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OLD TOWN CIVIC ASSOCIATION

Position on the Waterfront

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The OTCA recognizes The Alexandria Master Plan as the official policy document governing land use planning, zoning and land and economic development in Alexandria. The Plan is the product of an extensive and broad-based process involving citizens, property owners, community and business groups, which led to its adoption by the Planning Commission and City Council in single statement of OTCA’s position on the waterfront 1992. Under the City’s Charter, all public infrastructure, capital investments and real estate transactions involving the City must be consistent with the Master Plan, and the plan must serve as the underlying basis for the City’s zoning decisions.

The Historic Preservation chapter of the Master Plan observes that “Old Town contains the core of Alexandria’s urban heritage”:

Since the town’s official founding in 1749, it has been the urban center for Northern Virginia. King Street was a thriving commercial corridor offering wares and entertainment to the region. The Old Town area today includes the historic port, manufacturing and commercial sites, churches, cemeteries, schools, and residences. . . . More than 1,000 structures built in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries still stand in Old Town.

The charming architecture and scale of these surviving structures, and the historic mix of commercial and residential uses, continue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to establish the character of Old Town Alexandria, and give the City its unique “brand” as a living, historic community. Business consultants and urban planners throughout the country and indeed the world urge their clients to try to emulate Old Town Alexandria’s uniquely human scale, walkable community, authentic historical ambience, and vital synergy between the commercial and residential sectors. Alexandria’s historic ambience and charm are the distinguishing characteristics at the core of the City’s appeal to potential visitors and future businesses alike. This “brand” – consciously and judiciously nurtured by successive City governments in the eight decades since the 1929 Parkway Agreement – remains the City’s most valuable competitive asset over its neighboring jurisdictions.

Given the importance of this brand, and its value to the City generally, it is not surprising that the current Master Plan seeks to preserve and protect the character of Old Town. Thus, the central Old Town policy states that:

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 which 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 which is unique within the metropolitan area, and that mix needs to be protected if the character of Old Town is to be preserved. (Emphasis added.)

Similarly, the Plan summarizes that “the predominate use of the area is residential” and that “the plan proposes that the residential character of the neighborhood be maintained and protected from commercial encroachment.”

The OTCA has worked consistently to preserve and protect the unique character of Old Town. When the Association was organized in 1951, its charter purpose was stated to be its interest in “preserving the historical and residential character of the old town of Alexandria, Virginia,” and that purpose has been central to its efforts ever since. But while the Association has and will continue to work hard to deter commercial development of a scale which would threaten the character of Old Town, the Association and its members recognize and value the symbiotic relationship between the residents and a robust and vibrant retail and commercial environment along King and Washington Streets. Indeed, for many members of the Association and other residents of Old Town, the proximity of unique retail and other commercial establishments, which serve the neighborhood as well as a broader demographic, is a key “quality of life” asset to living in Old Town.

This facet of the Old Town Alexandria brand has been based in large measure on the range and variety of its unique specialty shops. Quite simply, King and Washington Streets have been a refreshing counterpoint to the homogeneity of regional shopping centers and strip mall chain stores. In addition, small independently owned businesses are more advantageous to the community in that they tend to hire and spend money locally. They purchase goods and services in their community and revenues remain in the community.

In 1992, the Master Plan credibly stated that both the residential and commercial sectors in Old Town were “strong.” Today, however, while the residential market remains strong, many of the small shops, both east and west of Washington Street face unprecedented challenges, both from the economic downturn and from changes in the marketplace, and several notable examples have been lost for good.

OTCA and its members also recognize that the parks and recreational amenities along the waterfront are an integral part of Old Town Alexandria’s character, and should be managed to provide an additional benefit to living, working in and visiting the City.

Today the City is preparing a new “Strategic Plan” (not part of the Master Plan but a policy document expressing the goals and aspirations of the current council), as well as a new “Waterfront Plan” which will be incorporated as an update to the Master Plan. OTCA believes that, in order to be adopted and successful, these planning exercises must continue the City’s long established practice of consciously and judiciously nurturing the Old Town Alexandria brand, albeit in light of the changed economic and social realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Accordingly, OTCA endorses five key principles which must guide these planning processes:

1. *The uniquely historical character and scale of Old Town (including the fragile balance between residential and commercial uses) must be preserved, in order to assure the continued value of the Old Town Alexandria brand as a competitive asset for the City.*
2. *The retail and commercial businesses along King and Washington Streets need assistance to help address the complex and changing issues facing the downtown business environment. The City must implement a program of assistance which puts the traditional assets of downtown, such as its unique architecture and locally-owned businesses, to work as a catalyst for economic growth and development able to compete successfully in a chain merchant and mall dominated environment.*
3. *As part of such a program, existing tools as authorized by state law, including local tax abatement (and also including new financial tools and authority from the General Assembly), and not merely regulatory reform, could be necessary to establish a true “business friendly” environment, foster economic success for the established small businesses along King and Washington Streets, and to help incubate new businesses which are complementary. The Main Street Affiliate Program sponsored by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development might offer a useful model.*
4. *The scale and permitted uses of infill development on the waterfront, including additional public park and recreation amenities, must complement and not compete with the traditional retail and commercial core along King and Washington Streets, and the associated traffic and parking impacts must not overwhelm the charm and stability of the surrounding residential neighborhoods.*
5. *Infill development opportunities in Old Town and on the waterfront are few and limited by the built environment as well as by the waterfront settlement agreements with the National Park Service, and can never reach the scale or ambition necessary to sustain a new retail/entertainment district such as National Harbor. Other areas in the City are more likely appropriate in land area and high-volume transportation access for the success of such a district.*

## **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.*

### **Anatomy of the waterfront plan so far**

The waterfront study area extends from Jones Point north to the marina on Daingerfield Island. The latest plan divides this study area into six sub-areas within which approximately two dozen guiding concepts (plan elements) have been proposed. These plan elements can be roughly grouped into four categories:

1. **“quality of life” amenities** such as walkways, bike paths, park improvements, environmental mitigation features.
2. **economic development drivers** such as waterfront restaurants, city markets, marinas, and theatres that generate jobs and taxes
3. **attractions** such as museums, carousels, art walks and civic/cultural facilities that generate traffic and jobs but no tax revenues, and
4. **venues** for high energy day or night time gatherings and events (art fairs, concerts, water festivals), that generate potentially high volumes of traffic.

Of the six sub areas, two are controlled by the National Park Service (Jones Point Park and Daingerfield Island) while three (Windmill Hill Park, Oronoco Park and Founders Park), fall into the “quality of life” category with an emphasis on passive and active recreational use with some attractions. The sixth sub-area, which embraces the foot of King Street, the Strand, the boat club and City marina has much more of a commercial focus. Three sites including the two Robinson Terminals and the Mirant Power Plant are identified as future opportunity sites.

## 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 which 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.** Many of the examples of successful waterfront development cited as a basis for the design concepts are not analogous to the Old Town context. Waterfront development in cities like Chattanooga, Baltimore, or Providence were designed as catalysts for brownfield redevelopment or downtown revitalization. Unlike these examples, Old Town is already a balanced mixed-use community comprised of a healthy mix of rental and owner-occupied housing types that allows a great deal of social flexibility, walkability, convenience, pedestrian friendly streets and an urban form built at a human scale. If Alexandria were to be developed like the cities of Chattanooga, Baltimore or Providence, or indeed others in need of a revitalization of a downtown area, the balance that exists today would be upset, and the existing strategies and policies would be de facto rejected by the city, without any thought, logic, or consideration for the residential areas, the current magnets that draw people to Old Town, or the long-term future and vitality of Old Town. Therefore, planning concepts must build upon and complement what already exists and the design concepts must be more subtle than wholesale waterfront development.
- 2. Planning concepts for the waterfront must link to the future of King Street as the commercial/retail corridor for Old Town** Pulling energy of King Street to the Strand will adversely affect the health of existing commerce. There is finite market demand unless there is a tectonic shift in retail dynamics which is not

likely, more aggressive marketing, a change in regional access, or a demographic shift. The King Street corridor has approximately one million square feet of retail space, with growing vacancy as evident by the number of vacant storefronts. The Old Town tourist district is already a major regional draw, and increasing its size by expanding along the waterfront will not necessarily translate in greater market penetration. By placing all activity at end of King Street and the waterfront, the City might inadvertently create conditions at the lower end of King Street that result in the energy being sucked from the rest King Street. This would cause more harm than benefit to the retailers on the street. If that were to happen, the small retailers would be most affected. Therefore, a major increase in the supply along the waterfront could well drain energy and activity (cannibalization).

3. **Any increase in development along the waterfront should not change the existing street framework dynamics** – Old Town is a fully urbanized area with a fixed street framework very close to capacity. The existing system is a delicately balanced network of interconnected streets where increasing traffic loads have, until now, been diffused and spread within this network rather than channelled onto a few traffic -dominated streets. This equilibrium promotes a pedestrian-friendly environment which can easily be degraded and unbalanced in favour of traffic over pedestrians by the demands of new traffic generated by new waterfront amenities and facilities (street widening, curb radii increases, traffic signalization).
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.** Tools such as employee transit vouchers, bike paths, wayfinding signage, uni-meters, and better parking management can only mitigate so much. According to recent parking surveys, better management and utilization of the existing parking supply does not help the waterfront area as much of the available parking supply is in the mid and upper sections of King Street. The challenge is distribution as opposed to supply. It is therefore important that the City finalize the strategies for the King Street parking, wayfinding and traffic management (including tour buses), so that a realistic assessment of the potential capacity for new uses in the whole of Old Town can be made before initiating new development on the waterfront.
5. **All new waterfront development should be served primarily by non-car generating transportation systems.** Granted, such services are on the horizon in the form of the water taxi service proposed for the Potomac, or the potential trolley link to a new Potomac Yard Metro station. However, in the near term, one way to justify increased waterfront development without seriously impacting the existing neighbourhood fabric is to transform in-bound car and bus dependent visitors into pedestrians by locating public parking garages and bus stops at the critical access points at the perimeter of Old Town. As the experience of historic districts all over Europe proves, people will absorb the hassle of walking further if

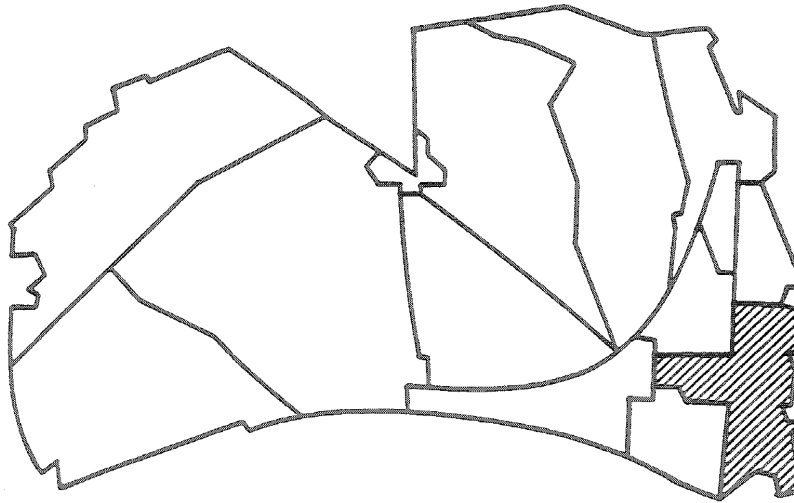
the experience is novel, the streets are user friendly, and their visual senses are stimulated by architectural variety. Protecting and preserving the current pedestrian friendly streets vis a vis traffic dominant streets must be a priority.

6. **To minimize the impact on waterfront neighborhoods, it is necessary to concentrate attractions into a few zones.** The concept of a chain of attractions, such as festivals, markets, fireworks displays and concerts strung along the riverfront is not an appropriate model for Old Town with its concentration of stable waterfront residential neighborhoods. This existing condition limits the range of waterfront uses because the residents have a vested interest in controlling 24-hour activity. The challenge in practical terms (setting funding aside), comes down to making a clearer definition of **“attractions”**. Which ones have low impact and which have a disruptive impact that upsets the delicate equilibrium between visitor traffic, parking, and the existing neighborhood fabric.
7. **Waterfront development will be more successful if the first order of business is to fix what’s not working well or under-performing within the existing supply of commercial/retail space before adding new capacity at the waterfront.** It makes more sense from both an economic development as well as from a “green” sustainability point of view to fix what’s broken or underperforming or underutilized before constructing new space on the waterfront. Properties such as the Food Court, vacant space along Union Street, or the Metal Jacket property should first be brought back into more productive use with a bit of imaginative promotion and design flair.
8. **Too much, too aggressive development can indelibly change the very fabric and ambience of Old Town.** Alexandria’s economy is reliant on tourism in Old Town. However, tourism not only has an economic impact, but also has an affect upon Old Town’s social, cultural, ecological, and physical conditions. The plan’s agenda seems primarily directed at the impact of tourism on urban space - the commodification of the waterfront. Too much new development will dilute the very draw of the area, resulting in a visitor experience that is no different from any other waterfront redevelopment. If the waterfront is seen as primarily a commercially driven district tourists may find it dull.

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.

# OLD TOWN

## SMALL AREA PLAN



This SAP has been amended by the following ordinances, attached in full:

3/15/1993	Ordinance # 3630
12/11/1993	Ordinance # 3686
12/14/1996	Ordinance # 3899
10/25/1997	Ordinance # 3956
12/12/1998	Ordinance # 4030
12/2/2004	Ordinance # 4287
1/22/05	Ordinance # 4374
10/15/2005	Ordinance # 4426

### ADOPTED 1992 MASTER PLAN

#### ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

## GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

- o Areas presently used for residential purposes should remain residential.
- o Route through traffic away from established residential areas.
- o Encourage maximum use of transit facilities.
- o Waterfront development should be at a scale compatible with surrounding buildings.
- o Provide a continuous pedestrian pathway and bikeway along the entire Waterfront.
- o Protect buildings and areas of historic and architectural value.
- o Encourage the tourist potential of the historic and architectural aspects of Old Town.
- o Encourage mixed use in new development where appropriate, particularly along the Waterfront.
- o Encourage water-related development along sections of the waterfront.
- o Encourage the design of new buildings in the Old Town Plan area on a basis that is compatible with existing development.
- o Preserve existing open space areas including residential side and rear yards wherever practicable.
- o Retain the retail pattern along King Street and Washington Street. Encourage more neighborhood serving retail uses and discourage large scale commercial buildings.
- o Protect the appearance of Washington Street as the gateway to Old Town.
- o Visual awareness of the waterfront should be preserved.
- o Encourage developers to consider the open space and recreational requirements of their employees.

## POLICIES FOR OLD TOWN

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 which 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 “Small Area Plan”: So What?

The Old Town Civic Association frequently cites the “Old Town Small Area Plan” in its arguments on behalf of the Association’s members and their community.

Residents who do not list the arcana of land use planning and zoning as among their favorite recreational pastimes, however, may be less familiar with the background of the Small Area Plan, its policy prescriptions, and its relationship to current issues of critical importance to Old Town.

The Alexandria Master Plan was adopted June 24, 1992, after an extensive and broadly-based process involving citizens, property owners, community and business groups, culminating in recommendation by the Planning Commission and adoption by the City Council. The Master Plan is the principal policy document governing land use planning, zoning and development in Alexandria.

The Master Plan is made of up fifteen Small Area Plans (SAPs) covering neighborhoods throughout the City, as well as several other chapters on topics of citywide relevancy such as Urban Design, Open Space, and Transportation. The Old Town Small Area Plan is one of the 15 area-specific chapters; three of the “element” chapters of particular interest to Old Town are the Plan’s original chapter on Historic Preservation (which includes an “Old Town Small Area Plan for Historic Preservation”); the King Street Retail Strategy, adopted in 2005; and the extant Waterfront Plan, which was adopted in 1982 and incorporated in the 1992 Master Plan.

The Historic Preservation Plan for the neighborhood observed that “Old Town contains the core of Alexandria’s urban heritage”:

Since the town’s official founding in 1749, it has been the urban center for Northern Virginia. King Street was a thriving commercial corridor offering wares and entertainment to the region. The Old Town area today includes the historic port, manufacturing and commercial sites, churches, cemeteries, schools, and residences. . . . More than 1,000 structures built in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries still stand in Old Town.

The scale of the integral, historic commercial and residential character of Old Town Alexandria makes the City unique in Northern Virginia, in the National Capital region, and indeed the nation. There are many other historical sites in the region, but by comparison they tend to be museum pieces, rather than living, organic communities like Alexandria. There are, of course, other fine residential areas—but most are 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century constructions with no particularly distinguishing character or heritage. Business consultants and urban planners throughout the country and indeed the world urge their clients to try to emulate Old Town Alexandria’s uniquely human scale, walkable community, authentic historical ambience, and vital synergy between the commercial and residential sectors. A recent in-depth market study for the Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association found that Alexandria’s historic ambience and charm are the

distinguishing characteristic at the core of the City's appeal to potential visitors, its most important competitive advantage over other destinations.

Given the importance of that unique character, and its value to Old Town and to Alexandria generally, it is not surprising that the 1992 Old Town Small Area Plan (and related policies before and since) have sought to preserve and protect that character. Thus, the core policy stated in the Small Area Plan is that:

#### Policies for Old Town

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Similarly, the Plan summarizes that “the predominate use of the area is residential” and that “the plan proposes that the residential character of the neighborhood be maintained and protected from commercial encroachment.”

An important subset of the policy provided (in what was captioned the “Old Town Restaurant Policy”) that, in the effort to preserve that balance:

City Council shall not approve a request for special use permit for any new restaurant, carryout or fast food establishment [or expansion thereof] unless it finds that the request does not significantly impact nearby residential neighborhoods.

In assessing that impact, Council would consider the cumulative impact of the proposal and the number of already established restaurants in the immediate area, considering such factors as the availability of off-street parking, the predicted impact of the restaurant on parking supply in the adjacent neighborhood, the extent to which the restaurant is open in the late night hours, the extent of alcohol consumption in relation to food service, the predicted extent of litter generated in nearby neighborhoods, and the like.

The Master Plan and its component Old Town Small Area Plan do not have the character of a legally-enforceable contract to which the City is bound. If a citizen or a civic association felt that the City had departed from the stated policies, goals and objectives in some respect, it is questionable whether such a party would have standing to sue the City to demand its “specific performance” of those provisions, and even less likely that such relief would be granted.

In a sense, however, the Old Town Small Area Plan is more important than that, certainly than a routine contract which the City has entered into with a private party. It is a social compact among the residents, property owners and businesses of the community, and the City that serves them: it is the fundamental statement of policy on how the land in the community will or will not be used, and of the expectations which all parties may reasonably rely upon as neighbors in that community. (It is, after all, called the Master Plan—not the “Compendium of Casual Suggestions” or the “Collection of Insignificant Aspirations”.)

Some observe that the Small Area Plan is not part of the Zoning Ordinance, which governs the specific uses that may or may not be made of parcels within each zone under specified conditions. But the Master Plan is in an important sense the source of the Zoning Ordinance: it is the basic land use policy document from which the specific—and consistent—terms of the Zoning Ordinance for each area are derived. The Master Plan, like the Zoning Ordinance, was enacted upon its adoption by the Mayor and City Council—and, indeed, amendments to the Old Town Small Area Plan chapter (of which there have been several) must themselves be enacted by ordinance adopted by the Mayor and City Council.

Nor is it surprising, given the City’s unique character, that OTCA has worked consistently to preserve and protect that character. When the Association was organized in 1951, its charter purpose was stated to be its interest in “preserving the historical and residential character of the old town of Alexandria, Virginia,” and that purpose has been central to its efforts ever since.

The genesis and stature of the Old Town Small Area Plan are currently of more than academic interest to OTCA members and Alexandria residents who treasure that character of their community. The City Council and administration are rapidly moving toward conclusion of two policy and planning processes which may have a profound impact on the Plan’s core emphasis on the “fragile balance” of the residential and commercial areas “...which must be preserved if both are to remain strong and if the ambience of Old Town is to be preserved”:

- (1) City Council, acting through several subcommittees, is working on the development of a new “Strategic Plan” to guide City action in the years ahead. The Land Use and Economic Development Workgroup is considering, among other provisions, a “Potential Objective 1: Increase the vitality and economic success of the City Waterfront and King Street Corridor.” The emphasis is on “increasing the economic success (e.g. revenue per square foot)” of present and new businesses in the area, principally by increasing the volume of daytime and overnight visitors; potential initiatives include “adding a carousel and other appropriately scaled attractions and activities to the Waterfront open space” and planning for “additional redevelopment, including additional waterfront dining and hotel(s).” (The preservation and celebration of Alexandria’s history, a core component of the existing Strategic Plan, barely survives as

the fourth of five subject references in the last of seven “goals” that make up the new plan.)

- (2) A new Waterfront Plan is also approaching the final stages of consideration by the Planning Department, and thence the Planning Commission and the City Council; when adopted, it would presumably replace the “Waterfront Plan” chapter of the Alexandria Master Plan. It, too, seems to some to be emphasizing increasing the scale, scope and volume of commercial activity on and near the waterfront, with the presumed objective of increasing revenue to the affected enterprises and to the City.

One hopes that a recent proposal—now apparently on hold—was not a harbinger of things to come: a plan to increase by half the volume of the former Olsson’s Books and Records store on Union Street, by expanding the building out into the historic Wales Alley, in order to accommodate a 500-plus-seat “Birchmere East,” with the hope of attracting particularly visitors from National Harbor—and with no plan for parking beyond what already exists in the neighborhood.

Development of new commercial, hotel, dining and entertainment venues on such a scale in Old Town, especially on and near the waterfront, would almost certainly undermine the “fragile balance” between the commercial and residential sectors that has been at the core of City policy for decades, and which is at the heart of the Old Town Small Area Plan. It would run the risk of substituting bread and circuses (carousels and wall-to-wall restaurants) for the unique, historical, mixed residential and commercial character which distinguishes Alexandria from all of its economic “competitors”—and which is the essential foundation for the success of its economy and of its character as a community.