

William A. Schreiner, Jr.
207 N. Royal Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

May 19, 2009

Via Email

James K. Hartmann
City Manager, City of Alexandria
Alexandria City Hall
301 King Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

Re: *Mowing of Northwest Bastion and Alterations At Historic Fort Ward*

Dear Mr. Hartmann:

I am writing to you as both an Alexandria resident and as the President of the Friends of Fort Ward, a group of Alexandria residents and residents of surrounding communities dedicated to supporting Historic Fort Ward.

Initially, the Friends note – with appreciation – that the City of Alexandria has started to respond to the very serious issues raised recently about overcrowding and other problems with the use of Fort Ward Park. The commitment of funds to start an archaeology study of the gravesites located in the Park itself signals to us that the City will act on its core value of historic preservation. The Friends have participated in the City's early planning efforts to resolve the other conflicting civic values in the Park, and while there is much more work to be done, the Friends look forward to working with the City and other stakeholders to create a brighter future for Fort Ward and the surrounding Park.

In the meantime, however, the Friends must write regarding two more urgent matters that cannot wait for the City's planning process to play out, and that came to our attention last week. Both of these issues have detrimental consequences for the preservation of the historic fort and the ability of the Museum to conduct daily operations related to historic site maintenance, public programs and other Museum activities that serve the public. The board of officers of the Friends and I learned of these issues after compiling updated information on Fort Ward projects in preparation for the annual meeting of the Friends of Fort Ward on May 28.

The first issue concerns the ***mismanagement of the mowing arrangements in the restored Northwest Bastion of the fort***. Imagine my surprise and embarrassment when I attended a Museum-sponsored program on Saturday, May 16 that focused on tours of the historic fort, and saw when we reached the bastion that the grass was about 30 inches high and had not been mowed in weeks! There were first-time and out-of-town visitors

on this walking tour, and this was their unfortunate first impression of a major City of Alexandria historic property. The un-mown bastion was not only unsightly, but required tour participants and other visitors to literally wade through the grass with difficulty. The participants were clearly at risk for deer tick infestation, and the thick matted grass itself provides cover for rodents (an issue in the Park in the past). Moreover, this situation poses a serious preservation threat to the ground cover and erosion prevention in this area of the fort. I have attached photographs taken on Saturday, May 16, which demonstrate the problem.

In investigating why the bastion was in this condition, I learned that the Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities Department (“RPCA”) had initially issued a work order to the company that mows the bastion, but later changed course and stopped that order on Friday, May 8.¹ The Museum staff learned of this stop order from the contractor on Tuesday, May 12, and by then the mowing could not take place because of scheduled contract work to paint the bastion revetment during the week. Although we have recently experienced a week of rain that prevented the bastion from being mowed, there is no excuse for RPCA affirmatively canceling mowing maintenance that was planned to accommodate another maintenance project, a public program, and, indeed, regular contracted care of the bastion which is integral to its preservation.

The Museum staff has diligently supervised many erosion control projects in the restored bastion over the past few years, and thousands of dollars in special projects and erosion control funding has been directed to establishing strong turf and preventing erosion. The Friends of Fort Ward contributed \$8,000 to this effort several years ago, and last year, the organization presented the City of Alexandria with a preservation award for its efforts in restoring and preserving the historic fort. We continue to believe that in the long term Alexandria is an excellent steward of its historic sites – including Fort Ward – and an example to its peers. In the short term, however, this recent mismanagement of mowing in this high-profile section of the historic fort is a disgrace, threatens to undermine many fine preservation efforts that have been made at Fort Ward, and provides ample breeding grounds for deer ticks and rodents.

I request an explanation of the mowing responsibilities and frequency of mowing maintenance for the historic fort that I can convey to the Friends membership at the upcoming meeting on May 28. I would also suggest that what is needed for the future is a transfer of mowing funds from RPCA to the Office of Historic Alexandria so that contracted mowing in the bastion can be coordinated and managed by the Museum staff to ensure that this current situation does not recur and that modern preservation practices are followed.

The second issue I am writing about concerns ***the apparent decision by City officials and RPCA to discontinue the Museum’s use of a room that has served for many years as a climate-controlled facility in the nearby maintenance building.*** For the past three years, The Friends of Fort Ward have closely monitored issues related to this Civil War

¹ The “stop work” order is especially puzzling given that RCPA staff were recently able to mow other parts of the Fort outside of the Northwest Bastion.

reproduction building that currently serves as a public restroom facility, RPCA park manager office, and a storage area for Museum equipment and supplies. You will recall that in 2006 and 2007, the Friends wrote City officials about resolving a number of problems involving this multi-use building, including the removal of an inappropriately installed air conditioner unit for the park manager's office, the removal of modern intrusions that conflicted with the period look of the building, and the repair of deteriorated woodwork. The nature of some of these problems was serious enough that the Virginia Department of Historic Resources forwarded a letter to the City Manager's Office reinforcing the need to uphold preservation standards at a National Register of Historic Places site. The Friends remain grateful that the City resolved these issues, but as others remain – notably the future use of the facility – we have continued to request updates on the building.

The Friends are therefore disturbed to learn that the Museum is being directed to relocate its equipment and supplies to an amphitheater storage room on the other side of the park and/or a storage facility on Payne Street so that RPCA staff can convert this space to a lunch room and have the sole use of the maintenance building. The majority of the Museum staff has worked for years in a totally inadequate, crowded, dimly lit and damp workspace in the Museum basement with a small table that doubles as lunch space and a work table. It is doubtful that staff workspace in this basement would meet modern fire code regulations for employee safety standards. Last year, when the maintenance building storage room was upgraded with air conditioning, volunteers from the Friends of Fort Ward assisted the Museum staff by removing items from the Museum's crowded basement and transferred them to the storage facility. The Friends were working with the Museum to upgrade shelving in the storage room, but were informed that the project would need to be deferred until an upcoming restroom renovation is completed. Now, we are being informed that the Museum will likely lose this valuable space.

The proximity of the maintenance building to the Museum makes this storage space essential for staff to quickly retrieve tools and equipment for fort maintenance, supplies for programs and exhibits, and other items necessary to daily operations. Also, unlike the amphitheater space, it has heat and air conditioning which is needed to preserve many items stored there such as paint, exhibit cases, shop merchandise and high quality Civil War reproduction objects that are used for programs, some of which the Friends of Fort Ward have purchased for the Museum. Inadequate storage of these materials will yield a waste of the Friends' and the City's investment in these materials. I understand that RPCA is already using the amphitheater area for equipment storage and City vehicles, so the rationale for moving the Museum from the maintenance building space and disrupting its operations does not make sense.

I request an explanation of why the Museum is being evacuated from this space. I cannot emphasize enough how the impact of moving the Museum from this storage space will be significant and detrimental to Museum operations. Less work will be done in an efficient manner because tools and supplies will not be easily accessible, and at a time when the City is trying to be as operationally efficient as possible and prepare for the Civil War Sesquicentennial, it seems shortsighted to undermine OHA's ability to care for

the historic site and present public programs. This decision could even impact on the Museum's ability to be re-accredited, which I understand is a process that will begin in the next year. In the Friends' view, neither the historic site nor the public will be served by this decision.

The Friends continue to believe in the City's record of careful stewardship of its historic facilities, and we continue to believe the City can solve both these two urgent matters and the longer-term problems that have been identified at Fort Ward Park. In April, the Friends were asked by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Civil War Preservation Trust to nominate Fort Ward for placement on Virginia's list of endangered historic sites. We declined to do so, primarily because: 1) we think the City is proud of its historic treasures and is very capable of managing them and resolving issues brought to its attention; and 2) such a listing could have unintended consequences for the status of Fort Ward on the National Historic Register. We are informed, though, that both of these organizations are closely watching the developments at Fort Ward, and we have no control over actions they may choose to take on their own with regard to the Fort.

On behalf of the Friends of Fort Ward, thank you for your attention to my comments and inquiries, and I look forward to your response. If you would prefer to respond to me by e-mail, please do so at bill89915@yahoo.com. If I can answer any questions you may have about this letter, please feel free to call me at 202.778.1858 during the day or 703.836.5307 in the evenings.

Sincerely,



William Schreiner
President, Friends of Fort Ward

cc: Hon. Mayor William Eulle
Hon. Members of City Council
Deputy City Manager Mark Jinks
Rich Baier, RCPA
Lance Mallamo, OHA
Friends of Fort Ward