

NorthEast Citizens' Association Resolution on Washington Street Task Force Recommendations

Adopted September 20, 2000

Whereas The George Washington Memorial Parkway was laid out and constructed, as part of celebrating the bicentennial of George Washington's birth. The intent was to develop and historic and scenic avenue that preserved and emphasized the natural beauty along the route between Washington D.C. and Mount Vernon. In 1929, the city of Alexandria entered into an agreement with the National Park Services that Washington Street, which is along the route, would be part of the City of Alexandria. As part of the agreement, Alexandria stipulated that it would *"restrict the said street to residential and business development of such character and of such type of building as will be in keeping with the dignity, propose and memorial character of the Parkway"*.

Whereas the design of commercial buildings on Washington Street has been the center of controversy for decades. Mass, scale, architectural style and features of these buildings have been scrutinized as to whether or not they were in keeping with the spirit of the agreement. However, every commercial building placed on Washington Street since 1946, regardless of whether it was appropriate or not, was approved by the City of Alexandria Board of Architectural Review. The Washington Street Standards were an attempt to clarify standards designed to protect the historic integrity of the Memorial Parkway. They stated that *"Construction shall be compatible with and similar to the traditional building character, particularly including mass, scale, design and style, found within the Old and Historic Alexandria District on commercial or residential buildings of historic architectural merit."*

Whereas The Washington Street Task Force was created in 1999 by the Alexandria City Council in the aftermath of the dissatisfaction with the Old Colony Inn process. The public perception was that the process had failed to ensure that appropriate architecture and mass and scale was applied in the Mastercraft and Old Colony Inn developments. The Task force unanimously called for tighter guidelines to curtail a Liberal interpretation of the Washington Street Standards, which may seem attractive, but are irreversible and contrary to preservation.

Whereas The Alexandria City Council must ensure that preservation of the historic ambiance and character is paramount in any development. In the past, other considerations detracted from the requirement for preservation of the historic district. Developers will always want to maximize profitability, but that usually means higher densities which in turn brings congestion and deterioration in the quality of life. This problem will worsen because of the encouragement of lot consolidations and redevelopment. This tarnishes the image of Alexandria

Whereas Alexandria is only a national treasure due to past efforts to preserve the Historic District, which is a tie to the historical heritage of the community. Alexandria should be proud of a historical heritage that has been cherished for 250 years, and Washington Street is a defining element of the Old and Historic District. More importantly, it is the introduction and natural gateway to Alexandria and as such, should not be experimented with "new and untried styles".

Therefore be it resolved that the Alexandria City Council should adopt the changes proposed by the Washington Street Task-Force (*see synopsis bellow*) without amendments that will dilute the recommendations.

And be it further resolved That the Alexandria City Council ensure that commercial developments are held to the same preservation standards as individual citizens are.

And be it finally resolved, that the Alexandria City Council should take such actions as required to ensure that staff and commissions adopt the spirit of the changes.

The proposed text amendment retains the existing standards of section 10-105(A)(3) but attempts to strengthen them. It adds language designed to address three general concerns: design, procedures, and SUPs for increased density. Stemming from concerns with some recent building proposals, such as for the Mastercraft and the Old Colony sites, the Task Force sought ways to ensure that large buildings that overwhelm the street could not be built in the future.

Design. Section 10-105(A)(3)(a), the first standard, currently states the accepted general criteria for building on Washington Street: that the design should be *compatible* with and *similar* to traditional building character found on buildings in the historic district of architectural merit. That standard explains that a building's mass, scale, design and style should be reviewed specifically. Another standard states that buildings should reflect the traditional bay width of historic buildings. However, the Task Force determined that the existing standards, while appropriate, are too broadly stated to be effective, and proposed that the standards be supplemented by more detailed statements.

First, instead of requiring that new buildings reflect the character of buildings found throughout the district, the new language requires that construction be compatible with existing historic buildings on *Washington Street itself*. Examples of historically important buildings on Washington Street include the Cotton Factory in the 500 block of North Washington Street and the George Mason Hotel in the 100 block of South Washington Street.

Next, in a series of detailed statements, the new standard language in section 10-105(A)(3)(a) emphasizes the specific ways in which new construction must reflect historic building construction:

- ! New buildings must be *complementary* to historically significant buildings on Washington Street; they may not *detract from, overwhelm, or intrude upon* historic buildings.
- ! The *massing* of buildings must *closely reflect and be proportional* to adjacent historic buildings.
- ! If new construction includes large buildings, *they must be designed to look smaller*. Specifically, (1) buildings should appear to have a *footprint no larger than 100 feet by 80 feet*; (2) they should include a *change in architectural designs* in the treatment of facades, setbacks, roof lines and styles in order to break up the mass; and (3) large projects should *preserve or replicate mid-block alleys*, thereby breaking up the building mass.
- ! Buildings designed in a historic style must be *consistent with that style*, including with its massing and proportions.
- ! *New or untried design approaches* that have no historical basis in Alexandria or that are not consistent with the scale, massing and detailing of an historic style are not appropriate.
- ! *Traditional fenestration patterns* and solid/void relationships must be used on all facades visible from any public right-of-way, including the first floor.
- ! *Design elements* (e.g., windows, doors, materials,) must be consistent with historically significant buildings on Washington Street.

The above statements add to the existing standards by repeatedly emphasizing that new construction reflect existing historic buildings in every way: size, land coverage, overall design and individual design elements. Acknowledging that interpretation of the standards involves aesthetic judgments, the Task Force sought, with the proposed text language, to narrow the design arena in which architectural decisions are made.