



Alexandria, Virginia

Historic Alexandria Resources Commission

220 North Washington Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314-2521
(703) 746-4554



January 27, 2021

Planning Commission
City of Alexandria

Re: DUSP #2020-10032 and Rezoning #2020-00006 – Heritage at Old Town

Dear Chairman Macek and Members of the Commission:

The Historic Alexandria Resources Commission (HARC) is the city commission charged with advising and supporting the City Council, City Manager and city staff as to “the responsible stewardship of this unique, historic city,” including through such means as “preserving the historic cultural diversity of the city,” “developing our city in directions that do not threaten its historic integrity,” “building a sense of community identity and continuity,” and “preserving historic sites and buildings.” Our interest thus extends to protection and preservation of Alexandria’s historic resources throughout the city, including those within the Old and Historic Alexandria District.

HARC is concerned that the height, scale and mass of the new buildings proposed for this site would far exceed that which is characteristic of the Old and Historic Alexandria District; that their architecture is starkly out of character with that of the nearby neighborhood, and of the Historic District generally; that the project would impair the welcoming quality of an important gateway to the City and its Historic District; that it would damage the historic Bottoms neighborhood which surrounds the site; and that it could set a poor precedent for future development in the Historic District and beyond.

We understand that this project is scheduled for a public hearing at your meeting of February 2, 2021. We urge your awareness of and consideration of the following factors as you conduct that review.

Impact on the Old and Historic Alexandria District (OHAD)

The current project contemplates construction of new buildings on three contiguous blocks within the Bottoms neighborhood in the “southwest quadrant” of Old Town. Although the project occupies only a small portion (2 blocks) of the OHAD (see attached map), the bulk of which extends north, east and south from this site, the entire project site is within or immediately adjacent to the OHAD. Whatever new construction takes place here will necessarily have impacts on that surrounding and adjacent historic district.

HARC has great interest in the historic integrity of the Old and Historic Alexandria District, which is perhaps Alexandria’s most widely known historic resource; which is of central importance to our city among such resources; and which is itself, in its entirety, a resource listed on the Virginia Landmarks

Register and the National Register of Historic Places. The proposal contemplates new construction occupying almost the entire compass of these blocks, predominantly six or seven stories in height, in a neighborhood of predominantly two-story and three-story townhouses of modest scale. The proposed architecture may be representative of modern commercial or multifamily residential buildings elsewhere in Northern Virginia in areas of little historical significance or distinction, but it is starkly different from that in the immediate neighborhood, and even, perhaps, from that most characteristic of the Old and Historic District as a whole.

We are concerned that the height, mass, scale and architecture of the proposed project are entirely out of character with the predominant characteristics of the adjacent and broader OHAD, and that it could thus have a substantially negative impact on the historic integrity of that District.

The South Patrick Street Housing Affordability Strategy incorporated into the Southwest Quadrant Small Area Plan recommended that building heights be limited to 45 feet to 55 feet for different portions of the project area. Regarding the current project, staff earlier advised the Board of Architectural Review that an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance Height District Map would be necessary to allow for building heights above 50 feet on those portions of the project area currently located within the Old and Historic Alexandria District. Going beyond those standards to permit heights up to 80 feet for the Heritage buildings would far exceed the height limit that has protected the Historic District since its inception, thus inviting egregious damage to the historic scale and character of the entire District in the future.

Proximity to an Important Gateway to Alexandria

The project site is bounded on the west by South Patrick Street, which is the gateway to Old Town (and to the city generally) from U.S. Route 1 and Interstate 95, the principal highway arteries for north-south traffic on the east coast of the United States, and the first gateway for traffic from the north and east on Interstate 495, the Capital Beltway. The site's gateway location calls for great care and consideration of project impacts in keeping with the Historic District Ordinance's purpose

...to safeguard the city's portion of the George Washington Memorial Parkway and other significant routes of tourist access to the city's historic resources by assuring that development in and along those transportation arteries be in keeping with their historical, cultural and traditional setting. (Sec. 10-101(H). Emphasis added.)

HARC's concern derives from its charge to advise on "building Alexandria's national and international reputation as an attractive city" so as to "attract people...to Alexandria" and thus to "increase the contribution of tourism to city finances." (Sec. 2-4-32 (b) and (c)). **The siting of tall, massive buildings close to the property line along South Patrick Street would dramatically change the view from the Route 1 gateway** – currently lined with many tall, mature trees, and variegated low- to mid-rise buildings compatibly scaled with the historic setting, set far back from the roadway. The stark new design would stand in sharp contrast to the present view-scape and could create the effect of a multi-story "wall" instead of an inviting entry to the City and the adjacent historical neighborhood. The existing buildings and the character of this neighborhood are compatible

with the City's historic, cultural and traditional setting; any new construction should respect those values as well.

Impact on the Historic Bottoms Neighborhood

The Bottoms or the Dip was the first African American neighborhood in Alexandria, begun in the 19th century when several free blacks entered into long-term ground rent agreements on the 300 block of South Alfred Street, which became the nucleus of the neighborhood. The Bottoms is roughly bounded by Washington, Prince, Henry and Franklin Streets (see attached map); the current project site, between Wolfe, Patrick, Wilkes and Columbus Streets, is at the center of that historic neighborhood.

Too many of the original structures in the Bottoms have been lost, but many important historical structures remain. The present brick structure of the Alfred Street Baptist Church at 301 South Alfred Street (in the first block north of the current project site) was probably designed and built by free black craftsmen. Founded in 1803, the church is one of the oldest African American congregations in Alexandria, and is significant for its major religious, educational and cultural role in Alexandria's free black community prior to the Civil War. The Odd Fellows Hall at 411 South Columbus Street (adjacent to and in the same block as the project area) was a major gathering place for African American benevolent organizations following the Civil War, serving an important role in developing community identity, promotion of racial consciousness and leadership skills. Dr. Albert Johnson, a graduate of the first black medical school at Howard University, was the sole African American doctor practicing in Alexandria in 1900. His home (814 Duke Street, in the first block north of the project site) is significant in the historic context of residential development because it illustrates the range of professions and people who lived in the Bottoms. The Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church (606 South Washington Street, at the edge of the Bottoms neighborhood), built in 1834, is the oldest African American church building in Alexandria.

These four sites shown on the attached map – Alfred Street Baptist Church, Odd Fellows Hall, Dr. Albert Johnson House, and Roberts Memorial Church – are all listed both on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places. These structures and a number of Bottoms townhouses still stand, one in the same block and others very nearby the current project site.

Among the Planning Commission's "Considerations on Review" is the question "whether the proposed use will result in the destruction, loss, or damage of any natural, scenic or historic feature of significance." (Section 11-504 (B) (13)) Construction of a new project of the height, mass and scale of that proposed, and of an architecture so starkly different from that of its surroundings, would have a detrimental impact on what remains of the historic Bottoms neighborhood in which it is centered.

Precedent for Future Development in the Bottoms Neighborhood and Beyond

The current project contemplates new construction on three of the nine blocks in the neighborhood (seven blocks to the east and two blocks to the west of South Patrick Street) that have been identified as potential redevelopment sites. Two of those are partially or wholly within the OHAD; a third abuts

those two but is outside the Historic District. The Commission should consider the impacts not just within the boundaries of the present project, but within the context of the surrounding neighborhood, and the impact it might have on the larger Historic District.

Moreover, the 2018 South Patrick Street Housing Affordability Strategy states that any affordable housing initiative must **“ensure future development is not only compatible with the existing neighborhood, but enhances it.”** The proposed densely packed massive buildings are much too large to complement the existing neighborhood. The proposal does not meet this standard of compatibility.

HARC urges your consideration that whatever judgments you reach now about the buildings to be constructed at the present site are very likely to be taken as precedent for what is now or later proposed for the other blocks that have been identified as potential redevelopment sites. If the Planning Commission were now to judge buildings of the height, scale, mass and architectural character of those proposed here as appropriate for the Old and Historic District, it is likely that current and future proposals for buildings on other blocks within or very near the Old and Historic District, the Bottoms neighborhood, and the South Patrick Street gateway to the City, would follow suit. Extension of that precedent to the remaining blocks could amplify any damage to the Bottoms, the OHAD, and the gateway.

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Finally, HARC asks the Planning Commission to value and protect the character of the Old and Historic Alexandria District and the City’s other historic resources within and outside the District, as you address the considerations and factors specified in Section 11-504 of the Zoning Ordinance.

As always, HARC is available to help and support this effort in any way it can.

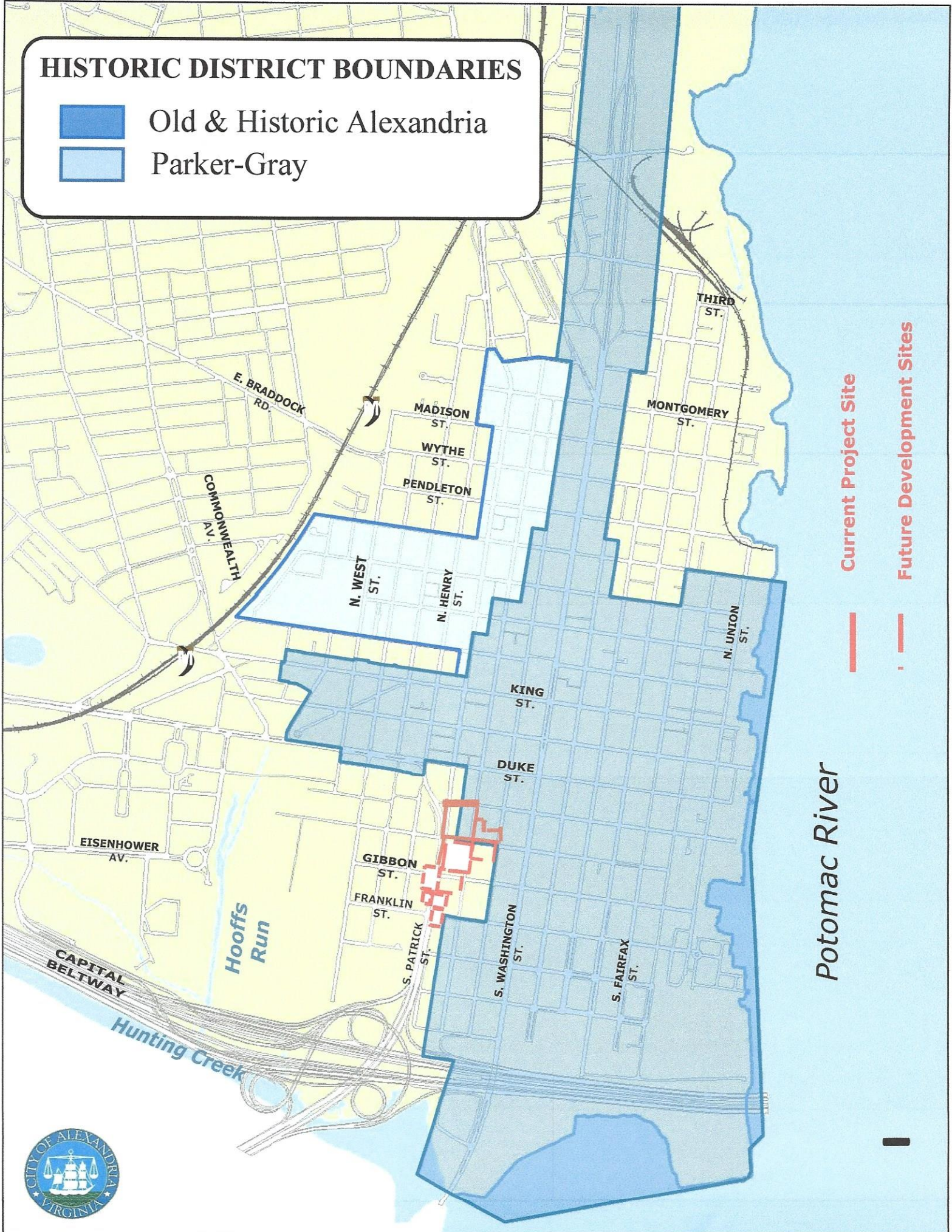
Sincerely,

Danny Smith and Linda Lovell, Co-Chairs

HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA RESOURCES COMMISSION

HISTORIC DISTRICT BOUNDARIES

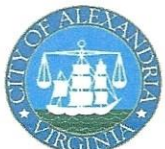
-  Old & Historic Alexandria
-  Parker-Gray



Current Project Site

Future Development Sites

Potomac River



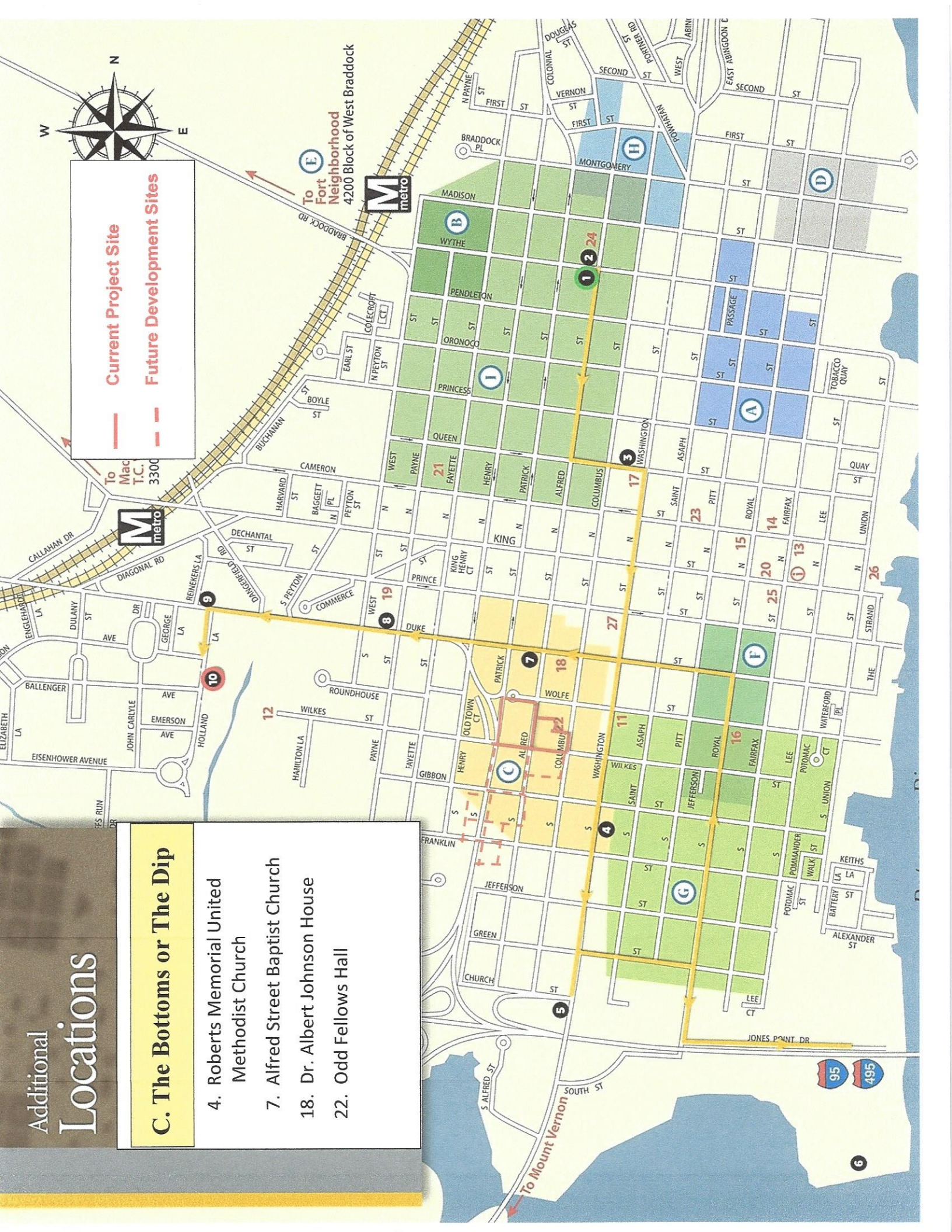
Additional Locations

C. The Bottoms or The Dip

- 4. Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church
- 7. Alfred Street Baptist Church
- 18. Dr. Albert Johnson House
- 22. Odd Fellows Hall

Current Project Site

Future Development Sites



To Fort Neighborhood
4200 Block of West Braddock

To Mac T.C. 3300

To Mount Vernon

95 495