

The Old Town Crier

The Monthly Newsletter of the Old Town Civic Association, Inc.

Announcing the May Program and Notice of the Meeting
And the Notice for the Annual Meeting

DATE: Wednesday, May 14, 2008
TIME: 7:00 p.m., Socializing with Neighbors; 7:30 p.m., Program
LOCATION: The Lyceum, 201 South Washington Street

PROGRAM AGENDA:

- (1) **POLICE REPORT: LT. JAMIE BARTLETT**
- (2) **NOMINATING COMMITTEE REPORT: CHARLIE HUETTNER**
- (3) **WETLANDS MITIGATION WOODROW WILSON BRIDGE: ALEX LEE**

NOMINATING COMMITTEE REPORT; ELECTION PROCESS AND SCHEDULE

The Nominating Committee is pleased to submit the following slate of nominees for election to terms beginning at the June 2008 Annual Meeting:

OFFICER NOMINEES

		<i>TERM</i>
President	Poul Hertel, 1217 Michigan Court	2008-2009
Vice President	Douglas Thurman, 804 Duke Street	2008-2009
Treasurer	Bert Ely, 901 King Street	2008-2009
Corresponding Secretary	Linda Couture, 505 Duke Street	2008-2009
Recording Secretary	Julie Crenshaw Van Fleet, 26 Wolfe St.	2008-2009

DIRECTOR NOMINEES

At Large	John Gosling, 208 South Fayette Street	2008-2010
North of King Street, West	Christa Lyons, 818 Cameron Street	2008-2009*
South of Franklin	Dianne Hicks, 202 Green Street	2008-2010
South of King Street, West	Vincent "Chip" Carlin, 1302 Prince St.	2008-2010

*Nomination to complete the unexpired term of Mr. Poul Hertel.

CONTINUING DIRECTORS

Central	Timothy Elliott, 422 South Fairfax Street	2007-2009
North of King Street, East	Jonathan Aaronsohn, 821 Rivergate Place	2007-2009

(Messrs. Aaronsohn and Elliott are completing the first year of their two-year terms.)

As provided in the Bylaws, additional nominations of eligible members may be made by nomination from the floor at the May 14, 2008 Members Meeting, if supported by a written petition signed by five Members eligible to vote and accompanied by the written acceptance of each such additional nominee signifying his or her willingness to be a candidate, and received by the Corresponding Secretary (Susan Brita, 420 Princess Street,

Alexandria, Virginia 22314) in person or at her regular address prior to the May meeting. The election will take place at the June 11, 2008 Annual Members Meeting, among the nominees submitted by the Nominating Committee and any additional members nominated from the floor at the May meeting; no other nominations (including nominations from the floor at the Annual Meeting) are in order.

The Committee expresses its appreciation to the Board and other members of the association for their advice and suggestions for its work, and to its nominees for their agreement to stand for service to OTCA and to our community.

2008 Nominating Committee

Charles Huettner, 218 S. Fayette Street (Chairman; West)

Jon Aaronsohn, 821 Rivergate Place (North)

Michael Hobbs, 419 Cameron Street (Past President)

Sarita Schotta, 104 Prince Street (Central)

Jean Antone, 704 S. Fairfax Street (South)

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING

The Annual Meeting of the Members of Old Town Civic Association, Inc., for the election of officers and directors and the transaction of such other business as may properly come before it, will be held on June 11, 2008 at the Lyceum, 201 South Washington Street, Alexandria, beginning at 7:30 p.m. The Board of Directors has fixed May 20, 2008 as the record date for the meeting; all persons who are members of the association as of that date will be entitled to receive notice and to vote at the Annual Meeting.

WETLANDS MITIGATION, WOODROW WILSON BRIDGE

Alex Lee, the Director of Community Relations for the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project will tell us about wetlands mitigation as a result of erecting the bridge.

LETTER TO THE MAYOR REGARDING THE BAR

The following OTCA Board of Director's letter was sent to Mayor Euille and the Council regarding the poor performance of the Board of Architectural Review (BAR).

April 18, 2008

Dear Mayor Euille and Members of the Alexandria City Council:

As you are well aware, the Old Town Civic Association is an essential partner in the civic oversight process to ensure that all the basic principles of historic preservation are adhered to in the Old and Historic District. We have been performing this function for over fifty years. Working to preserve the third oldest historic district in the country, OTCA takes great pride in ensuring that Old Town remains an exemplar of historic conservation and that our historic fabric will be maintained over the years.

Recently, however, the process to ensure our town's unique historic character has come under assault. In the Association's opinion, the Board of Architectural Review (BAR) has made several highly questionable decisions which endanger not only our historic preservation but also have produced long lasting, deleterious effects to our collective

reputations for vigilantly protecting our historic heritage. We can point out numerous examples, but will concentrate on the “worst of the worst”.

Just take a look at the Hotel Monaco on the 400 block of King Street. The facade has at least four paint schemes. The eastern portion of the building is painted a cream color; the western portion of the building is painted battleship grey and in between the hotel frontage is painted fuchsia and a brassy orange: a ridiculous range of colors for one structure. The hotel frontage also includes a “rusted” metal overhang, a metal sign spelling out “Jackson 20”, that apparently advertises the hotel’s restaurant, and recessed white neon lights around the Monaco sign. When this development was first brought before the BAR, the Office of Historic Alexandria (OHA) objected to this frontage on the grounds that it projected an “art deco” façade which is not consistent with this Colonial structure. OHA’s comments were essentially invisible as they appeared at the end of the staff report and were not even addressed in the staff analysis within the basic document. A ruse at best!

Although BAR members were given drawings showing these color schemes, the citizens were not provided the same drawings. Therefore citizens had to rely on the plain pre-sketched vu-graphs shown in Council chambers. A lack of fully colored drawings put the citizens at a distinct disadvantage during the discussion and comment period. After seeing the frontage in person, the President of OTCA asked the City Manager to present our case. He directed us to the Director of Planning and Zoning, whose only reply after hearing our complaints was that the BAR had approved this development; therefore there was nothing she could do. In all fairness, the City Staff has since replaced the old black and white projector in the Council chamber with a new system that is fully color capable and that is tied into the flat-screen displays on either side of the chamber. However, the historic ambiance on one of the city’s most prominent blocks of King Street has been seriously compromised. Now we’ll match the “glory” of National Harbor!

The Small Mall on the 100 block of King Street is the perfect example of BAR decision making which calls into question their consideration of the basic principles of historic preservation. Through a series of developer misrepresentations, unlawful demolition, and lack of oversight by both the BAR and Council, another prominent block in the heart of Old Town now contains a building incompatible with neighboring historic buildings on a major block in the heart of Old Town. In a city nationally known for its dedication to historic preservation, one wonders how these actions could have happened.

The Saul Center on the 600 block of North Washington is of questionable architectural value. The design totally violates the Washington Street Standards, and in fact the poor design was the catalyst for revising the Washington Street Standards in 2001. With its overwhelming massive scale and height, the building is incompatible with the other historic buildings on Washington Street. The Saul Center and the nearby Jefferson Building are blights on the area where the George Washington Memorial Parkway enters the City.

Almost across the street from the Saul Building at 802 North Washington is a historic building that has been boarded up for many years. In fact, the side porch of this structure, along Madison Street, has been enclosed with chicken wire. How did the BAR allow the owner to install chicken wire on a historic building along the George Washington Memorial Parkway, and why isn’t the City classifying this structure as blighted property?

The Chairman of the BAR repeatedly excuses such grievous decisions by rationalizing that the Guidelines for Historic Preservation in the Old and Historic District are “just guidelines”. He belittles the witnesses who come before the BAR with that message. What he should say is that the guidelines were written to guide the BAR in making rational decisions regarding developments in the Old and Historic District. In addition, he should add that there is some flexibility built into the guidelines but in essence they are our bible along with the Washington Street Standards. If the guidelines are meaningless then why do we ask everyone who wants to erect or modify a structure in the Old and Historic District to follow them? Anyone taking office on the BAR ought to have to agree that they will uphold the Guidelines along with the Washington Street Standards. Persistent or flagrant disregard of the Guidelines or the Washington Street Standards by a BAR Member should result in the member’s removal from the Board. In addition, we currently have another member of the BAR who takes great pride in openly opposing the Washington Street Standards. We can’t recall the number of times we have been exposed to the BAR’s staff reports wherein they will list a number of guidelines for denying demolition of a structure having been met, but then turn around and recommend approval of the demolition. Subsequently, the BAR will blindly approve the demolition.

The City Manager and the Director of Planning and Zoning have been asked on a number of occasions to have the BAR Dockets distributed to the public at least a week prior to each BAR hearing. As it stands now the dockets are put out at about 6pm on the Friday prior to the BAR hearing on the next Wednesday. This is totally unfair to the citizens, the Old Town Civic Association and other historic preservation organizations. This results in only five days to read all of the docket items, visit and examine the site, discuss any questions with staff, develop a position on any matter of concern, and then prepare remarks to be rendered during the hearing. An extremely short time, especially for a large number of the citizens who have other sources of employment—to say nothing of the BAR members themselves, who are expected to reach intelligent and rational decisions based on such wholly inadequate notice and preparation. Occasionally no sketches are attached to those reports. In fact, on the 19th of March, at the start of the BAR’s meeting the OTCA President objected that no sketches or pictures were attached so that we could not study what each docket item truly reflected. He reiterated this as he spoke about each individual item; however his comments were totally ignored. The Chairman should have deferred the entire docket. A similar scenario occurred at the following meeting on the 2nd of April.

In recent months a number of “After the Fact” applications have come before the BAR. However, the BAR has not set up a fines schedule; therefore each of these hearings is quite contentious. One of the after the fact requests that was appealed to Council involved an ice house on Commerce Street. The BAR wanted to fine the owner \$25,000; however it was reduced to \$6,000 by Council. The most recent after the fact application was for the unlawful painting of a brick structure located at 900 Prince Street. The owner admitted making a mistake, however the BAR voted 3-3 on whether or not to make the owner take the paint off the building and/or pay a fine. The staff stated that it would have cost the owner \$108,000 to take the paint off or they recommended he pay a fine of \$100,000. With a 3-3 tie the owner “skated” without doing either, as the BAR chose not to reopen the case; therefore, it was summarily approved. All “ties” should be deferred for future consideration by the full BAR, rather than being automatically approved after 14 days. The real stickler in this case was that one member of the BAR stated that he didn’t like the green paint on the bricks and that the owner should repaint the structure a different color.

This case will be appealed but that doesn't change the fact that the BAR again voted wrong.

There are other examples that could be cited; however the purpose of the association's letter is to call attention to our suggested remedies. The beauty and value of our city deserves our constant attention, citizen input, and consistency in application of historic guidelines and principles. We offer to meet with you, staff, and the BAR to discuss further our concerns and suggestions for a more coherent application of basic historic preservation principles. We respectfully request that you consider our call for action. Our attachment offers a series of recommendations regarding the BAR process.

Sincerely,

THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS of the
OLD TOWN CIVIC ASSOCIATION
Townsend A. "Van" Van Fleet, President

OTCA RECOMMENDATIONS

- ? The role and value of the historic guidelines must be significantly strengthened. These guidelines shape and frame our public discourse and decision making. They are not in place for casual discard, but are expected to be used by the BAR to inform their decisions. Private citizens are expected to adhere to them, we expect no less from the BAR.
- ? All BAR dockets must be made public one week prior to BAR meetings. The current short time frame impedes input from not only individual citizens but also civic associations and historic groups who are trying to comment on serious matters within a too-short timeframe.
- ? Occasionally no sketches are attached to staff reports. OTCA recommends that all docket items not accompanied with fully colored drawings automatically be deferred to the meeting at which the drawing are available.
- ? Establish a consistent "after-the-fact" application process with consistent fines. The applicant should be offered the choice of correcting the condition or paying a fine. The fine and cost of correction should be comparable.
- ? Any BAR decision which ends up with a tie vote should automatically be deferred to the next BAR meeting. Demolition of historic structures should never be permitted by a "tie" vote--which is in fact no decision by the BAR at all. At the very least, such demolition should require the affirmative vote of a majority of four of the seven members of the Board--if not, indeed, a "supermajority" of five members, thus assuring that at least a majority of the citizen members, as well as the architect members, would be required to authorize the demolition of an historic structure.

- ? Establish thorough and effective conflict-of-interest policies and procedures to be administered by the City Attorney.
- ? Term limits should be established for the BAR membership. Twenty-two years is far too long for any member to serve and additionally inhibits any new infusion of intellectual diversity on the Board.
- ? After considering each case the BAR must issue a written statement of the reasons for its decision and a finding that its decision is consistent with the Historic Preservation Guidelines and the Washington Street Standards.

Attachment

DO YOU LIKE TO BE HEARD ABOUT THINGS IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD?

The city staff is proposing that Special Use Permits (SUP) for a wide variety of businesses be granted administratively, rather than go through the process of notice to the public with the opportunity for a hearing before bodies such as the Planning Commission or the BAR. Your Board believes that there are a great many changes being proposed that will not affect Old town or other residential neighborhoods, such as applications for certain businesses in shopping centers. The change is most different in the Old and Historic District for restaurants of less than 61 seats, all of which, if new, now must have an SUP granted after the full process.

We have discussed the fact that in adopting the King St. Retail Strategy in 2005, City Council also re-affirmed the Old Town Restaurant Policy, which provides certain procedural (and substantive) safeguards for the surrounding residential area. The proposal as to restaurants would eliminate the opportunity for a public hearing. We have questioned the staff as to the reasons for now proposing to change that stance so soon after its adoption and affirmation. The facts are that in 2006 no application for an SUP for a restaurant on King St. was denied. There is no hard evidence of problems encountered by applicants on King St. that might prompt or be relieved by eliminating the current process. In essence, nothing is known to be broken.

The “Eisenhower Model” seems to be the one applicable to King St., according to the staff. That model allows administrative SUPs for full-service restaurants. The purpose for that policy is to entice restaurants to locate along Eisenhower Ave., where there have been few. There does not appear to be a need to entice restaurants to King St. One member of the board counted 60 eating establishments between the river and King St. Metro, not including those within two blocks of King on the side streets.

In a city that prides itself on citizen involvement and participation; in a city that has a plethora of restaurants along the King Street corridor; in a city noted primarily for the ambiance of its historical areas; in a city where the citizens have been assured that they can be heard on problems affecting the quality of life, it seems contrary to reason to now propose to preclude those citizens from being heard when the city is considering allowing business establishments to affect their residential lives.

The city staff will be presenting its proposals to the Planning Commission on May 6. You are invited make yourself heard on this issue. Please let Van Van Fleet or Tim Elliott know if you plan to attend the meeting.

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN

The OTCA President appeared before Council on 12 April at the City's monthly public hearing. He reiterated the concerns of the Old Town Civic area in regards to motorcycles, tour buses and parking. He had repeatedly expressed these same views on numerous occasions as a member of the National Harbor Collaborative over the past year. A Tour Bus Task Force is going to be convened in the immediate future. OTCA's representatives are Sarita Schotta and Bert Ely.....The Hunting Terrace (Ceechi Development) will again surface before the Planning Commission in June. IDI will present the same 140 foot building in the Hunting Terrace area in exchange for a newly revitalized affordable housing plan at Hunting Towers. Ceechi still doesn't own Hunting Towers.

*Townsend A. "Van" Van Fleet
President*

THE NEXT MEETING OF OTCA (ANNUAL MEETING) IS ON JUNE 11, 2008