

City of Alexandria

Old Town North

Urban Design Advisory Committee (UDAC)

March 2022 Meeting Notes

[DRAFT-PRELIMINARY]

Wednesday, March 9, 2022 at 9:00 a.m.

Hybrid: City Hall, Room 1101 and via Zoom

Recording Link: <https://alexandriava.gov/video/5412>

Date of Draft: April 25, 2022

Committee Members in Attendance:

Stephen Kulinski, Chair (SK)

Thomas Soapes, Vice Chair (TS)

Abbey Oklak, Secretary (AO)

Katherine Bingler (KB)

Theresa del Ninno (TN)

City Staff in Attendance:

Michael Swidrak (MS) P&Z

Catherine Miliaras (CM) P&Z

Stephanie Sample (SS) P&Z

Richard Lawrence (RL) P&Z (Virtual)

Applicant Members in Attendance:

John Savage (JS) Architect representing Perfect Pita

Erica Olds (EO) Perfect Pita

Mary Catherine Gibbs (MG) Wire Gill (Representing PRGS)

Michelle Chang (MC) HRP (PRGS Applicant)

Simon Beer (SB) OJB (Landscape Architect for PRGS)

Carolyn Sponza (CS) Gensler (Architect for PRGS)

Julianna Valle Velez (JV) Gensler (Architect for PRGS)

Bani Amrit Kaur (BK) HRP (PRGS Applicant)

Melissa Schrock (MS1) HRP (PRGS Applicant)

Bud Hart (BH) Wire Gill (Representing PRGS)

John Helms (JH) Christopher Consultants

Others in Attendance (online and in person):

Sara Lavin Community Member

Frances Zorn Community Member

Julia Coggins Community Member

Daniel Straub	Community Member
Brian Boyle	Community Member
John Long	Community Member
Penny Laporte	Community Member
Louise Kenny	Community Member
Christina Mindrup	Alexandria Economic Development Partnership
Agnes Artemel	Community Member
Kathryn Condello	Community Member

INTRODUCTION & OLD BUSINESS

- The meeting was called to order at approximately 9:01 a.m. as the March 2022 meeting of UDAC.
- The Committee considered a draft of the notes for the January 2022 meeting. TS offered a minor technical edit to the draft meeting notes. TS moved to adopt the meeting notes with the amendment, and KB seconded the motion. The meeting minutes were approved 5-0.

NEW BUSINESS

Note: Presentation materials on the below items are located at <https://www.alexandriava.gov/boards-and-commissions/urban-design-advisory-committee-serving-old-town-north>

Presentation of development proposal at 951 N. Fairfax Street (Perfect Pita Addition)

- JS introduced the proposal to expand the Perfect Pita building, noting the history of the site (including the recent closure of the curb cut serving the site), and the request to expand the building footprint of the existing building eastward about 43 feet. The addition will allow for a kitchen area and outdoor dining above (approximately 23 seats) accessed from a proposed stairwell to the roof. JS mentioned the applicant is also exploring outdoor dining in a triangular area to the east of the building and in the sidewalk area to the north of the building.
- JS explained that the location of the new HVAC system is proposed for the rear of the building on the southern property line in the side yard of a townhouse at The Venue development. The applicant is working with the adjacent property developer to confirm the HVAC location.
- JS noted that the proposed addition cannot meet the Old Town North Urban Design Standards & Guidelines (OTNUDSG) standard that requires a 15-foot floor-to-ceiling height for ground-floor retail due to the ground-floor height of the existing building. Additionally, JS noted that the applicant could not meet the minimum building height outlined in the standards to 30 feet based on the existing structure.
- JS stated that the applicant is exploring increasing the height at the parapet at the corner of N. Fairfax Street and Canal Center Plaza to increase rooftop screening and street presence.

Committee members stated their support for the increased parapet height. JS clarified that the proposal to increase the parapet of the proposed expansion would bring the height in line with the existing building's parapet making it a single height between the existing building and the addition. The increased parapet height would allow for additional height in the openings to the covered outdoor dining area that will front Canal Center Plaza.

- JS stated that the applicant was amenable to working with staff on landscaping in the triangular eastern corner of the site where the paved surface area used for loading activities is located. AO stated her support for enhanced landscaping in the triangular open space area at the east end of the site.
- EO noted that the applicant is looking to ensure ADA access on the ground-floor of the building. EO added that the applicant is working on installing a plaque or signage on the building to satisfy the Old Town North Small Area Plan (OTNSAP) requirement for historic interpretation for development sites.
- EO noted that the hours of the Perfect Pita will be extended after construction based on a question from KB.
- JS confirmed that the dumpsters will be enclosed and will be accessed by a sliding door per question from TN. The sliding doors will be located adjacent to the Canal Center Plaza sidewalk.
- SK asked City staff if the applicant has addressed staff issues or questions. Staff stated that the applicant has been working with staff to address any site design issues prior to Planning Commission review.
- SK stated his support for the proposed addition and that most of the OTNUDSG standards do not apply to a project with such minimal floor area.
- **KB motioned for support of the proposal. TS seconded the motion. The motion passed 5-0.**

Informational Update on the upcoming Development Standards and Guidelines and Design Excellence Standards for the Potomac River Generating Station (PRGS) Coordinated Development District (CDD)

- RL provided an introduction to the informational update. RL stated that the OTNUSDG adopted by City Council in 2017 outline that the design standards and guidelines relating to the PRGS site would be developed at the time that the CDD is created for the site. The applicant is planning on CDD approval by City Council in July.
- MC introduced members of the applicant team and the timeline of the development of the PRGS CDD.

- CS provided a site design overview for the committee, including the proposed open space program, the flexibility in the future mix of uses, proposed building heights and activation of the ground plane with areas of retail.
- RL outlined City staff's proposal for the implementation of design review standards for the PRGS site which is to be reviewed and approved by City Council in July. In the staff proposal, the applicant will choose for the upcoming development special use permits (DSUPs) for the site that they meet either an amended OTNUDSG or a set of Design Excellence Standards. The amended OTNUDSG will reduce the existing standards and guidelines to those that are relevant to the PRGS site with updated language.
- RL stated that in lieu of the seeking consistency with these amended standards and guidelines, the applicant may seek to meet separate Design Excellence Standards that will permit design flexibility for projects if the proposed development meets specific pre-requisites that ensure a high standard in building and site design. RL noted that staff will review the pre-requisites for projects that seek approval via the Design Excellence Standards.
- RL outlined the review responsibility for UDAC for projects in the PRGS CDD site. UDAC will apply the amended OTNUDSG or the Design Excellence Standards (after staff pre-requisite review) if the latter path is sought by the applicant in the initial conceptual stage of review for future DSUPs on the PRGS site.
- Staff stated that it will draft the Design Excellence Standards and amended OTNUSDG for the PRGS site in the spring and present to UDAC. The Standards and the amended OTNUDSG will be included in the CDD approval package for Planning Commission and City Council to review and potentially approve in June and July, respectively. Staff confirmed that UDAC will have input on the drat Standards and amended OTNUDSG based on a question from SK.
- KB asked if the applicant requests if either the Design Excellence Standards or the OTNUDSG are utilized for a given DSUP project. Staff confirmed that the applicant requests either path, pending staff review of the Design Excellence Standards prerequisites if that path of approval is desired. MC noted that the applicant will determine the approval path for the future DSUP projects after CDD approval.
- TN asked if the new Standards and amended OTNUDSG will require setbacks for additional height based on the proposed additional height for the site. RL stated that the amended OTNUDSG will continue to require a variety of building heights per block while the Design Excellence Standards will take into consideration a variety of heights per block.
- MC stated that the applicant is planning on using different architects for the future building/block DSUPs based on a question from TN.
- KB noted concerns with the proposed connections to and from the PRGS site based on the projected traffic impacts and advocated for the study of additional connections from the

site to the street grid. MC noted that the applicant wants to enhance the porosity of the PRGS site and is cognizant of the need to increase site connections and discourage cut-through traffic. TS added that impacts to and improvements of Slaters Lane and connecting portions of the George Washington Memorial Parkway were considered with the Old Town North Small Area Plan process and are critical for the applicant to consider. MG noted that the applicant has been coordinating with the National Park Service on discussing improvements to the Parkway at Slaters and Bashford lanes.

- AO advocated for UDAC’s role in reviewing the CDD submission prior to City Council review and approval, stating that reviewing the conceptual design plan is within the purview of UDAC’s urban design review and sets up the framework for further review. KB and TS agreed with AO’s statements. MS stated that staff will follow up with UDAC on the Committee’s role on CDD design review and review of the Infrastructure DSP that follows the CDD approval.

Other New Business

- KB provided the Committee and staff with a printout of an article from the Alexandria Times (see Attachment below) arguing for a reconsideration of the application of bonus density and height on projects in Alexandria. KB specifically mentioned Old Town North, where the utilization of bonus density for both the provision of affordable housing and for arts and cultural anchors can be utilized jointly. KB and TS argued that Old Town North planning area has seen growth that has outpaced what was anticipated at this point in the OTNSAP.
- Staff responded that applicants have been providing development proposals per the OTNSAP and are able to utilize the Zoning Ordinance tools that permit the use of bonus density in exchange for providing either affordable housing and/or arts and cultural anchors. Staff also discussed the holistic approach in considering the proposed height and density for the PRGS site and its relation to the public benefits package to be provided by the applicant, including those derived from employing additional density for arts uses and affordable housing, and also for parks and neighborhood amenities.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 10:20 a.m.

ATTACHMENT: ALEXANDRIA TIMES ARTICLE

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ALEXANDRIA TIMES

Our View

Build affordable housing while honoring SAPs

Within 10 days, City Council has moved forward with two large developments that between them will provide almost 1,000 units of affordable housing in Alexandria. This progress follows years of steep declines in housing for residents who make less than the area median income.

It's also heartening to see that in the Mount Vernon-Glebe development, a loan for which was approved by council at the Tuesday night legislative meeting, a quarter of the development's units will be reserved for residents who make less than 40% of the AMI.

While we are not fans of further densifying already-too-crowded Alexandria, we do support projects like these, for several reasons:

- Lack of affordable housing is a real problem in Alexandria, and the arrival of the Amazon and Virginia Tech campuses are going to continue putting pressure on regional housing prices.
- Partnering with nonprofits – Wesley Housing Corporation in the ParcView II project and Alexandria Housing Development Corporation on Mount Vernon-Glebe – maximizes affordable housing at these locations. We think this justifies the bump up in density.
- The range of AMI units within each of these projects means there will be socio-economic diversity on each campus. This is important because it will help more moderate-wage earners, along with low-income residents, be able to afford Alexandria housing.

Yes, we also have concerns about these projects.

One concern is that the number of residents at each project earning 80% of AMI should never be more than those earning 40% of AMI. The 80% mark is not enough below AMI to have them comprise anywhere near the majority of units. It bears watching closely how many residents of each level actually wind up inhabiting these developments.

We are concerned about the added density that large projects like these will bring to Alexandria. That's why there should be an attendant pause in density waivers granted to for-profit developers in exchange for what amounts to a token amount of affordable housing.

Projects like ParcView II and Mount Vernon-Glebe show that real progress can be made on the issue of affordable housing. We need more projects like these, and fewer for-profit developers getting density waivers.

We agree with the adjacent letter from the Alexandria Federation of Civic Associations that the city should not be able to simply ignore small area plans. Alexandria has 20 SAPs, each of which was developed over time with input from residents living within the impacted areas. It is wrong for the city to simply cast these SAPs aside because they are suddenly inconvenient.

We think that new City Manager Jim Parajon has arrived in Alexandria at a crucial juncture in the life of our city, and we are heartened that he has apparently embarked on a listening tour with various groups of city stakeholders. Fresh eyes, attuned ears and hopefully an open mind are exactly what's needed right now in the most powerful person in Alexandria.

We hope that Parajon finishes his listening tour with empathy for the concerns many residents have about environmental preservation and the eroding quality of life that over-densification has wrought. We also hope that he will set about ensuring that Alexandria's government honors the promises it has made to city residents.

Abiding by the city's SAPs, or at least revising them through established processes, would be a great place to start.

Opinion

"Where the press is free and every man is able to read, all is safe."

- Thomas Jefferson

Photo of the Week



PHOTO/ELIZABETH LEGERE

'George Washington' rides in style through the streets of Old Town on Monday during Alexandria's annual parade in his honor.

Your Views

City should follow small area plans

To the editor:

Below is a shortened version of a letter The Alexandria Federation of Civic Associations sent to Mayor Justin Wilson, members of City Council and City Manager Jim Parajon:

The Alexandria Federation of Civic Associations supports the preservation and addition of affordable housing in our city but believes the challenge is to find a balance between density and achieving reasonable housing goals. The federation is concerned that density increases are overriding city-community small area plans. The federation has followed the discussions and decisions about the Heritage and ParcView II projects with increasing concern, and the comments during the Feb. 1 Planning Commission deliberations about the ParcView II project brought these concerns into sharper focus.

It is increasingly apparent that the 2013 Housing Master Plan, combined with the aspirational housing goals established by the Metropolitan Council of Governments in 2020, have now taken precedence over small area plans. Concerns about huge increases in density and its impact on traffic, school capacity, parking, infrastructure, financing and the quality of life for existing residents are quickly dismissed as long as a project contains affordable housing.

As Commissioner David Brown stated at the Feb. 1 meeting, "Affordable housing is the name of the game in the future." The federation does not believe that the residents of Alexandria have had an opportunity to give input into this "game" for Alexandria's future.

The Residential Multifamily Zone, created to allow approval of the Heritage and Olde Towne West III projects, is interpreted by the city to be a "floating zone" across the

SEE **SMALL AREA**

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Your Views

Drivers are not the only safety threat

To the editor:

The city has received a \$45,000 app that allows “pedestrians and bicyclists to report near miss collision incidents with drivers and note ‘dangerous locations.’”

Will the app also allow drivers to report bicyclists who don’t stop at stop signs? Can motor vehicle operators alert the city to pedestrians

who wander into crosswalks while deeply engrossed in their mobile devices without a single glance to the left or right? Will drivers also be able to “navigate the city more safely” as NoVA Families for Safe Streets hopes to do for walkers and bikers? Just asking.

—Joan Hartman Moore,
Alexandria

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city, which diminishes the purpose of SAPs. Neighborhoods vary and the vision for each neighborhood, and the city’s 20 SAPs, reflects these important distinctions.

SAPs are the result of extensive community input to shape the vision for our various neighborhoods. As do many other SAPs, the Landmark Van Dorn SAP states that, “This Plan will serve as the basis for future City Council policy initiatives and actions affecting land use, zoning, capital improvements and programs.”

The plain language of the LVD SAP and other SAPs clearly states that they are not merely “guides,” but rather binding legal requirements for any redevelopment within the area of the respective SAP. The question now is whether imposition of an RMF zone supersedes the provisions of all 20 city SAPs and thereby permits a 3.0 floor area ratio anywhere in the city.

Section 3-1407 of the RMF zone states that “the maximum permitted height of buildings shall be the height as depicted in the governing Small Area Plan.” This strongly suggests that wherever the RMF zone is used, it must comply with the SAP.

The federation is well aware that more affordable housing requires more density. But at what point does density tip the scales to negatively affect the quality of life in Alexan-

dria? How much density do we as a community want employed in our strategy to meet artificial goals for housing?

The question of density is one that we believe must be addressed in community discussions before the RMF zone is further expanded across the city. In recent years, many residents have asked the question, “How much density is too much for our city?” There has been no answer to that question from city staff or our elected officials. Abrogation of small area plans continues to be a common occurrence throughout the city without any city-community discussion of density and its impact on nearby neighborhoods and residents.

Therefore, we respectfully request that the city plan and implement a series of community meetings and discussions to address the question of density in all areas of our city for subsequent input in revising our City Master Plan. Crucial to this discussion is the role that affordable housing, with its two tiers of bonus density, should play in further increasing density.

Alexandria is already the densest jurisdiction in the Commonwealth, and a critical and long overdue community conversation about density should be a priority for City Council before the RMF zone is invoked again.

—Board of directors,
Alexandria Federation
of Civic Associations

The opinions expressed in letters and columns are those of the writers only and do not reflect the views, nor receive the endorsement, of the Alexandria Times.



Ethical Reflections

with Rev. Ian Markham

Driving on sunshine

BY REV. IAN MARKHAM

General Motors’ announcement that by 2035 they will only produce electric vehicles is significant. We are in the midst of a shift from petroleum vehicles to electric; the world is changing.

Granted it will take significant time.

The shift from horses to cars was at one level quite quick. In the United States in 1900, 4,192 cars were sold; in 1912, there were 356,000 cars sold. On another level, it was fairly slow. It took 50 years to completely make the move from horses to vehicles – especially in the realm of farming and public transport – as the wagon delivery system continued for many years.

Naturally, cars provoked significant resentment. Cartoonists made an industry out of capturing the innocent pedestrian avoiding the oncoming “devil wagon.” The affection for the horse ran deep. Horses had done a fabulous job for centuries. Gas vehicles were seen as dangerous and disruptive. As a car drove by, hecklers would yell at the driver, “Get a horse.”

For many the new world was unlikely and undesirable. Yet the shift did happen. There was a social inevitability about the spread of the motor car. The disruption was considerable; from blacksmiths to stable owners and feed producers, an entire industry was displaced by the carmakers and oil drillers.

It will be interesting to see the gradual changes over the next 15 years or so. Gas stations will be converted into electric charging stations. Auto shops will have to shift emphasis as they stock for the simpler electric engine. We will get to a point where the gas station will be the rarity. We will say to each other, “If you drive down Route 66 out to Gainesville, then you can find a gas station.” Gas stations will become a niche service.

At Virginia Theological Seminary, we are in the middle of planning for the future. All organizations are thinking about the significance of this shift from

gas to electric vehicles. All employers are starting to think about the perk of a guaranteed free electric charging point.

But perhaps we can be more imaginative. One idea circulating on the campus of VTS is putting solar panels on all residences. The overwhelming majority of faculty and students live on campus.

The traditional reason for solar panels is to allow the solar panels to provide the electricity to the residence. However, if we add an electric charging point to each residence, then the future electric car can be powered by sunshine.

The economics of solar panels now shift significantly. In addition to providing electricity to the household, it is now your fuel. Every morning there is a full charge ready to get you to the store and to work. The savings are no longer just to your utility bill but also to your gasoline bill.

Notice the argument of this column is not invoking a need to save the planet. The words “climate change” have not been written until now. The argument is economic. Imagine a moment when you can drive to the grocery store, visit friends, make a trip – and it is cheap. Indeed, all you will need is an electric car, which GM promises will be affordable, solar panels and sunshine. No one will miss the experience of the gas station. At this point, the electric car wins on convenience, economics and efficiency.

One anxiety is that the electricity grid will not be able to handle all the electric vehicles. This is why we need our homes to go solar and to expand the grid.

This will be a massive transition, not without problems. We are all going to have a front seat at the show as petroleum shifts to electric. We are all going to be participants. But the slogan “driving on sunshine” has a really nice ring to it. Perhaps it will catch on.

The writer is dean of Virginia Theological Seminary.



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