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your connection to City Council by Mayor Justin M. Wilson

July 1, 2024

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In the fall of 1748, [a group of Scottish and English merchants petitioned the Virginia General Assembly for permission to establish a town near where they owned real estate along the Potomac River.](#)

With that permission in hand, in the Spring of 1749, the Fairfax County surveyor laid-out 60 acres, and the first lot was auctioned off on July 13th, 1749. [You can see a marker on the spot of that very first lot, on Cameron Street, between N. Fairfax Street and N. Lee Street in Old Town.](#)

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With this auction, the City of Alexandria was established. [Next Saturday, 275 years to the day of the establishment of our City, we will hold a celebration to honor Alexandria's 275th Birthday and the 248th Birthday of our nation.](#) It's going to be quite a party, and I hope to see you there!

We will have fireworks, cannons, the Alexandria Symphony Orchestra, cupcakes for all and much, much more!

As we continue to celebrate Alexandria's Birthday, our effort to plant 275 trees around our City is well under way. [We surpassed our goal and we are now on track to plant over 1,000 trees in a 12-month period.](#)

As we celebrate Alexandria's history, we recognize that our history is you. Alexandria's history is the people who have shaped our community for 275 years. [To help us celebrate, please help us tell YOUR story.](#)

Last month, the [Alexandria's Caen Sister City Committee](#) hosted its annual [commemoration](#) of the D-Day invasion at Normandy by the Allied Forces in 1944. This year's celebration, marking the 80th anniversary, included representatives of the militaries of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and France.

Upon conclusion of Alexandria's event, I headed to the airport [to return to our sister City of Caen](#), to participate in the 80th Anniversary observances at the [Normandy American Cemetery](#) and the [International observances at Omaha Beach.](#)

If you ever have the opportunity to visit Normandy, you will be forever changed. I am perpetually in awe of the sacrifice of the Greatest Generation to rid our world of tyranny. There is no place on our planet where that sacrifice is more evident than among the gravest of 10,000 Americans buried on that beach.

Thanks again to the Mayor of Caen, Joel Bruneau (who incidentally [placed first in the first round of his race for the French National Assembly](#) in yesterday's snap

elections) for his hospitality and renewing the relationship between Caen and Alexandria!

If you would like me to host a town hall in your neighborhood, [please drop me a line](#) and we'll get it on the calendar!

[Contact me anytime](#). Let me know how I can help.

Initiatives and Updates



Heritage Redevelopment

Three years ago, [the City Council unanimously approved the redevelopment of the Heritage at Old Town](#). The approval of this project provided for the redevelopment of 140 aging affordable housing units, renewed their affordability protection for 40 years and created an additional 55 new affordable housing units. This effort was proposed to be subsidized by the creation of 555 market-rate units on the site.

This was the first development under the approved [South Patrick Street Housing Affordability Strategy](#) and it demonstrated that the City could create and preserve 195 affordable housing units without spending a single taxpayer dollar. As the City continues to employ an "all of the above" approach to addressing affordability in our community, this project provides an important example of how we might use our land-use authority to create affordability, in this case "deep" affordability, supporting residents who earn as little as [40% of our area median income](#).

[Market conditions led to the project being placed on hold after demolition was completed](#). With a new source of financing now in place, the project is poised to move ahead.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the [Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority \(ARHA\)](#), Alexandria's public housing authority, used its bond issuance authority to support the financing of housing development which contained affordability components. ARHA recently revived its bonding capacity and they have proposed to leverage that tool in support of the Heritage redevelopment.

Last month, the City Council [approved this bond issuance to allow this transaction to proceed](#). The issuance is structured as a revenue conduit bond, which means that ARHA is not loaning the money to the private developer of the Heritage, nor does ARHA

or the City assume any risk of default. The obligation will remain with the borrower.

The approval of this project ensures a place in our City for long-time residents of our community as well as important members of our workforce.

The basic premise of the adopted plan is to use additional density on the site, in partnership with private landowners, to prevent the loss and provide for the replacement of the existing affordable housing.

Across the plan area, along Route 1, there were 319 affordable housing units that are for various reasons at risk. For 215 of the units, they are under **Project Based Voucher agreements** that are on the verge of expiring or have expired. For the remaining 104 units, they are market-rate affordable units that currently accept **Housing Choice Vouchers** and could be redeveloped at any time. For this phase of redevelopment 244 of those units will be redeveloped.

Inaction would have meant the loss of these affordable units over time. In an attempt to devise proactive measures to maintain the affordability of the housing, the City applied for and received grant funding from the **Virginia Housing Development Authority (VHDA)** to launch the planning process that ultimately led to the adoption of our strategy.

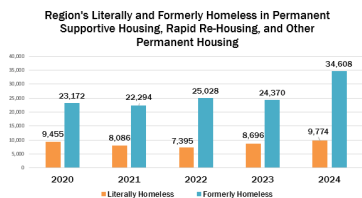
While creating new affordable housing is especially challenging for our City, the preservation of affordable housing units that are ending their designated affordability periods, particularly those that are privately owned, presents unique constraints.

In approving the strategy for preservation of the affordable housing in this area, the City created a new zoning tool, entitled the **"Residential Multi-Family" zone**. This new zone allows for an increase of density up to a 3.0 **FAR (Floor Area Ratio)**, if a third of the new density is designated as committed affordable housing. **This new zoning tool was later given a national award by the Urban Land Institute in 2021.**

As privately-owned, affordable housing becomes threatened in the future, the City's approach to this particular project will provide a road-map for what works and what will not work in the future. I am excited to see this project move forward!

Homelessness in Alexandria

Last week the United States Supreme Court issued an important ruling in a case from Oregon that hinged on the constitutionality of criminal statutes against public camping. While **the Supreme Court ruled that such**



ordinances did not violate the Eighth Amendment, this litigation certainly shouldn't be determinative for local governments as to the ideal approach to ensure shelter for those without. **There is ample data to suggest that criminalizing homelessness does little to reduce the prevalence of it.**

In Alexandria, **we have taken a multi-faceted approach to provide accessible services to those in our community without shelter**, and we have worked to do so in a way that is humane and does not criminalize the factors that lead to homelessness, including poverty, substance abuse and mental illness. Within Alexandria, we have 124 year-round emergency shelter beds, with additional beds available for transitional housing and specialized programs. During the winter, this capacity expands by 50 additional beds.

Each year, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) performs an annual "Point-In-Time" survey to measure the level of homelessness in the region. In May, **COG released the 2024 survey, which showed that there were 9,774 individuals experiencing homelessness in our region**. This is a 12% increase from the previous year and the second year in a row this enumeration has increased.

For Alexandria, this study showed 184 homeless individuals in our City, an increase of 23% from last year. Yet, over the past 4 years, the City has seen a 10% decrease in homeless individuals. Of Alexandria's homeless population, 55 are children.

A comprehensive approach to homelessness requires that we address the many factors that lead to individuals and families being unable to find shelter. If you have neighbors in need, **please ensure that they are aware of the services available.**



home-logo image

Better Bus Initiative

The Metro Bus route network serving Alexandria is changing. The deadline to provide input on these proposals is July 15th.

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA or "Metro") **has released a new proposed bus network**, reflecting a rethinking of the Metro Bus routes across the region. WMATA is **now collecting input** at meetings and electronically to get feedback on this attempt to provide more frequent, relevant and usable service.

For Alexandria, these changes are modest, as the City's DASH Transit Vision Study implemented many changes to both DASH and Metro Bus.

At the beginning of September of 2021, Alexandria implemented a new route structure for Alexandria's DASH bus system. **Existing routes changed and new ways to get around our City were established.** This was the most significant rethinking of our DASH route structure since 1984.

To coincide with the implementation of this new route structure, City Council unanimously approved my proposal for DASH to become the first transit system in the DC area to eliminate fares. Fare-free transit was estimated to expand ridership by an estimated 23%, bring riders back to transit following the pandemic, help achieve the City's environmental goals and **disproportionately benefit our lower-income residents.** With ridership depressed due to the pandemic, the initial cost to implement this change was dramatically reduced.

The City was awarded \$7.2 million in grant funding from the **Commonwealth's Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP)**, which supported the first few years of this program.

Earlier this year, the Board of Directors that governs DASH accepted the **second annual report covering the fare-free program.**

This report showed:

- Average daily ridership more than doubled (152%) from August 2021 to August 2023, with large increases during off-peak periods
- Fiscal Year 2023 saw 4.5 million boardings, DASH's most significant ridership year in its 40 year history
- Customer and employee feedback has been positive

Since the study, the progress has continued. In April, DASH has 488k boardings, the most significant month of ridership in the system's history.

The tool our City has used for decades to serve the transit needs of most of our neighborhoods has been the bus.

The Alexandria Transit Vision Plan was the City's effort to rethink our buses. At the end of 2019, **DASH approved this significant "re-imagination" of its route structure.**

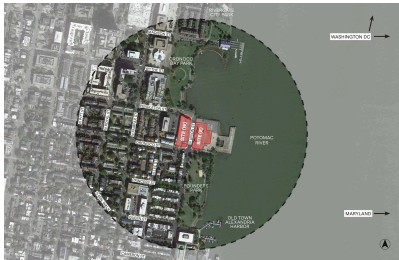
Communities around our nation have done the difficult work of rethinking their bus route networks to improve frequency of service, reduce route duplication, and ultimately serve more riders. **Houston's overnight route network transformation helped spur growth**

in ridership at a time when transit ridership was dropping elsewhere.

Our effort was similar, designed to re-imagine our bus routes and ultimately increase ridership and route efficiency.

Free or not, passengers will not ride a bus unless it is going where they want to go when they want to go there. Increased taxpayer subsidy and more relevant and frequent bus service has made DASH a better mobility tool for our residents. It has also **inspired other efforts around our region**, as well as the WMATA Better Bus initiative.

This new network was an important step forward as we create a transit system that serves more of our community with more efficient and relevant service. So far, it looks like it's working. I am looking forward to WMATA replicating our success!



Waterfront Update

Our Potomac River waterfront is the reason Alexandria exists as a community, dating back to our founding 275 years ago. **The history of our waterfront is the history of Alexandria.** It is what has brought people and commerce to our community for generations.

Only a few years ago, **the future of our waterfront was the source of disagreement and vigorous debate.** Today, it is the source of vitality, excitement and a place for all of those in our community to gather. Yet, we are just getting started.

The remaining major development site of the Waterfront Plan is Robinson Terminal North, located just south of Oronoco Bay Park. While development had been approved for the Robinson Terminal North site, the approval was quickly determined to not be feasible given market conditions. In recent years, the property has been used by Alexandria Renew to advance the **River Renew project**. With River Renew concluding soon, the land owner of Robinson Terminal North is working to advance a new redevelopment vision.

Last week, at a community meeting, Rooney Properties presented **their new vision for redevelopment of this important waterfront site**, including significant new open space, as envisioned by the Waterfront Plan. **You can watch the full community meeting online.** This redevelopment project is intended to come for final approvals later this year.

Exactly a decade ago, the City Council approved [Phase One of the Waterfront Landscape and Flood Mitigation Design](#). This exciting design married the vision of the Olin Group and the input of hundreds of residents who participated in the planning efforts. It also received input from the [Art and History Report](#) to ensure our history is a key component of the future of our waterfront.

Along the Potomac River shoreline, the City is working to advance a significant project to address backflow of river outfalls, overtopping of our bulkheads and inundation of our storm sewers. The City formalized an interim agreement with [Skanska/JMT](#), a contract team, under the [Progressive Design-Build Model](#) that has been selected for this work.

The contractor team [has now provided their initial findings](#). These findings are demonstrating the benefit of Progressive Design-Build, as their planning efforts have been to reduce cost and risk by eliminating underground storage and by redesigning the pump station plan. They have proposed a more targeted plan to replace bulkheads along the shoreline.

We are on the verge of realizing the vision for Alexandria's waterfront that so many shared. The economic vitality must be paired with flood resiliency to ensure our success.

Please [let me know your thoughts](#) on these concepts as we work to achieve the vision of a more vibrant and accessible waterfront for our City.



Short-Term Rentals

Today there are over 700 short-term rentals in the City of Alexandria. This comprises a little less than 1% of our housing stock. As defined by law, a short-term rental is a dwelling space that is rented for fewer than 30 consecutive days at a time. They have been popularized by AirBNB, VRBO, etc.

The Commonwealth of Virginia has struggled to arrive at the correct regulatory regime and provide Virginia's local governments with appropriate tools to address quality of life impacts.

During the 2017 General Assembly session, [legislation was enacted seeking to address these types of businesses](#). The adopted legislation allowed local governments in Virginia to create a registry, requiring registration, imposition of a fee for registration, and fines for those who do not register.

With the law in effect, Alexandria [moved quickly to implement this new authority and today 460 short-](#)

term rentals are registered in the City.

Shortly thereafter, **Alexandria became one of the first in Virginia to negotiate a tax collection agreement with AirBNB to allow them to collect and remit the appropriate taxes** from those short-term rentals operating within the City.

Today, short-term rentals constitute over a quarter of the transient lodging (hotel) tax revenue that the City receives. Last fiscal year, this portion totaled \$3.3 million from short-term rentals and so far in this fiscal year (which ended yesterday), we have collected \$2.5 million from short-term rentals (through the end of March).

Yet, we do hear complaints from residents regarding the quality of life impacts of these short-term rentals. Since 2018, the City has received 33 calls to 311, citing concerns such as trash, noise, parties and parking. We have received 65 calls to Police during this same period, citing concerns regarding potential criminal activity. **There are also studies that cite the impact of short-term rentals on housing affordability.**

In May, **our City staff came to the Council to discuss to regulation of these uses** and how the City may adopt a more stringent regulatory structure to address these concerns. **You can watch the staff presentation and the City Council discussion (the presentation begins at the 25:00 point).**

This summer, our staff will engage with the community regarding further regulation, returning this fall with proposals for consideration by the City Council. **Let me know your thoughts!**

**Alexandria West Plan**

Last week, our City staff released the draft of the new Alexandria West Small Area Plan.

Since the fall, our community has been engaged in a comprehensive update of the Alexandria West Small Area Plan. This plan will encompass **a wide swath of our City, the entire northwest corner.**

You can watch the community meeting where our staff presented the draft plan. We would like **your input between now and August 1st.**

The City's Master Plan is made up of **18 Small Area Plans** and several Citywide sub-plans (Transportation, Housing, Open Space, etc). This is how the City meets **the obligations of state law to adopt and update a comprehensive plan.**

Over 23 years ago, the City Council adopted **"Plan for Planning,"** a vision for how the community could proactively work to get ahead of development pressures and ensure that our community's vision would shape transition in our neighborhoods.

Since that time, the City has been revising and modernizing these Small Area Plans, working intensely with different neighborhoods around the City to adopt a vision for the future of our community.

But no plan is worth the effort if the City will not implement what was planned. Over the past several years the City has worked to improve our efforts to implement plans and policy goals in a variety of areas. **To provide accountability for those efforts, the City publishes an annual report detailing the status of implementation of the most significant City planning initiatives.**

I am excited to see these neighborhood planning efforts moving forward, specifically as we work to conclude a new Alexandria West Plan! I look forward to your input.



Electric Vehicle Charging

Last year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change again sounded the alarm. Their report gives the world very little time to take meaningful action to mitigate catastrophic impacts of rising temperatures.

A year ago, the **City Council approved our Energy and Climate Change Action Plan.** This comprehensive plan is designed to turn our Environmental Action Plan and our declaration of climate emergency into concrete steps the City can take to make progress on this vital issue impacting our future.

This plan identifies 13 strategies across five sectors:

- Buildings
- Transportation
- Carbon-Free Electricity
- Waste
- Other

The plan calls for a 50% reduction in Greenhouse Gas Emissions by 2030 and 100% reduction by 2050. To achieve reductions of this scale requires significant action. Specific to personal vehicles, by 2030, 50% of all personal vehicle sales will need to be electric and 100% of personal vehicles sales electric by 2050.

Three years ago, [the City Council approved our new Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure Readiness Strategy](#). Alexandria has higher electric vehicle adoption rates than the rest of our nation. Today, there are over 3,100 electric vehicles in Alexandria, with two-thirds of those vehicles on the East End of our City.

Studies show that 80% of electric vehicle owners charge their vehicles at home. But for many residents of our City who live in multi-family dwellings or properties without access to dedicated curbspace, that can be a challenge.

To help facilitate further electric vehicle deployment in Alexandria, the City is undertaking additional strategies.

Tomorrow evening, [the City Council will vote to approve a franchise solicitation to award agreements to private firms to install electric vehicle charging infrastructure](#) at 27 different City facilities. We envision issuing franchise agreements by the end of this year.

Additionally, [the Council voted last week to apply for Federal funds under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, to fund public charging infrastructure and strategies designed to expand deployment](#).

We are optimistic that these strategies will continue the rapid adoption of electric vehicles in our community.



Southside 495 Express Lanes

At the end of 2021, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) notified the City that they intended to study the expansion of the [Express Lanes system, that currently is on sections of Interstates 495, 395 and 95](#).

The current proposal is to [expand the system by 11 miles, from the Springfield interchange across the Wilson Bridge into Maryland](#).

The City has generally had a "cautiously skeptical" stance towards similar proposals in the past. We have worked with the Commonwealth to ensure that these projects generate revenue for transit initiatives and include protections to prevent such efforts from exacerbating cut-through traffic on City streets.

Last fall, [the City provided written input to VDOT](#) on this proposal expressing concerns regarding the impacts this project may have on transit over the Wilson Bridge in the future and traffic flow impacts to the City.

It was 26 years ago, in 1998, that the City of Alexandria filed a lawsuit challenging the Federal government's plans and designs for the new Wilson Bridge. A year later, **the City Council approved an extensive settlement agreement** that included a variety of components designed to protect the City and ensure that when resources and vision allowed, transit would be incorporated as part of this critical span.

As this project proposes to make additional changes to the bridge, the City has very real concerns that various configurations for these new lanes could prevent transit in the future.

This was one of the factors that shaped discussion on this project before the regional Transportation Planning Board (TPB). **Ultimately, the TPB allowed this study to continue, with explicit instructions to study these issues further before any final configuration is determined.**



Hotel Heron Opens

Last week, the Hotel Heron opened in Old Town, boasting a new restaurant, a rooftop deck and modern rooms.

In 1929, the George Mason Hotel opened up at the corner of S. Washington Street and Prince Street in Old Town. Designed by the **architect William Lee Stoddart**, the hotel boasted a toilet in each room!

While the hotel used a few neon signs on the roof to lure guests, in 1971, it shut down for good. The building later became the headquarters of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). The building was sold when NCMEC moved to a new location in the City of Alexandria.

This transition led to the opportunity to return this building to its original use, with the opening of the Heron.

Hotels are the most lucrative land-use for the City of Alexandria and its taxpayers. Hotels generate significant real estate tax, transient lodging (hotel) tax, dining tax, sales tax and Business, Professional and Occupational License (BPOL) tax. In return, hotels consume hardly any services, with no kids in schools, minimal public safety needs and limited impact on transportation networks. No other land-use can match it.

When a private entity explored the concept of converting the old George Mason Hotel back to its

original use, the Alexandria Economic Development Partnership (AEDP) went to work.

AEDP identified a state program, the **Tourism Development Financing Program (TDFP)**, administered by the Virginia Tourism Corporation. This program identifies tools to address the needs of gap financing for projects supporting tourism activity.

In this case, a \$69.6 million project was partially financed by its investors, leaving a \$6.1 million gap. Using the TDFP, private loans sought by the hotel developer could be serviced by 3 revenue sources, all ultimately paid by hotel guests:

- The Commonwealth agrees to provide its 1% sales and use tax charged to each hotel guest over 20 years to pay off the debt
- The City agrees to provide its 1% sales and use tax charged to each hotel guest over 20 years to pay off the debt
- The hotel guests will pay a special 5% "access fee" over 20 years to pay off the debt

As the City Council considered this arrangement, concerns were raised by members of Council and labor activists, as to whether additional protections for workers could be included as part of the performance agreement with the hotel.

Ultimately, City Council voted 4-3 to approve the arrangement, submitting the application to the Virginia Tourism Corporation and including new protections in the performance agreement to support the right of employees to organize with a union if they wish to do so.

The landowners of this property have vested rights under the existing zoning to convert the property to a multi-family residential use (as well as other "by-right" uses). By reverting to the hotel use, this property will generate a net tax return to the City's taxpayers of \$37.6 million over the next 20 years, a return 500% higher than an allowed residential use.

This project brings back the historic use of the building and provides strong economic return for the City's taxpayers. It's also a beautiful hotel with a great restaurant!



Skill Games

The Virginia Code defines a skill game as: "an electronic, computerized, or mechanical contrivance, terminal, machine, or other device that requires the insertion of a coin, currency, ticket, token, or similar object to operate, activate, or play a game, the outcome of which is determined by any element of skill of the player and that may deliver or entitle the person playing or operating the device to receive cash or cash equivalents, gift cards, vouchers, billets, tickets, tokens, or electronic credits to be exchanged for cash or cash equivalents whether the payoff is made automatically from the device or manually."

While some might define these devices differently, they are essentially similar to electronic slot machines that can be located in a convenience store. In 2020, there were over 10,000 of these devices around the Commonwealth.

Last fall, the Virginia Supreme Court allowed the state to enforce a ban on these devices, and they have been illegal since this that time.

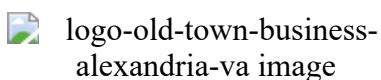
There was an effort during the most recent General Assembly session to bring these skill games back to life. Legislation adopted by both houses was amended by Governor Youngkin to add more controls on the uses. Those amendments were rejected by the General Assembly, which caused Governor Youngkin to veto the legislation.

For reasons that I cannot quite understand, the regulation of these devices has become one of the biggest issues in the Virginia General Assembly and legislation has returned during the current Special Session that would bring the skill games back.

In April, I wrote the General Assembly and urged that any effort to bring back skill games include local control and resident input on such a proposal.

Unfortunately, there is a torrent of campaign money being directed at members of the General Assembly from those that would benefit from a return to these neighborhood gambling machines.

I am hopeful that the General Assembly will look past these campaign donations and instead ensure that any legalization of these devices includes appropriate protections to ensure local control and neighborhood compatibility.



logo-old-town-business-alexandria-va image

BID Update

About seven years ago, the City was caught up in a spirited community debate about whether we should create a proposed **Business Improvement District (BID)** for Old Town.

Opinions were varied. However, nearly all involved at that time agreed that our central business district was challenged.

After a community worksession and a lengthy public hearing, the Council took up the issue. **The Council voted unanimously to refine the proposed BID, distribute a proposed budget and set of performance metrics, and hold a vote of the impacted businesses to determine if there is sufficient support to proceed.**

Before that ever got off the ground, **the City Manager returned to the City Council with his recommendation that we not proceed with a vote of the affected businesses and instead shelve the effort to consider a BID.**

In the ensuing years, a lot changed. **We have seen considerable consolidation in the ownership of properties in Old Town.** But ultimately, the merits of the collective financing and governance enabled by a BID, have not gone away.

As such, there is a **new proposal of a Old Town Business Improvement Service District.** The proposal suggests different boundaries and a more modest budget, but similar priorities as previous iterations of this concept.

At the end of May, **the City Council made changes to our BID guidelines to ensure that each business owner and property owner has their perspective included in the decision-making process.**

As with the last effort to create a BID, I feel as though the idea has merit, and if sufficient support could be generated within the business community, the City should facilitate its creation.

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