



The Old Town Crier

**The Monthly Newsletter of the Old Town Civic Association, Inc.
January Program and Notice of the Meeting**

DATE: Wednesday, January 13, 2010
TIME: 7:00 p.m., Socializing with Neighbors; 7:30 p.m., Program
LOCATION: The Lyceum, 201 South Washington Street

PROGRAM AGENDA

- 1) **ANNOUNCEMENTS**
- 2) **POLICE REPORT**
- 3) **REPORT FROM THE CITY WATERFRONT COMMITTEE**
 1. *Townsend Van Fleet*
- 4) **OTCA WATERFRONT PLAN**
 1. *Presentation by John Gosling*
 2. *Discussion*

Start the New Year off on a good note! It is time to put on your thinking caps again after what we hope was a joyous holiday season. It is not unreasonable to say that impacts to the Old Town center of gravity are being discussed, since potential incursions such as a scaled down National Harbor are dominating the thought processes for the Waterfront Plan, and the City Council Strategic Master Plan that is also under review. Your help is needed to formulate a well thought out OTCA position on these plans, since it is better to operate from a well-prepared early position than to angrily react to issues that are well under way. We urge you to come to the meeting on January 13 for a discussion and adoption of the Old Town proposed Waterfront Plan that is included below. Professional planner and board member John Gosling will present the salient issues and the proposed position for OTCA. Do please attend, because the only wasted voice is the silent one.

The OTCA plan invokes a citywide perspective and looks at the possibilities that can realistically be used without the negative side effects that the City plan incurs by the focus on short-term revenue. So please come to listen to OTCA plan. It will definitely be worth your time and we need you to stand up for your City and be counted.

PROPOSED OTCA PLAN - which differs from the City Plan

Alexandria must view its waterfront in a citywide context

The Alexandria City Council has undertaken a major waterfront planning process, which envisions much more intense development along the Alexandria waterfront. However, such development not only would harm the historic character of Old Town Alexandria, which makes it such a strong tourist draw, but also competes with other areas of Alexandria which need additional development to be economically viable. Planning for the waterfront must enhance Old Town as a residential and small business area while stimulating development and redevelopment within the entire east end of the City, and beyond. Therefore, waterfront planning must be viewed in a citywide context, not as a solo planning exercise.

Old Town Alexandria is not just one of the most historic neighborhoods in America, but also a forerunner of the “new urbanism” that many cities have tried to create through their redevelopment activities – an urbanism characterized by a grid street pattern which encourages walkability, buildings of low to moderate height giving the community a human scale, and mixed land uses primarily focused on serving local residents and visitors. What Alexandria has in Old Town is what many cities have tried, and failed, to create. One object of the City’s waterfront planning should be to polish that jewel further, not shatter it.

There are relatively few properties along the waterfront suitable for redevelopment, namely Robinson Terminal north and south and the Strand between Duke and Prince. These properties should be redeveloped in a manner consistent with the urban form of the rest of Old Town. Specifically, their development should be consistent with the scale, density, and appearance of the rest of Old Town so that they become integral to the Old Town community, treasured by residents and tourists alike.

Given the finite vehicular and pedestrian traffic capacity of Old Town’s streets and sidewalks, and the limited potential for constructing additional off-street parking, development projects along the waterfront should not draw additional automobile and bus traffic to Old Town’s overloaded streets. If there is anything that will destroy Old Town’s tourist appeal, it would be more traffic. The City Council must accept the fact that Old Town’s streets and sidewalks not only constrain more intense property development, but also represent a condition that actually enhances Old Town’s value to the entire City. Old Town will never be another National Harbor, nor should City Council try to make it one.

If City leaders are looking at new retail/entertainment development as economic drivers of growth and increased tax revenues, they should look not just at the Old Town waterfront but at a more comprehensive citywide retail strategy. There are many other areas within Alexandria with even greater potential for successful development

We must start with the assumption that the waterfront infill development opportunities in Old Town are strictly limited and will never reach the scale or ambition of National Harbor. There are several structural reasons for this:

- **Existing Old Town Infrastructure** - The existing physical layout of Old Town will impose limits to the amount of parking and traffic which in turn imposes limits on the scale of the proposed waterfront development.
- **Land Ownership Patterns** - Infilling with new development will require great skill not only in controlling likely traffic and parking impacts, but also in balancing overall retail dynamics. Unlike a regional mall or strip shopping center, King Street is not organized or operated as a single economic unit where the tenant mix can be fine-tuned and is controlled by a single landlord. The pattern of small multiple business ownerships along King Street make any form of coordinated retail merchandizing (tenant mix, hours of operations, shared parking, promotions, etc.) much more difficult.. It is anybody's guess whether introducing new types of retail and entertainment venues into this context support or cannibalize existing tenants.
- **No Direct Traffic Access** - Retail/entertainment districts need easy regional access and convenient parking to succeed. None of this is readily available within easy reach of Old Town's waterfront. The available parking supply is located further west along the middle and upper sections of King Street or one half mile north at the Canal Center.
- **Framed by Mature, Fully Developed, Mixed-Use Neighborhoods** –It is important to remember that Old Town is not an undeveloped area of Alexandria in need of revitalization; rather it is a fully developed, mature mixed-use district with strongly established small businesses and residential neighborhoods.
- **King Street creates the Brand Identity for all of Alexandria** - . Its appeal is based not only on its historic ambience but also on its pedestrian friendly physical layout and the range and variety of its local specialty shops and restaurants. Quite simply, King Street retail is a refreshing counterpoint to the homogeneity of regional shopping centers and strip mall chain stores.

If City leaders are serious about employing retail/entertainment as an economic driver for new growth and tax revenue generation, they should also look at other areas within Alexandria that have greater potential. For example, the undeveloped land around the Eisenhower Metro Station, the Landmark Mall (a prime candidate for revitalization now that BRAC has settled on the Mark Center property) both have large land assemblies, which are critical for any form of successful retail/entertainment development (witness Shirlington).

This planning concept – acknowledging and working with physical constraints to development where they exist, and focusing more intense development in areas lacking those constraints – should be executed citywide so that Alexandria is home to a healthy mix of walkable neighborhoods and more intense, more commercial development where such development makes sense.

Just because the majority of visitors and 75% of the population in Alexandria are car dependent for every household trip does not mean they should expect that level of traffic access and parking convenience within Old Town. OTCA is not saying let there be no development at the waterfront, but is saying do not let the scale of infill development and the associated traffic and parking impacts destroy the charm of King Street and the stability of the supporting neighborhoods. Therefore, OTCA deems it reasonable to expect not only traffic and parking management plans

for all development proposals, but also a retail impact analysis to determine the effects on the existing tenant mix.

Overarching Concerns

Old Town is unique in that it maintains a very fine residential area in close proximity to the commercial establishments on King and Washington Streets. While both the residential and the commercial areas are currently strong, there is a fragile balance that must be preserved if both are to remain strong and if the ambience of Old Town is to be preserved. Further, the commercial areas contain a mix of activities that is unique within the metropolitan area, and that mix needs to be protected if the character of Old Town is to be preserved.

Old Town has a rich history because it was built over 200 years ago and remained largely intact. However, for the same reason, Old Town was built to a scale commensurate with its time of inception. Consequently, the size of the City Blocks is smaller than usual; so are the streets and sidewalks. Therefore, any plan must deal realistically with these limitations by properly addressing the physical constraints in and near Old Town. Additionally, Old Town contains a substantial number of older, irreplaceable structures, which give Old Town its unique historical character that attracts permanent residents to Old Town as well as businesses and visitors, including tourists.

Issues

- 1. The Old Town waterfront is not an undeveloped area of Alexandria in need of revitalization.**
- 2. Planning concepts for the waterfront must link to the future of King Street as the commercial/retail corridor for Old Town.**
- 3. Any increase in development along the waterfront should not change the existing street framework dynamics.**
- 4. There are very few tools left in Old Town's traffic mitigation toolbox available to reduce the traffic/parking impact on the existing urban fabric.**
- 5. All new waterfront development should be served primarily by non-car generating transportation systems.**
- 6. To minimize the impact on waterfront neighborhoods, it is necessary to concentrate attractions into a few zones.**
- 7. Waterfront development will be more successful if the first order of business is to fix what is not working well or under-performing within the existing supply of commercial/retail space before adding new capacity at the waterfront.**
- 8. Too much, too aggressive development can indelibly change the very fabric and ambience of Old Town.**

Many of the guiding concepts outlined so far in the planning process are good ideas that could go a long way towards making the waterfront enjoyable for the larger community. OTCA will support a plan that balances protection and preservation of the historical and residential character of Old Town, the expressed desire of the larger Alexandria community to have access to and enjoyment of the waterfront, the business community's interest in further development of what it sees as an underutilized asset, and the importance of maintaining the "fragile balance" between the commercial and residential sectors which the Old Town Small Area Plan recognizes as essential if both are to remain strong and the ambience of Old Town is to be preserved. But OTCA takes the position that the City should take into account the several key issues raised here when evaluating plan concepts.

TALE OF TWO MEETINGS

On January 13, 2010, two meetings will be taking place simultaneously. The topic at each meeting will be the future of Old Town and the Waterfront, but they are radically different in their perspective, approach and consistency. By that, I mean one is narrowly focused on business and short-term revenues, while the other takes a more holistic approach that believes "if we want to be here and shop here, so will tourists". Because we are in a Historic urban City, let us focus on the entire sandwich not just the gravy.

In 1992, the City adopted the Old Town Small Area plan as part of the comprehensive master plan for the City. The small area plan, best understood as a social contract drawn up between the relevant City stakeholders, is the blue print of how to achieve the vision of the future. Therefore, it ought not to be altered unilaterally by running rough shod over the Citizens as has been suggested in one of the "blue ribbon" panels established by the City Council.

The 1992 plan recognizes the historic and architectural perspective and plays on this uniqueness to accentuate their value by respecting, and protecting them. Obviously, anything new needs to be both compatible and symmetrical with the existing structure of Old Town. However, the 92 plan also emphasizes the balanced relationship that exists between residential, retail and restaurants and how it creates the ambience that is Old Town; and why this social fabric needs to be protected as well if Old Town is to survive.

"Further, the commercial areas contain a mix of activities that is unique within the metropolitan area, and that mix needs to be protected if the character of Old Town is to be preserved" *1992 Small Area Plan page 57*

In contrast, the City Council has set up a sub group, led by Kerry Donley and Paul Smedberg, to look at the City Council strategic plan for growth in the City. In a twist of

fate or by design, they will be meeting to adopt their vision exactly the same time we are meeting.

The City strategic sub group, although about growth, focused almost exclusively on Old Town, because of its uniqueness. The result is a document that looks at changing King Street, the waterfront and regulations in Old Town. Although some would say they are suggestions, they contain a level of specificity that includes the provision for a carousel and bicycle racks. Above all else, they radically diverge from the 92 plan.

OTCA was promised at its November meeting that there would be many opportunities for input in the waterfront plan, yet we see here that the strategic plan is being set, and it is not unreasonable to assume that it will predicate the outcome for the small area plan. In fact, the discussion preempts and supersedes any subsequent public discussions that were to ensue. Furthermore, the public participation is moot if plan has already been adopted as an accelerated strategic plan.

This does raise the problem of public participation, which the Federation of Civic Associations has also brought up with the City Manager. However, this has been an evolving dilution started at the first City strategic plan. The City Council chose a consultant who advertises that his expertise is the elimination of the vocal 20% of the citizens that stand in the way. That is in fact us, the Civic associations and frankly, I have never seen the civic world more marginalized in the City process than today

The OTCA plan is an evolution of the 92 small area plan instead of subversion. It builds on the strengths of Old Town, while on a more scientific basis sets out to explain why there are issues that ought not to be skirted in favor of illusionary quick fixes. Instead of catering to a group think mini-national harbor approach, it suggests a balanced process. If listened to, the balanced process will ensure we do not end up with big mistakes as were created by the then hot idea of tearing down King Street in favor of urban renewal. Ed Braswell keeps reminding me that if it were not for one man's lawsuit stopping the groupthink that encouraged urban renewal, it would have destroyed Old Town.

The OTCA plan invokes all of Old Town and looks at the possibilities that can realistically be used without the negative side effects that the City plan will have by its narrow short term revenue focus. Yes, it is a little more work, but no more than required to fix the problems caused by mistakes like the urban renewal effects.

PLANES

I received a call from Senator Warner's office about needing to compromise with western senators who want to allow direct flights from the West coast to Reagan National Airport.

The planes would be larger, heavier, carry vastly more fuel, and divert from the currently approved flight paths, all of which significantly adds to the noise and pollution.

Furthermore, they will squeeze out regional planes, making regional travel more expensive and inconvenient. Please contact him and let him know that Dulles is there for a reason.

Nicholas P. Devereux | Senator Mark R. Warner
Russell 459A | 202.224.2023 | 202.224.2530 fax
nicholas_devereux@warner.senate.gov

...GOING TO MORE THAN THE DOGS:

Adult Store text amendment fails to get by Planning Commission. (Testimony given at City Council Open Mike in November)

A second adult store has opened on King Street, Alexandria's premier shopping street. This store even offers to deliver merchandize to hotels. Concerned about the possible proliferation of these establishments, the city's planning department staff wrote a text amendment designed to limit the number of them in the Old and Historic District.

At its November 5th meeting, the Planning Commission rejected the adult use text amendment. During the public hearing representatives of the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce, the Alexandria Economic Development Partnership and the Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association came to speak in favor of keeping Alexandria a business friendly city. The commissioners decided that the right of the consumer to buy objects and not harming any business, whatever it sells, overrode all other considerations.

One planning Commissioner decided to give a lecture on the benefit of sex and added that he did not feel that the zoning code ought to be used for regulating behavior. Another felt that the rights of the consumer to be able to purchase this particular material on King Street needed protection. In the end, and to great cheering and relief for the assembled opponents of the proposed regulations, the commissioners proudly announced that Alexandria is still the only local jurisdiction that does not regulate adult stores at all.

I am very disappointed that the representatives of the business community pushed the City into a Faustian bargain that could jeopardize all retailers on King Street. What is more, as if to finish off the Kafkaesque performance of the Planning Commission, one of the Commissioners commented on how important the business communities' turn out had been for the result. So in the end, it was about business is business, was it not? In being so afraid to appear business unfriendly, we now have to be porn friendly on King Street.

Poul Hertel

Next meeting will take place on February 10. OTC&A WEB SITE: <http://oldtowncivic.org>