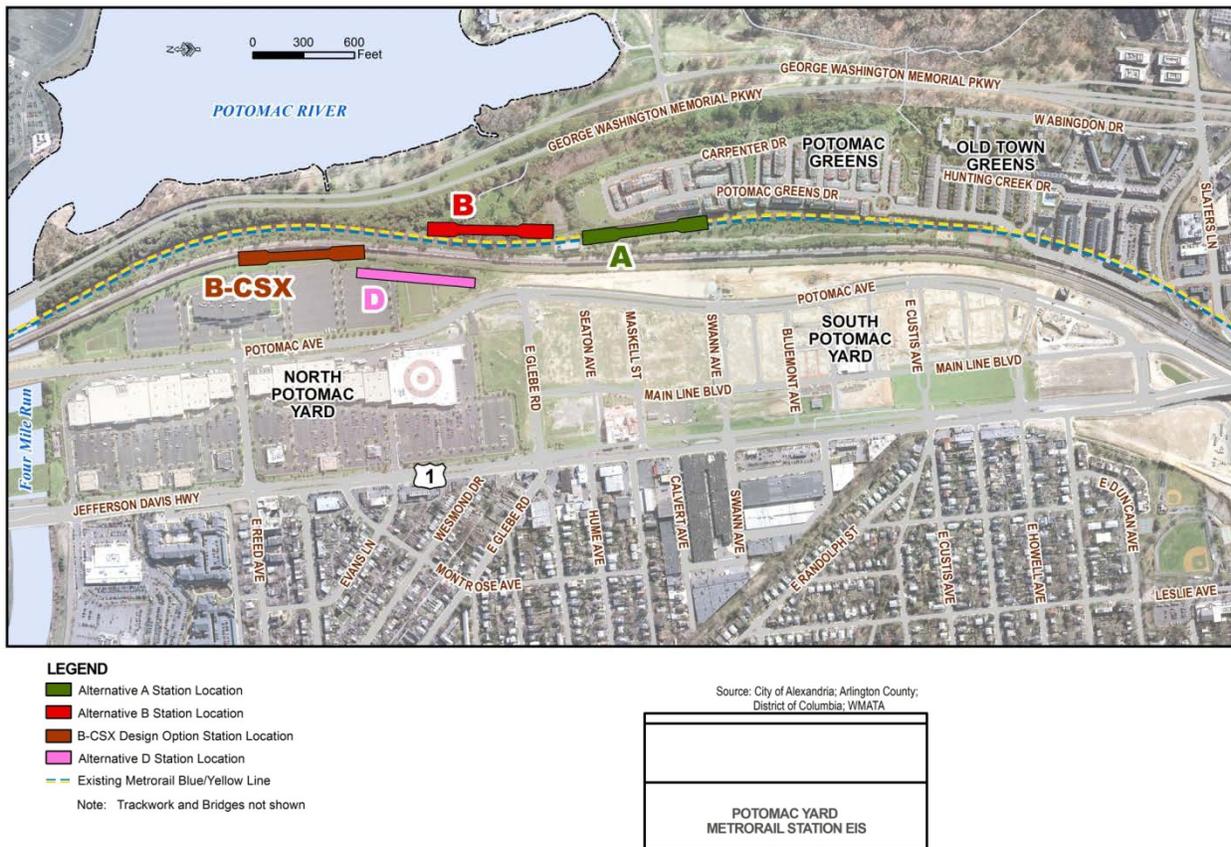


Figure 1. Aerial showing four potential station locations.

DISCUSSION

Preferred Alternative

Selecting the most appropriate location for the Potomac Yard Metrorail station, closest to the most potential development and office uses in particular, is critical to the success of Potomac Yard. The North Potomac Yard Plan recommends that the station be located closest to the highest density. The Plan also allows additional density if the station is constructed in the Alternative B location (and requires the developer to contribute to the cost of construction), and therefore yields the most economic benefit to the City. Alternative B locates the Metrorail station within 0.25 mile of the most new development and creates the best opportunity for smart growth and a walkable, compact, urban community. Staff has determined after much analysis that Alternative B best balances land use and transportation, is consistent with City plans, and places the station in the best location to serve the largest number of potential Metrorail riders. As noted in the Staff Report to City Council, several Boards and Commissions, as well as the Potomac Yard Metrorail Implementation Work Group (PYMIG), are involved in the review process to provide comment and public input for matters related to their purview.

BAR staff finds that the most significant impact to a historic and cultural resource that would be affected by a Metrorail station, at any of the alternative location sites, would be related to the view from the George Washington Memorial Parkway (GWMP). As noted in Chapter 10 of the Zoning Ordinance, one of the primary purposes of the Old and Historic Alexandria District is “to safeguard the city’s portion of the George Washington Memorial Parkway and other significant routes of tourist access to the city’s historic resources by assuring that development in and along these transportation arteries be in keeping with their historical, cultural and traditional setting.” Additionally, a driving force in the creation of the historic district in 1946 stems from the City’s commitment set forth in the 1929 agreement with the National Park Service that any development on what was then the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway “will be in keeping with the dignity, purpose and memorial character of said highway.” Therefore, while it was never envisioned in 1929 that a structure as large as a Metrorail station would be constructed, it is the BAR’s duty to adhere to this agreement and safeguard the memorial character of the GWMP.

Although all of the Metrorail station alternatives would be visible from the GWMP to some degree, only one location is located within the Old and Historic Alexandria District: Alternative B. Therefore, only Alternative B, if selected as the preferred alternative, would be subject to BAR approval for the station design.

Potential Mitigation

The City recognizes the value of the GWMP to Alexandria’s character and City staff have worked closely with NPS staff throughout the DEIS process to develop a framework for the mitigation of impacts to the GWMP that will result in a net benefit to this important cultural and historic resource. The phrase “net benefit” is used because it indicates that in order to implement Alternative B, mitigation must result in improvements to the GWMP beyond its existing condition. Some of the elements contained in the City’s proposal include:

- Limitations on height and other restrictions (on items such as materials, signage, and lighting) on portions of Potomac Yard adjacent to the GWMP;
- Design of the station and landscape, including planting and berms, to mitigate the visual impact of the station on the GWMP;
- NPS participation in the design process for the station; and
- Exchange of approximately 7,000 square feet of GWMP property and 1.71 acres of the Greens Scenic Area Easement for full ownership by the United States of most of the remaining parkland covered by the easement (approximately 13 acres).

Although the BAR will only review the station design if Alternative B is selected, the location and design of the new station and associated elements visible from the GWMP, such as pedestrian bridges, must be appropriate and compatible with the Old and Historic Alexandria District, no matter which alternative is selected. Any station alternative must have a minimal visual impact on historic and cultural resources, specifically the GWMP, and design of the new station should be sensitive to its context. There are ways to mitigate the visual intrusion of a Metrorail station through conscious design choices, materials and the integration of landscaping. Therefore, for any of the station alternatives, it will be essential to support a compatible and contextual design that picks up on architectural features and materials found along the GWMP.

Construction Access

When considering the impacts of each alternative, the BAR should consider not only the long-term impacts but also the short-term impacts, particularly as they relate to construction. Alternative B has two possible construction routes—one with construction access directly from the GWMP and the other with construction access from Potomac Greens as well as Potomac Avenue. As there is a viable alternative to construction access from the GWMP, staff recommends that the BAR only support a scheme that requires access from other ways beside the GWMP.

Section 106

As this project is considered a federal undertaking, the lead federal agency is required to undergo the Section 106 review process. The applicant has coordinated a group of interested consulting parties which includes representatives from the City and specifically historic preservation staff, as well as other interested parties. At this time, the only historic, or potentially historic, resources located within the defined Area of Potential Effect are Potowmack Crossing on West Abingdon Drive and the GWMP. Should the BAR find that any other historic, or potentially historic, resources be affected by this project and process, it is recommended that they be identified at this time.

ATTACHMENTS

- 1— Staff Recommendation for Preferred Alternative
- 2— Relevant DEIS Chapters on Visual Resources and Cultural Resources