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Alexandria Waterfront Committee

Waterfront Small Area Plan Potential Talking Points
May 26, 2011

DRAFT – For Discussion Only

The Alexandria Waterfront Committee is a unique City-wide assembly of Waterfront stakeholders established by City Council in 1989 to study and advise the City on Waterfront issues. We represent a wide cross-section of the community and have the best interests of the Waterfront at heart. Members include City residents, businesspersons, and members of selected business associations, non-profit organizations, and City commissions.

We believe a new Plan is necessary to guide future development and civic investments. We have long advocated for development and enactment of a new Plan, and believe it is essential to establish guidelines for future development before any specific projects are proposed. Today’s Waterfront does not meet its full potential to serve residents or improve the City’s economy. 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.

Over the past two years, the Waterfront Committee, its members, other community groups, and the public at large have collaborated to create the Plan recently endorsed by the Planning Commission. Throughout the plan-making process, the Waterfront Committee offered critical feedback on multiple drafts of the Plan.

- In May 2009, the Waterfront Committee offered its [Waterfront Plan Principles](#), a 91-point summary of the elements we thought critical to include in any Waterfront Plan. Many elements of these principles were incorporated into the Waterfront Plan’s goals and objectives.
- In February 2010, the Waterfront Committee, Department of Planning and Zoning, and Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Activities jointly sponsored Marina Night, an interactive community discussion on the City Marina and future maritime needs of the Waterfront. This event culminated in the Waterfront Committee’s [Marina Vision Statement and Briefing Paper](#). This paper helped shape the Plan’s proposed marinas, which provide a waterside gateway to Alexandria that separates pleasure from commercial watercraft.
- In June 2010 the Committee provided Planning staff 10 pages of [comments](#) on the Concept Waterfront Plan. This letter carefully outlined our critique of the early draft relative our Committee’s May 2009 Waterfront Plan Principles. These comments were addressed by staff as the Plan evolved over the next six months.
- In March 2011 we again offered [detailed feedback](#) when the draft Waterfront Small Area Plan was released, with particular concerns regarding implementation the Plan’s parking strategy; the scale and tenor of redevelopment; the proposed Waterfront Park restaurant building; and the implementation timeframe for completion of the long-delayed Windmill Hill Park Plan. These recommendations were generally addressed by staff in advance of the May 3 Planning Commission meeting, although the Waterfront Committee has some lingering concerns, summarized at the end of this letter.

- 48 • In April 2011 [we wrote](#) the Planning Commission urging the proposed Fitzgerald Square to remain
49 the Plan’s vision for the foot of King Street. The Planning Commission responded by amending the
50 Plan to state that Fitzgerald Square remains the proposed alternative for this location.
51

52 The proposed Waterfront Small Area Plan will renew the Alexandria Waterfront. It accomplishes several key
53 objectives urged by stakeholders:
54

- 55 • **The Plan balances new areas of economic vitality with quiet places for contemplating the water.**
56 The Plan respects existing neighborhoods, many of which are the product of past Waterfront
57 planning efforts. It proposes re-development only in those locations with existing commercial and
58 industrial uses.
59
 - 60 • **The Plan provides new open space and enhances existing parks.** A vast portion of the Plan’s
61 acreage includes renewed open space. Waterfront parking lots would disappear, replaced by new
62 parks and a public plaza. Long-stalled plans for Windmill Hill Park would be realized, as well as
63 improvements to Oronoco Bay Park. Founders Park would remain passive open space.
64
 - 65 • **The Plan is unique to Alexandria.** Its design concepts are generally compatible with the historic
66 tenor of Old Town and the City’s long heritage of maritime and commercial waterfront activity. It
67 has the “look and feel” of the best of what’s already here, and would continue to differentiate
68 Alexandria’s waterfront and the Old Town business district from others in the region.
69
 - 70 • **The Plan provides an anchor in Fitzgerald Square,** which would serve as a central hub tying
71 together disparate pieces of existing Waterfront amenities with Old Town’s commercial artery. The
72 square would provide a celebratory sense of arrival on Alexandria’s Waterfront both from the
73 landside and the waterside. Without the central anchor that Fitzgerald Square provides, other
74 worthwhile public improvements contemplated by the Plan will not have the meaningful focal point
75 that is required to link them together.
76
 - 77 • **The Plan provides enhanced connectivity and preserves and enhances Waterfront vistas.**
78 Redevelopment of the existing Robinson Terminal sites and city-owned parcels along The Strand
79 would provide the much sought-after continuous pedestrian access along the waterfront, enabling
80 riverfront walks from Jones Point Park north to Marina Towers and beyond. This element of the Plan
81 would make productive use of little-used existing public parks at street ends, and provide the public
82 sweeping views of the Potomac.
83
- 84 **The Plan proposes a strategy for addressing parking challenges in the vicinity of the**
85 **Waterfront core area.** The Plan recognizes the negative impact that parking may have on
86 neighborhoods immediately adjacent the Waterfront and proposes that any redevelopment include
87 off-street parking sufficient to meet projected needs. The Plan also recommends better management
88 of the existing supply to serve present and future demand for parking in Old Town, monitored by a
89 new parking implementation group.
90
- 91 • **The Plan interprets the history of Alexandria, and provides a stunning vision for incorporating**
92 **the arts.** The community can be proudest of two resident-led efforts the Plan incorporates: the
93 Waterfront Public Art Proposal and the Waterfront History Plan. The Public Art Proposal, if realized,
94 would make Alexandria’s Waterfront a showplace for the arts, including public, fine, and performing
95 arts, most notably by developing an art walk parallel to the river. The History Plan envisions a

96 Waterfront that recognizes the significance of Alexandria’s place in American history, incorporating
97 historic preservation and interpretive measures along the Waterfront to preserve existing architectural
98 treasures and re-tell the fascinating history of Alexandria to future generations.
99

- 100 • **The Plan maintains Alexandria’s working waterfront, with expanded facilities for commercial**
101 **boat services and a relocated pleasure boat marina.** Proposed piers would provide space for
102 existing excursion services to expand, as well as for new operators to enter the Alexandria market.
103 The Plan relocates the water taxi dock to facilitate access to King Street, and provides a prominent
104 docking location for tall ships and other historic vessels. The Plan separates pleasure boats from the
105 commercial marina, mitigating the conflicting maneuvers present at the current marina. It proposes to
106 enlarge the City Marina to an economically-viable size, which could wean the Marina from City
107 subsidies and provide a more secure location for private vessels.
108
- 109 • **The Plan sensitively integrates nuisance flood mitigation measures.** As April showers once again
110 demonstrated, the Alexandria waterfront is susceptible to nuisance flooding on a regular basis. The
111 City’s recent flood mitigation study outlined a cost-beneficial approach to mitigating nuisance
112 flooding of up to 6.0 feet, such as the April 16, 2011 storm that resulted in flood levels of 4.77 feet.
113 But while original engineering designs featured stark flood walls that would separate Alexandrians
114 from the river, the Waterfront Plan takes a subtle approach, integrating barriers into proposed
115 infrastructure and landscape improvements. This combination of form and function allows flood
116 mitigation to enhance rather than impede public access to the Waterfront.
117
- 118 • **The Plan provides a strategy to fund improvements without increasing taxes or establishing a**
119 **business improvement district.** The Implementation chapter of the plan demonstrates a method of
120 covering the cost of public improvements to the Waterfront with revenues generated from
121 redevelopment of existing industrial and underutilized commercial parcels. The boutique hotels
122 proposed for these locations that would be enabled by the Waterfront Plan’s zoning ordinance text
123 amendment are among the Alexandria’s most productive revenue-generating land uses, of benefit not
124 only to the Waterfront but to the City in general.
125

126 Without a comprehensive plan for the Waterfront area, these improvements could not be accomplished in a
127 strategic, harmonious way.
128

129 The Waterfront Committee believes that there are several key issues to be resolved as the Plan is
130 implemented by the City: the Fitzgerald Square concept; the Waterfront extension and Marina design; the
131 Parking Implementation Plan; and the Waterfront boutique hotels. These points are summarized below.
132

- 133 • **Fitzgerald Square Concept:** The Waterfront Committee strongly disagrees with proposals to
134 relocate the proposed Fitzgerald Square from the foot of King Street to Prince Street or elsewhere
135 along the Waterfront. We agree with the Planning Commission that the original proposal for
136 Fitzgerald Square is the preferred, optimal design, and believe that it has the potential to be not only
137 the centerpiece of the Waterfront, but one of the City’s crown jewels. Realizing this vision, however,
138 will require leadership by City Council. We encourage the City to continue negotiations with the Old
139 Dominion Boat Club, especially when reasonable alternatives exist. However, in no instance should
140 the King Street right-of-way be blocked by a relocated parking area.
141
- 142 • **Waterfront Extension and Marina Design:** The Draft Waterfront Plan proposes two major
143 extensions into the Potomac River, including piers at the foot of King and Cameron streets and a

144 pleasure craft marina off the current Robinson Terminal South location. The financial
145 ramifications—including construction costs and ongoing maintenance expenses such as for
146 dredging—of the proposed marina designs are not clear.

147
148 The Plan envisages a new marina area off the current Robinson Terminal South. The Waterfront
149 Committee has two concerns regarding this structure. The first concern is about the technical
150 feasibility of such a structure in a river that can surge from meteorological events and can carry large
151 tree trunks and, at times, ice floes. The second concern is about the economic feasibility of the
152 structure. Whereas the management details are for future discussion, the Waterfront Committee’s
153 own research suggested a minimum size of 150 berths before a marina can become viable. The same
154 research also showed that a marina of such a size would require storage areas and proper transfer
155 points for families to load and transition from land vehicles to watercraft.

156
157 Similarly, increased commercial traffic will require storage facilities for boat operators.

- 158
- 159 • **Parking Implementation Plan:** The Draft Waterfront Plan cites the Old Town Area Parking Study,
160 which found that “issues with Old Town parking relate to proximity, rate, and availability and not to
161 overall capacity.” The study—and the Draft Waterfront Plan—recommends better management of
162 the existing supply to serve present and future demand for parking in Old Town. If this indeed the
163 case, we urge the immediate implementation of the recommendations of this chapter, including
164 wayfinding, valet parking, and shuttle services aimed at maximizing existing parking capacity,
165 coupled with enhanced enforcement of existing parking policies in adjacent residential areas. Such a
166 pilot program will mitigate existing parking issues, and provide a model as implementation of the full
167 Waterfront Plan unfolds. There is no reason to wait for further development of the Waterfront to
168 address the presently existent parking issues. Let us test this concept during the summer of 2011 to
169 see if it works.
 - 170
171 • **Waterfront Boutique Hotels:** The Plan will support commercial land uses, which activate the
172 Waterfront and help to pay for the Plan. A key consideration, however, is what types of commercial
173 uses are appropriate. The Plan calls for re-zoning three locations to permit boutique hotels with no
174 more than 150 rooms each, described as a quiet use without the traffic, parking, noise, and public
175 service impacts that could result from redevelopment under existing zoning. The challenge is to
176 carefully balance residential, commercial, and visitor-oriented Waterfront development, including
177 civic and cultural attractions for both visitors and residents. Too much residential development may
178 give the Waterfront the feel of being a private area primarily for residents, while too much
179 commercial development may leave the area vacant at night.