

City of Alexandria

Old Town North

Urban Design Advisory Committee (UDAC)

March 2022 Meeting Notes

[FINAL]

Wednesday, July 13 at 9:00 a.m.

Hybrid: City Hall, Room 1101 and via Zoom

Recording Link: <https://alexandriava.gov/video/5548>

Committee Members in Attendance

Stephen Kulinski, Chair (SK)

Thomas Soapes, Vice Chair (TS)

Abbey Oklak, Secretary (AO)

Katherine Bingler (KB)

City Staff in Attendance

Michael Swidrak (MS) P&Z

Stephanie Sample (SS) P&Z

Daniel Welles (DW) P&Z (Virtual)

Applicant Members in Attendance

Ken Wire (KW) Wire Gill (Representing Montgomery Center)

Austin Flajser (AF) Carr (Montgomery Center)

Wish Carr (WC) Carr (Montgomery Center)

Rob Uhrin (RU) Cooper Carry (Montgomery Center)

Jason Albers (JA) Cooper Carry (Montgomery Center)

Patricia Toledo (PT) Cooper Carry (Montgomery Center)

INTRODUCTION & OLD BUSINESS

- The meeting was called to order after the site tour at approximately 9:02 a.m. as the July 2022 meeting of UDAC.
- SK thanked Theresa del Ninno for her service on UDAC, noting that she had been appointed to the Board of Architectural Review. TS asked staff if there was a timeline on the appointment of a new member to the Committee. MS responded that the appointment will likely happen at the next City Council Legislative Meeting in September.

- The Committee considered a draft of the notes for the May 2022 meeting. KB moved to adopt the meeting notes with the amendment, and TS seconded the motion. **The meeting notes were approved 4-0.**

NEW BUSINESS

Note: Presentation materials on the below items are located at <https://www.alexandriava.gov/boards-and-commissions/urban-design-advisory-committee-serving-old-town-north>

Presentation (second) of development proposal at Montgomery Center

- KW introduced the applicant team, noting that the applicant would highlight the site and building design changes made since the previous UDAC presentation.
- RU provided a project overview, outlining the proposed floor area and building height and significant site features (including the multiple building massings and arts anchor connector, internalized loading and the “paseo” shared space, and multiple pedestrian areas of the site. RU confirmed that the internal pedestrian areas would be lighted at night, based on a question from TS.
- RU continued by outlining building articulation, including window treatments, storefronts, and building recesses. RU highlighted the recessed balconies and 5-foot building stepback by the paseo entrance based on TS asking the applicant to highlight areas of significant building articulation.
- TS noted concern from nearby Alexandria House residents that the southwest corner of the site is not setback enough from the street. RU responded that the building is placed by the property line in that location to accommodate the change in building massing along the N. Royal Street façade for the paseo/loading area. KW added that the applicant will provide the Committee with more information on the building recesses and setbacks.
- RU, KW and AF said that the applicant is working with staff on the design of the arts connector piece as seen from the interior courtyard, as it cannot have windows based on the use/design of the arts connector. As presented, RU noted that the interior courtyard elevation of the arts connector was designed with faceted metal panels backlit with color and movement, to be an active architectural art piece.
- RU noted that the building features areas of fiber cement panel on higher floors of the building facades, but that the fiber cement coverage is less than the 20% maximum for building frontages permitted in the Old Town North Urban Design Standards and Guidelines (OTNUDSG).

- RU highlighted the ground-level open space for the site. RU stated that the applicant is exceeding the open space requirement for the CRMU-X zone, including when deducting outdoor dining areas and covered pedestrian areas from the calculation.
- RU outlined the two color-design options which the applicant was seeking advice from the Committee:
 - The first option featured a deep red brick cladding for the 7-story building portion located to the north of the arts connector and Machanic Courtyard, and a gray brick cladding over floors 2 through 6 on the building massing at the southwest corner of the block (adjacent to Madison and N. Royal streets).
 - The second option differed from the first option by featuring light gray brick cladding 7-story building portion located to the north of the arts connector and Machanic Courtyard, and a dark red brick cladding over floors 2 through 6 on the building massing at the southwest corner of the block (adjacent to Madison and N. Royal streets).
- Diane Harmon (DH), a neighborhood resident, asked RU to review the pedestrian connections through the site. Going north to south, RU laid out the connected pedestrian areas of the site from Montgomery Plaza located adjacent to Montgomery Street, connecting to the northern section of the covered arts paseo. The northern arts paseo connects to the arts anchor entrance and to Machanic Courtyard. This open-air section of the site open space is then adjacent to the southern portion of the arts paseo to the covered drop-off area and then to Madison Street at the south. RU noted that the covered portions will have skylights installed. RU also noted the 8-foot of grade change through block from the south (low point) to the north (high point).
- DH asked the applicant about site security. RU responded that the site will be actively managed by the property owner and that the open space areas will feel activated.
- DH asked if there were names selected for the building(s). AF responded that only the Machanic Courtyard had been named and that a site branding exercise is to come.
- SK read a letter from Old Town North resident Frances Zorn (FZ).¹ SK read that FZ noted issues with the scale and height of the building at the southwest corner and a potential “canyon effect.”
- RU noted that the applicant received staff comments, based on a question from KB. RU stated that staff recommended additional ground-floor retail or commercial space at the southern end of the site by the end of the paseo. KW and AF noted the applicant’s disagreement with staff stating that the applicant does not want to provide a surplus of retail space that would not be economically viable. KW additionally noted that the applicant

¹ Letter included as an Appendix at the end of the Meeting Notes.

believes that the individual stair entries activate the Madison Street frontage consistent with the OTNUDSG.

- AO stated that the building and site design had progressed from the previous presentation to the Committee. AO asked the applicant for additional information on the design of the arts paseo. She noted that the design could be successful but could provide safety hazards, depending on lighting and design. AO noted her support of the proposed off-street loading and setback of the some of the upper stories of the building, noting that the applicant could study the building design at southern end of the site based on the comments made by FZ. AO said that she believes the heavy brick bands around the window openings minimize the appearance of any setbacks on the southwest facades and that the brick bands could be “lightened” to give the facades more in-and-out articulation. AO noted her support of the townhouse-style units at the south end of the site and the constraints with having excess retail space on a site or in the neighborhood. AO noted that the lobby entrance(s) appeared small and should be designed to be more visually apparent – a statement with which SK was in concurrence.
- TS stated that a third level of underground parking should be made a reality, noting that on-street parking along N. Pitt and N. Royal streets is often fully utilized during business hours. TS asked that a comprehensive neighborhood parking solution is studied. SK asked the applicant if there was a reason that a third level of parking was not confirmed for the project. AF stated that the applicant needs a way to pay for the construction of a third parking level (AF estimated cost at \$14-15 million based on question from KB), and that the applicant is studying options for financially accommodating a third parking level. TS noted that the nearby Harris Teeter/Kingsley development had another level of parking added at time of public approvals.
- Neighborhood resident Ann Shack (AS) provided three questions and comments via Zoom. First, AS wanted the applicant to confirm that the number of on-street parking spaces currently fronting the site would not be reduced with the redevelopment. KW responded that the applicant has provided street sections that are consistent with what is shown in the OTNUDSG. Second, AS asked how the building facades relate to the historic character of Old Town. KW responded that the applicant is utilizing high quality materials, including brick cladding. Third, AS asked the applicant to provide parking for guests of the site in addition to the future residents. KW responded that the applicant is providing an amount of parking that exceeds minimum Zoning Ordinance requirements.
- SK noted his support of the variety of building forms provided and the design of the open spaces and pedestrian access. SK noted concerns about the mechanics and safety of the paseo design and asked the applicant for more renderings to show how the paseo will function. Would help to have more renderings of paseo by lobby for instance. SK noted a richness of color to the building forms, noting his slight preference for the second color option.

- KB noted that the North Old Town Civic Association (NOTICE) was pleased with the design of the Alexan Old Town (the former WMATA bus barn site), and that the neighborhood will be appreciative of the public access to be provided with the plazas and paseo.
- DH asked if the development will feature any natural gas service or will it only have electric. KW noted that the City’s green building policies require mainly electric service, but that gas service may be needed as a backup. KW added that the applicant is still in discussions with this City regarding the inclusion of any gas service to the site.
- KW noted that the applicant will have discussions with the City regarding on-site parking.

Other New Business

- MS noted that City staff will provide a presentation and review of the Design Guidelines Addendum and Design Excellence Standards for the Potomac River Generating Station (PRGS) redevelopment site at an upcoming meeting. MS also noted that the applicant was preparing to submit an initial concept plan for site infrastructure and that the Committee will get a chance to review the proposed infrastructure plan as plan development progresses.
- AO stated that the PRGS CDD conceptual design plan should have been brought to UDAC for review and feedback (in addition to the design standards documents).
- KB and TS stated neighborhood and boardmember/commissioner concern with narrow timelines for reviewing staff reports ahead of Planning Commission and City Council meetings.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 10:09 a.m.

APPENDIX – LETTER FROM FRANCES ZORN

Comments to UDAC on Montgomery Center Redevelopment

I'm a resident of Alexandria House Condo, in a unit that sits right at the corner of Madison and Royal Street, so I'll be looking out directly at the redeveloped Montgomery Center. I'd like to comment on what I think is a problem with the scale of the building at the Madison and Royal Streets Sides of the Building.

This is the place where the biggest mass of the redevelopment will be. It is the tallest part of the building at over 100 feet. Even today, when I walk past the 2-story current version of this building, there is a very closed in feeling along Royal Street. My opinion is that the tall mass of the building will feel like a canyon. I get the same feeling with the block on Madison that the Sheraton Hotel occupies. (When you walk or drive down Madison past Harris-Teeter, it is a little like a cliff, with a sheer wall on one side of the street, even with a sidewalk and one layer of trees.)

I think the Montgomery Center Proposal will have the same cliff-like feel, which I urge UDAC and the Carr Company, to consider and to make some adjustments to the planned building.

My suggestion is that there be a greater setback on the Royal and Madison Street sides, where the biggest mass of the building occurs. The scale of one layer of trees is just out of whack to me. I think it will make the height of the building look more ominous than it needs to be. A double layer of trees would soften the effect and maybe allow bigger street trees since the wires will be put underground.)

The setbacks of Alexandria House, Alexandria Park and the Port Royal are much greater and I think the contrast of the new building, with that corner built like a box to the street edge will be dramatic and not in a good way. On the FFX street side there is the Machanic courtyard, which breaks up that side and keeps it from becoming a canyon. There should be more creative thinking about the other side from an architectural standpoint as well.

Thank you

Frances Zorn
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