

June 3, 2016

From: Jeremy Fretts, Member, North Potomac Yard Design Advisory Group

To: North Potomac Yard Design Advisory Group
Department of Planning and Zoning, City of Alexandria

Re: Comments for June 6 meeting, regarding May 17 design direction

All:

I'm sorry I will not be able to join you on Monday evening. I am travelling in some of America's *other* great historic towns – Savannah and Charleston. Appropriately, I am arriving by train.

After our last meeting, I participated in the workshop and presentation on May 17, and have continued to reflect on the two options that were emerging at that point. My comments below – loosely organized -- reflect items I hope you will be looking for in the most recent iteration presented on June 6.

First, I want to reiterate that I think the City of Alexandria is fortunate to have top-notch teams engaged in this project. The developer team, staff, and advisory group are exceptionally qualified. That said, I do think it is important that we not accept anything that's merely "good enough." There are many sites for which "better than average," is an acceptable outcome. This is not one of those sites. In my opinion, our end result must generate an urban form that is not only financially viable now, but also resilient, world-class urbanism that will endure for the next 150+ years. The urban form we are engaged in creating should outlast the buildings that will first occupy it.

Again, our goal is not to hinder JBG from building a viable, profitable, successful project (and we want them to be able to do so in time for Metro opening.) Our goal is to make sure that we are stewards of good urbanism in a city first platted by George Washington, which remains one of the most celebrated towns in America.

Process

In our initial meetings in May, the plan presented by the developer had a couple glaring issues that needed to be addressed--namely the re-routing of Potomac Avenue, and the absence of a civic Metro plaza. Focusing on these obvious items, however, led us to spend very little time on a more nuanced review of how this plan compares to the original Small Area Plan we are charged with "refining." I believe we are obligated to review more carefully how each of the two proposed schemes responds to the themes in the 2010 Urban Plan Framework.

I do not want to delay progress, but we may need to extend our review period a little.

Vistas & Corridors

I am supportive of the currently proposed plans' (May 17) mix of open and "terminated" vistas. It is my opinion that this represents an improvement over the original Small Area Plan, which was too focused on preserving open vistas to the park at every intersection. Some of the best "vistas" in an urban area are the vistas terminated by *something*-- usually something vertical. To that end, I support a plan which mixes both open vistas of the park, and vistas terminated by architectural elements. "Deflected views" are also a powerful element of urban form -- and the most recent refinement of East Reed Avenue generated in the 5/17 workshop Option 1 combines both a deflected view--leading to the park--with a vista terminating on a strong anchor retail tenant. I would suggest not only that we support the proposed configuration of this intersection, but that we in fact *require* a vertical, tower-like element at this terminus.

City Fabric

Both the plan as initially presented and Option 2 as presented on 5/17 are too insular. We need to consider and champion connectivity to the larger site, and discourage a fully-contained retail pod. Metro Plaza, in particular, needs to be conceived as a part of the larger neighborhood off-site to the south and west.

I will continue to advocate for "quirky," non-rectangular elements at select locations in the plan as was suggested by the original Metro Square. Many of the world's most beloved public realms occur in the quirky intersections where the grid is broken or an odd intersection occurs. Further, quirky intersections and slightly-offset streets invite exploration, and draw pedestrians into exploring one block after another. (incidentally, the "weirdest" intersections tend to be the safest -- drivers are so confused by them that they slow down and pay attention.) For this site, I think "funnel" designs--in broad terms--can help draw people into the new retail street and celebrate Metro.

Crime prevention through environmental design

While I am no expert on Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), this is one of the considerations that inform my concerns about certain elements of the plan.

- A Potomac Park which does not front the street has fewer "eyes on the street"
- A self-contained retail street is also more enclosed, and thereby less inherently safe

Potomac Avenue

I appreciate the concerns about the width of Potomac Avenue, but I still tend to prefer locating Potomac Avenue along the park (Option 1). I think we need to better understand the options for the street section in both schemes. (i.e. how wide it is, and how it can be "tamed"). Properly designed, even a wide street can become pedestrian friendly and urban. In general, parks edged by streets suggest "urban", while buildings surrounded by greenspace suggest "suburban." There

are of course good and bad examples of both, but I think we need to take care in the messages we are sending through the design, and the default assumptions we might fall into.

In Scheme 2, much more study is needed on how the back side of the buildings interacts with Potomac Park before I would be comfortable with this approach. If this scheme is pursued, I think the AG and the City need to have a fairly strong stance on the nature of the public-private separation and engagement. There are many creative ways to solve the problem -- but that's part of the issue, that there are MANY ways to resolve it, some of which may be undesirable.

Once again, my apologies for not being able to participate with you at this meeting. What an exciting project we have before us! Have fun.