

Statement Regarding Proposed Development on the Site of the Heritage at Old Town Apartments before the Alexandria Planning Commission, DSUP #2020-0032 and Rezoning # 2020-00006, February 2, 2021

Presented on behalf of the Historic Alexandria Resources Commission by Co-Chair Danny Smith

Mister Chairman and Members of the Commission:

My name is Danny Smith. I am Co-Chair of the Historic Alexandria Resources Commission and speaking on behalf of the Commission.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments on the proposed development on the site of the Heritage at Old Town Apartments. HARC members have followed with great interest the actions related to that property.

At our January meeting, HARC voted unanimously to forward to you a letter describing some of our concerns about the proposed development. Considerable research was undertaken by HARC members in the months prior to the decision. The final HARC letter was submitted to you last week. Your staff (Patrick Silva) indicated that it would be circulated to Planning Commission members. My comments tonight highlight key points in the letter.

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Much of the site at issue is within the Old and Historic Alexandria District and we contend that the development concept offered exceeds the height, scale, and mass of buildings typical of OHAD. Specifically, the proposal includes structures predominantly 6 or 7 stories in height at the maximum point in an area where existing buildings are typically 2 or 3 stories in height. Overall, the architecture is out of character with the area and little effort has been expended to design

structures that would be harmonious with those surroundings. Among “Considerations on Review” articulated for the Planning Commission is “whether the proposed use will result in the destruction, loss, or damage of any natural, scenic or historic feature of significance” – a consideration that is of paramount importance for this project.

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Route 1 is an important gateway to the Old Town area, and forms one of the boundaries of the proposed development. Protection of such gateways into our historic areas is an explicit purpose articulated in the city’s Historic District Ordinance. We are concerned that the proposal envisions the equivalent of a massive wall along Route 1 – a dramatic change from the current viewscape of mature trees and low-rise to mid-rise buildings that are appropriately scaled to their surroundings.

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Many significant historic elements of Alexandria’s African American history are in the immediate vicinity of or within the proposed development: Alfred Street Baptist Church, the home of Dr. Albert Johnson, and the Odd Fellows Hall to name a few. The proposed development site is part of the first African American neighborhood in Alexandria known as the Bottoms or the Dip. The proposed starkly different development would have an unnecessarily detrimental impact on the historic African American neighborhood in which it is located.

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We are especially concerned that this project involves three of the nine blocks in the immediate neighborhood that have been identified as potential redevelopment sites. The Commission should consider the precedent-setting impact of this project for development of the other two thirds of the identified redevelopment sites.

Overall, we are quite concerned that inappropriate development within the Old and Historic Alexandria District and adjacent to it detracts from our historic architectural assets which are a major tourist attraction contributing significantly to city finances and to the wellbeing of our citizens.

Thank you for your attention and your diligent work to guide planning and development in a manner that promotes the future and vitality of our living city while maintaining our phenomenal history that has been earned with care and determination over nearly 3 centuries.

Thank you.