Housing Master Plan
Advisory Group Meeting
Thursday, December 2, 2010 6:30p.m. – 9 p.m.
Jefferson Houston School

Meeting materials are available online at: www.Alexandriava.gov/housingplan

Meeting Summary

Introduction
Kyle Talente, RKG Associates, welcomed everyone, reviewed the ground rules for the meeting, then introduced the speaker.

Presentation: Design Tools for Affordable Housing
Jim Constantine, LRK. The presentation can be found online at www.alexandriava.gov/housingplan

Each section of the presentation was followed by a Q and A and comment session. Notes follow below. Question (Q), Answer (A) and Comment(C). John Catlett, the Director of Code Administration, and Faroll Hamer, the Director of Planning and Zoning, participated in the Q & A. Please note that comments reflect individual statements by AG committee members and/or members of the audience.

ACCESSIBILITY
Q: Does the City have the latitude to deviate from state requirements for the percentage of various levels of accessibility?
A: From the building code perspective, no, the City must require the minimum. But the City can require additional levels/percentages of accessibility through the SUP process ~~and through bonus density~~ (I do not think this is correct only affordable units). In all cases, all new development must meet the minimum requirement for Type A and Type B accessibility.
C: The cost estimate provided for adaptability in the presentation is not necessarily relevant, since all new developments over 20 units are already required to be 100% adaptable?
C: The cost seems particularly high, given that most of the construction changes required are to relatively low cost areas such as hallways and entrances.
Q: What is the cost of converting adaptable units to accessible?

A: Don't have that cost available immediately, but it is significantly less substantial since the infrastructure is already in place in the walls.
Q: Does the City use 2006 or 2009 building code requirements?
A: The city currently uses 2006.
Q: Is the City looking at the issue of off-gassing and healthy buildings as an accessibility issue in addition to physical and sensory issues? Would like to know what the costs are for addressing off-gassing, smoking, ventilation, etc.
A: This issue is receiving growing attention from the US Green Building Council and other organizations. The HMP team will look at available costs and tools for incentivizing "healthy homes."
Q: Is there anything in the building code that addresses these types of issues?
A: Not yet, but it is moving in that direction.
C: Sounds like the need for accessible units is greater than the minimum requirement, and at the same time that the demand may be less than the supply. Likelihood is that not enough units priced at levels those in need can afford.
C: There is a lack of choices in adaptable units (but features can be added)
C: Many townhomes are not accessible, and are very difficult to adapt. The rules that are implemented should take the housing product into consideration.
C: People with disabilities are often very low income, and simply can't afford new units. Experience shows that accessible units for people at or below 20% of AMI is where the need is greatest. HMP should look at what is the need for accessibility at what level of affordability and at what bedroom size? After getting that data, need to develop a strategy to better deliver more density at more affordability for those who need it. Density can help bring the cost of developing accessible/adaptable units down (per unit). Development incentives should be implemented for the production of low income accessible.

ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS

Q: Does the City currently restrict building on top of a garage?
A: There are height restrictions on accessory buildings (such as sheds), as well as setback issues. Variances are a possibility, but current zoning allows only a single family on a single lot. The definition of family and dwelling unit in the zoning ordinance are fairly rigid.
C: Seems like a win-win: Accessory units are a financial benefit for the owner, and provide some additional affordable housing.
A: City tried to adopt an accessory dwelling unit policy in the 1980's, but was not successful. It was very unpopular at that time, but may have a greater chance of passing in today's economy.
C: Accessory units as a strategy were largely supported by the committee when put to an informal poll, though some voiced concerns:

- May not be worth "fighting" for if it was turned down in the past, and if the return (# of affordable units) is not very high.
- Existing neighborhoods can't withstand additional parking and traffic.

C: Units over a garage may be unhealthy (carbon monoxide leakage)

C: VA offers a rent reduction to those who rent to households with disabilities – could be a further incentive for renting accessory units to households with disabilities.
C: seem to be a much better value, rather than constructing new units.
C: The current $2000 tax credit for buying an accessible unit would also likely apply to an accessible dwelling unit.
C: There are possible financial ramifications for existing first trust loans on single-family homes which add an accessory dwelling unit

TRANSIT ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

C: The City already implements parking maximums in TOD areas. City also requires underground parking and has done parking counts in underground lots in Arlington that demonstrate that they are often underutilized – meaning not so many spaces are needed. Building fewer underground spaces means more money for other important items such as affordable housing units. The City has been fairly successful in negotiating with developers to build as little parking as possible at TOD. The City also encourages reserved spots in garages for zip car options and bike storage. And the City is currently looking into bike-sharing.
Q: Is there still developable land at Metro Stations?
A: Yes, but much of it is already approved. Potomac Yard will be rebuilt with housing above commercial (~11M SF) and will include a metro station; Existing metro stations also have significant development that is approved but not built, including Eisenhower Ave (~6M SF) and Landmark/Van Dorn (12M SF); all three sites will include affordable and some public housing; most existing developments provide shuttle buses to the Metro Stations as a benefit.
Q: Does building a limited amount of parking spaces at TOD sites really work?
A: Yes, people tend to self-select, and choose these locations specifically so as not to have to drive in congestion.

MAXIMIZING MIXED USE

Q: Does current zoning allow for this?
A: Yes, in certain zones.
C: Might want to make mixed-uses allowable at more locations
C: Mixed-use housing is a great opportunity, and would be very desirable for residents to live close to needs and amenities, but this is often very expensive real estate.
A: In many cases, units above shops can be smaller and more affordable; also can use the DSUP process to allow mixed use, and in return to require affordable housing.
C: There may be environmental concerns about units above shops (such as dry cleaners); would have to mitigate impacts

INFILL DEVELOPMENT

C: There is a limited number of infill sites in Alexandria; could require a relaxing of the code to allow development of substandard lots or subdivision in order to facilitate affordable housing infill.
C: Infill is problematic because of the loss of green space

C: Infill does not seem realistic – it would be a challenge to get units affordable
C: Air rights could be sold, like in Arlington
C: Land at religious institutions should be considered if the fit is right.
C: Losing green space is a major concern – some members would rather build up than go out (not all members agree)

ADAPTIVE RE-USE

C: Major challenge with adaptive reuse is City's current zoning. In the case of Safe Haven, having to add a roof deck for required open space added a substantial cost—meeting requirements may impact potential affordability
C: Units above shops or in previously vacant areas add a safety factor ("eyes on the streets")
C: Old Health Department could be an adaptive re-use opportunity
C: Need to get private developers on-board
C: Need to find the right partners
C: Can explore historic tax credits potential with adaptive reuse
C: The West End has potential

Meeting adjourned at 9:00PM.