

Remarks for Waterfront Planning Meeting, April 23, 2009
From: Old Town North Community Partnership

My name is Christa Watters and I am speaking tonight as a member of the Old Town North Community Partnership.

Our organization has been active for many years in working toward the improvement of Old Town North as it changed from a largely industrial part of town to a mixed use residential and commercial area. We continue to work toward making our part of town a beautiful place to live and work. Hence our intense interest in this Waterfront planning process.

The Waterfront Plan dated 1982 that is available on the City's Web site posited a 20-acre waterfront park stretching from Daingerfield Island in the North to Jones Point in the South. The plan acknowledged difficulties in gaining continuous pedestrian access to the waterfront along the entire stretch, and this remains true today. We would like to see that goal achieved under the current plan.

That 1982 document urged careful planning for the development of the North Old Town waterfront, noting that the area is "located adjacent to two of the City's greatest assets – the Potomac River and Old Town." That remains true today. Those of us who live and work in Old Town North cherish our proximity to the River, its vistas and open space. We offer the following points for your consideration:

1. We hope this planning process will respect the spirit of the original plan, which envisioned public access and a mix of activity nodes with passive parks aimed at providing open space for recreational use. We now know more about environmental and ecological principles, and this knowledge reinforces the importance of maintaining green open spaces. We should also remain aware of the power of this river and the need to respect the 100-year flood plain.
2. Our enjoyment of the river is also premised in part on activities such as restaurants, shops, markets, marinas, and other uses that enhance and give life to the waterfront. Additional uses that come to mind include a place for residents to easily put in their personal small craft such as kayaks and canoes, or a seafood market on weekend mornings.
3. While the waterfront is for the enjoyment of everyone – all residents of our city as well as visitors – we must particularly respect the needs and rights of the residents of Old Town and Old Town North as we consider redeveloping Robinson Terminal and similar sites. We should respect zoning and height limits, remember to provide for a visually interesting skyline, and avoid huge massed structures that visually block extensive stretches of the waterfront. And any uses that increase vehicular traffic should address the need for adequate parking that does not visually intrude on the cityscape.

4. Along with creating a long-range plan that incorporates the City's extended vision of how our waterfront should be, we should focus parts of this plan quite specifically on those areas where current redevelopment opportunities exist, such as Robinson Terminal North, or where previous development has not achieved the optimal uses envisioned – such as at Canal Center, which was intended for mixed use but has remained a largely sterile, if handsome, office complex. The hoped for restaurants and other retail uses anticipated there have for the most part not materialized. Until the area gets more pedestrian traffic from people other than local office employees, growth of that sort is unlikely.

5. One last point: In considering the waterfront in long-range terms, we recommend that you include the site of the Mirant Power Plant. While it may still be there for some years, we believe that ultimately, this obsolete facility will be closed down. For that eventuality, we believe it would be prudent to draft an alternate zoning plan, even if just in broad outlines.

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