



City Hall  
Alexandria, Virginia

*Alexandria Waterfront Committee*  
*Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities*  
*1108 Jefferson Street*  
*Alexandria, Virginia 22314*



March 23, 2011

Ms. Faroll Hamer, Director  
Department of Planning and Zoning  
City of Alexandria  
City Hall  
301 King Street, Room 2100  
Alexandria, VA 22314

Dear Ms. Hamer:

This letter summarizes the position of the Alexandria Waterfront Committee on the Draft Waterfront Small Area Plan recently circulated by the Department of Planning and Zoning for public review and comment. The Waterfront Committee recommends that the Draft Waterfront Plan and the concepts it proposes should be amended as described in this letter and formally adopted as a study by the Planning Commission and City Council, with further community discussion before adoption of Zoning Ordinance text amendments and incorporation of the Waterfront Small Area Plan chapter into the City's Master Plan.

The Waterfront Committee believes that a new Waterfront Plan is necessary to guide future development and civic investments. The Committee has long advocated for development and enactment of a new Waterfront Plan, and believes it is essential to establish guidelines for future development before any specific development is proposed. Today's Waterfront does not meet its full potential to serve residents or improve the City's economic vitality. Existing infrastructure is aging and needs to be revitalized for the area to be competitive with neighboring waterfronts. A Waterfront Plan will assist in addressing these shortcomings.

The Draft Waterfront Plan, as proposed, will renew the Alexandria Waterfront over the next 30 to 50 years. The Plan successfully accomplishes several key objectives urged by the Waterfront Committee and other interested stakeholders. Notably, it creates a continuous pedestrian pathway along the entirety of the City's Potomac River frontage. It seeks to integrate nuisance flood mitigation measures in vulnerable areas with sensitivity, and it conforms to existing Chesapeake Bay watershed development guidelines. It comprehensively incorporates the Alexandria Waterfront Public Art Proposal prepared by the Public Art Committee of the Alexandria Commission for the Arts and the Alexandria Waterfront History Plan developed by the Alexandria Archaeological Commission. It balances new areas of economic vitality with quiet places for contemplating the water.

However, the Waterfront Committee believes that there are four key issues that must be adequately resolved before this Plan is legally adopted and implemented by the City:

- What are the ramifications of extending piers into the Potomac River? Are such structures technically feasible; will they withstand the pressure of the river flow and will they negate the current dredging problem rather than add to it? Is the proposed design for the new pleasure craft marina appropriate?

- Can we achieve the parking plan?
- Are the proposed locations of hotels appropriate, will such use be permitted by the National Park Service (NPS), and by what methods will the City influence the ultimate build-out of these sites?
- Is the proposed Waterfront Park Building—including its proposed use, height, and scale—appropriate?

In addition to these major issues, we have concerns about other elements of the Plan, as proposed:

- The apparent continued delay to the implementation of the Windmill Hill Park Plan
- Utilization of the existing Food Pavilion
- Proposed attractions for children and families
- Programming and management of the Waterfront

Failure on these points would severely impact the outcome of the Plan; therefore, the Committee advises that more should be done to resolve these uncertainties before the Plan is legally adopted in the form of text amendments to the Zoning Ordinance and incorporation of the Waterfront Small Area Plan chapter into the City's Master Plan. Adoption of the Plan as a study at this time will formally endorse key concepts expressed by the Draft Waterfront Plan, continue the forward momentum of Plan development, and permit adequate time to address major issues before legal adoption.

We further advise that its authors distinguish between concepts integral to the Waterfront Plan and elements that are merely illustrative of potential implementation approaches. As presently drafted, it is often not clear where concepts end and implementation approaches begin.

We offer these constructive comments in an effort to improve the comprehensiveness and completeness of the overall Plan. The Plan must have broad-based community support, and resolution of these issues is essential to achieve buy-in from the community at large. We have previously noted that compromise and discussion are required to achieve a Waterfront Plan that may be supported by all Waterfront stakeholders, and remain optimistic that we can find common ground. We look forward to collaborating with City staff and fellow stakeholders in the months ahead to address these points.

### **Waterfront Extension and Marina**

The Draft Waterfront Plan proposes two major extensions into the Potomac River, including piers at the foot of King and Cameron streets and a pleasure craft marina off the current Robinson Terminal South location. Notably, a potential legal obstacle to extension of pierheads was resolved when the District of Columbia Office of Planning determined that the City of Alexandria is not required to obtain District permissions to construct structures located inside the pierhead line, thanks to a 1945 Congressional act that states that the D.C./Virginia boundary follows the “present established pierhead line” and that “wherever the location of the pierhead line along the Alexandria Waterfront is altered, then the boundary shall follow the new location of the pierhead line.”

We note, however, the significant expense involved in constructing and maintaining these structures when the case for expansion into the waterway—instead of better utilizing frontage shoreward (westward) of the existing shipping channel—has not been made. We are concerned by the significant financial liability the City may encumber to maintain a Potomac shipping channel eastward of the existing natural channel just off the existing pier head line. In addition, the ease with which the City will achieve the necessary permits and permissions from relevant federal agencies—including the U.S. Department of Interior and the Army Corps of Engineers—remains somewhat unclear.

Currently the City spends several millions of dollars on a regular basis dredging the approaches to the existing City Marina berths. The financial ramifications—including construction costs and ongoing maintenance expenses—for the proposed marina designs are not clear. The Waterfront Committee is concerned that the proposed “horseshoe” shape for the commercial marina might attract even more silt into the central area and so it is recommended that more research be undertaken to examine this issue.

The Plan envisages a new marina area off the current Robinson Terminal South. The Waterfront Committee has two concerns regarding this structure. The first concern is about the technical feasibility of such a structure in a river that can surge from meteorological events and can carry large tree trunks and, at times, ice floes. The second concern is about the economic feasibility of the structure. Whereas the management details are for future discussion, the Waterfront Committee’s own research suggested a minimum size of 150 berths before a marina can become viable. The same research also showed that a marina of such a size would require storage areas and proper transfer points for families to load and transition from land vehicles to watercraft.

Similarly, increased commercial traffic will require storage facilities for boat operators.

### **Parking**

The Draft Waterfront Plan cites the Old Town Area Parking Study, which found that “issues with Old Town parking relate to proximity, rate, and availability and not to overall capacity.” The study—and the Draft Waterfront Plan—recommends better management of the existing supply to serve present and future demand for parking in Old Town. If this indeed the case, we urge the immediate implementation of the recommendations of this chapter, including wayfinding, valet parking, and shuttle services aimed at maximizing existing parking capacity, coupled with enhanced enforcement of existing parking policies in adjacent residential areas. Such a pilot program will mitigate existing parking issues, and provide a model as implementation of the full Waterfront Plan unfolds. There is no reason to wait for further development of the Waterfront to address the presently existent parking issues. Let us test this concept during the spring and summer of 2011 to see if it works.

As the Plan is implemented, we note the importance of careful timing of improvements that would impact the supply and demand for parking. As an example, the parking lot on the Strand (often referred to as Dandy’s parking lot) is shown in the Old Town Area Parking Study as the most heavily utilized parking lot in Old Town. It currently serves Dandy Restaurant Cruises, Chadwick’s Restaurant, and the Union Street Public House, plus several merchants and other attractions in the area. This spring it will also serve the new Virtue Feed and Grain gastro pub under construction in the former Olsson’s building at 106 South Union Street, which was recently approved by the City without requirements for additional parking. Any future restaurant and hotel developments in this vicinity will place further demands on this lot and other parking facilities in this area. Therefore, before the existing parking along The Strand is redeveloped into parkland, detailed study to ensure adequate supply in this area will be warranted.

### **Hotels**

The Plan will support commercial land uses, which activate the Waterfront and help to pay for the Plan. A key consideration, however, is what types of commercial uses are appropriate, as the Plan proposes hotels for a significant portion of developable Waterfront areas. Existing Settlement Agreements between the City, NPS, and the property owner allow both Robinson Terminal sites to be developed as waterfront commercial mixed use. At present, these agreements specifically exclude hotel uses from these locations. However, the Draft Waterfront Plan proposes a hotel on each of these sites. The Draft Waterfront Plan also proposes increased density at the Robinson Terminal sites—consistent with the respective Settlement Agreements, but greater than

permitted by existing zoning. The Committee recommends that NPS be approached to see if it would modify existing Settlement Agreements to permit hotel uses.

Careful consideration must be given to whether any of the major Waterfront redevelopment sites—Robinson Terminal North, Robinson Terminal South, and the Cummings/Turner Block—should be developed as hotels. The challenge is to carefully balance residential, commercial, and visitor-oriented Waterfront development, including civic and cultural attractions for both visitors and residents. Too much residential development may give the Waterfront the feel of being a private area primarily for residents, while too much commercial development may leave the area vacant at night. The Waterfront Committee would not wish to see the area suffer from blight as a result of overly prescriptive planning.

The Committee also requests clarification regarding controls over the design quality of these sites. Will design guidelines be enforced by the Board of Architectural Review, Planning Commission, and City Council using existing development approvals processes, or will additional oversight apply? The relationship between guidelines and governance is crucial, as both policy and process will ultimately determine the City's success influencing private development to achieve the Plan. The Waterfront Committee recommends that the City link increased density on these sites with enhanced control over design quality.

### **Waterfront Park Building**

We appreciate that the land swap with the Old Dominion Boat Club resulting in Fitzgerald Square is facilitated by the construction of parking on a portion of Waterfront Park, and are very supportive of the resulting public plaza at the foot of King Street that results. We hope that negotiations between the City and ODBC succeed in achieving this outcome. We question, however, the need to construct a restaurant building on top of the re-located ODBC parking area. Alternate options for the proposed Waterfront Park building include covered parking with a green roof offering additional passive recreational open space; space for cultural institutions; a smaller restaurant or targeted retail; or a surface parking lot tastefully landscaped. We are not convinced that a restaurant building at Waterfront Park is in order.

### **Windmill Hill Park**

The Draft Waterfront Plan reaffirms the plan for Windmill Hill Park adopted by the City in 2004. To date, however, none of this plan has been implemented, and unfortunately it is not addressed in the draft Plan's implementation chapter. Furthermore, compared to the City's approved FY11 Capital Improvement Program (CIP), the proposed FY12 CIP reduces funding for the Windmill Hill Park Bulkhead project from \$5.5 million to \$4.0 million in FY16 and FY17. We suggest that active implementation of the languishing plans for this park be integrated with the Plan's implementation strategy for the Waterfront's core area, and that proposed improvements be fully funded and constructed in a timely manner.

### **Food Pavilion**

The Draft Waterfront Plan does little to address the current state of the Torpedo Factory Food Pavilion at 5 Cameron Street, other than to point to the current master leaseholder's plans to refashion the facility to house two sit-down restaurants. Its present quick-service restaurants serve an important segment of Waterfront users that may be lost if the entire facility is converted into upscale, sit-down restaurants. We encourage the City, as the owner of this facility, to engage in proactive negotiations with the Food Pavilion's present master leaseholder to consider short- and long-term strategies to improve the economic vitality of this deteriorating asset that balance Waterfront dining and retail offerings. This facility would be an ideal home for an Eastern Market-style food hall or small-scale retail, and should not be permitted to continue to languish.

**Children and Families**

The Plan proposes a play structure for children at the north end of Oronoco Bay Park, as well as a model boat basin in the proposed park area east of the 200 block of The Strand. However, these are the only explicit mentions of facilities for children, and we are concerned that the proposed Oronoco Bay Park location, in particular, is too close to existing residential. We note that attractions for children may encompass more than conventional playground equipment. Ideally, Alexandria’s Waterfront would integrate public art and historical interpretation in a manner attractive to children. We underscore the importance of making the Waterfront and interesting place for children and families as their interest is likely to drive return trips to the Alexandria Waterfront.

**Programming and Management**

The Plan describes the creation of a special entity for management of the Waterfront. Indeed, the Waterfront has many different objectives that do not neatly align with the City’s present organizational structure for serving the Waterfront. Consideration of a one-stop, cross-functional entity for managing core Waterfront areas would facilitate the City’s stewardship of this asset, and improve the experience of Waterfront residents, businesses, and visitors. We are eager to engage in further discussion with the City regarding this concept following adoption of a Waterfront Plan.

We note, too, the importance of programming and other activities to make the Waterfront an interesting place. The Plan is silent on the role of programming and the associated costs. The Plan should also address the maintenance of existing assets, some of which will reach the end of their useful lives within the horizon of this Plan.

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We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Draft Waterfront Plan. If you should have further questions regarding this matter, please contact me at 202-365-2927 (mobile) or [natemacek@hotmail.com](mailto:natemacek@hotmail.com). On behalf of the Alexandria Waterfront Committee, thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,



Nathan M. Macek, Chair  
Alexandria Waterfront Committee

- CC: Alexandria City Council
- Alexandria Planning Commission
- James K. Hartmann, City Manager
- James Spengler, Director, Department of Recreation Parks and Cultural Activities
- Karl Moritz, Department of Planning and Zoning
- Nancy Williams, Department of Planning and Zoning
- Jack Browand, Department of Recreation Parks and Cultural Activities
- Jim Hixon, Department of Recreation Parks and Cultural Activities
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