

City of Alexandria, Virginia
WATERFRONT COMMISSION
Regular Meeting – Virtual
Torpedo Factory Implementation Strategy
Tuesday, December 6, 2021
7:30 a.m.

Commission Members

Present:

Gina Baum, Alexandria Park and Recreation Commission
Eldon Boes, Alexandria Environmental Policy Commission (EPC)
Robert Cvejanovich, Old Town Civic Association (OTCA)
Doug Gosnell, Alexandria Marina Pleasure Boat Owners
Kristina Hagman, Founders Park Community Association
Charlotte Hall, VisitAlexandria
Judy Heiser, Alexandria Commission for the Arts
Trae Lamond, Representative, Old Town Business and Professional Association (OTBPA)
Nathan (Nate) Macek, Alexandria Planning Commission, and Vice-Chair, Waterfront Commission
Lebaron Reid, Commissioner At-Large
Louise Roseman, Citizen, Park Planning District I
Barbara Saperstone, Citizen, east of Washington St. and south of King St
Mohamed E. "Mo" Seifeldin, Member, Alexandria City Council
Kathy Seifert, Alexandria Seaport Foundation
Scott Shaw, Alexandria Chamber of Commerce
Stephen Thayer, Citizen, east of Washington St. and north of King St. and Chair, Waterfront Commission
Christa Waters, Citizen, east of Washington St. and north of Pendleton St.
Patricia Webb, Citizen, Park Planning District II
Robert Weinhagen, Historic Alexandria Foundation
Esther White, Alexandria Archaeological Commission

Vacancy

Citizen, Park Planning District III

City Staff

Emily Baker, Deputy City Manager
Jamie Bridgeman Alexandria Police Department (APD)
Jack Browand, Commission Staff Liaison, and Acting Deputy Director, Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities (RPCA)
Mike Durham, Assistant Dockmaster, RPCA
Julian Gonsalves, Assistant City Manager for Public/Private Partnerships
Catherine Miliaris, Principal Planner, P&Z
Iris Portny, Commission Recording Secretary, RPCA
Diane Ruggiero, Director, Office of the Arts, and Deputy Director, RPCA
Terry A. Suehr – Director, Department of Project Implementation (DPI)

Guests

Brian Buzzell

Yvonne Callahan

Matthew Carroll
Susan Cohen
Nancy Fortwengler
Martha Harris
Simmi Kaur
Jeff Lipsky
Michael McWhirter
Susannah Moore
Jon Rosenbaum
Melynda Wilcox

Gabriela Cañamar Clark
Bert Ely
Stuart Fox
Christine Hines
Stephanie Landrum
Jody Manor
Christina Mindrup
Charlene Nield
Savannah Sierco

Call to Order – Stephen Thayer, Chair

Thayer called the meeting to order at 7:30 a.m. and welcomed Deputy City Manager Emily Baker to the meeting.

Discussion Items for Action and Information

ITEM 1: COMMISSION REPORTS / ANNOUNCEMENTS

WATERFRONT FLOOD MITIGATION COMMITTEE – Nathan Macek, Committee Chair

Note: Committee meeting information is posted on the Commission webpage:

<https://www.alexandriava.gov/recreation/info/default.aspx?id=76162>

- The Committee continues to review and provide feedback on Waterfront flood mitigation options being developed by the Department of Project Implementation (DPI) team.
- Macek referred Commissioners to his more detailed report at the Commission’s November 16 meeting.
- The Committee plans to meet in January 2022 to review staff’s latest proposals.
- DPI staff will brief the full Commission in the near future on options being considered.
- When the flood mitigation options are finalized, the Committee will develop a draft Commission recommendation to Council for the full Commission to consider.
- The timing of when staff will submit its flood mitigation recommendations to Council has not yet been determined.
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ITEM 2: TORPEDO FACTORY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY – Vibrancy and Sustainability Action Plan

Introduction:

- Chair Thayer thanked staff for developing the additional information in response to Commissioners’ requests at the November 16, 2021, Commission meeting. At that time Commissioners had said they had not received enough information to make an informed recommendation to Council on the TFAC scenarios included in the Vibrancy Action Plan.
- Thayer noted the Commission continues to support the Torpedo Factory Art Center (TFAC) as a key City asset, the TFAC artists and their work, including TFAC artists’ in the City’s TFAC planning process.
- The Commission regards TFAC as a longtime essential element of the Waterfront.

- The Commission had sent Council a detailed letter conveying its concerns regarding the TFAC Action Plan for Vibrancy and Sustainability in a December 22, 2020, letter.

Staff presentation - Diane Ruggiero, Director, Office of the Arts, and Deputy Director, RPCA and Julian Gonsalves, Assistant City Manager for Public/Private Partnerships.

Presentation overview:

- ***Strategy*** - Ruggiero reviewed the TFAC strategy's concepts and noted that the City sees TFAC artists as a central element in TFAC operations.
- ***Illustrative special uses*** - Gonsalves presented the financial feasibility analyses that support the report's illustrative uses of TFAC spaces, and the capital improvements that will be needed over the next 40 years. Some level of City subsidy supporting operating expenses will continue to be needed.
 - The Plan's scenarios included for using spaces, including estimates of related costs, show how the TFAC building's spaces *might* be used.
 - They are not actual plans.
- ***Stakeholder engagement in decision making*** - Final decisions on how to use TFAC spaces will be made with stakeholder participation and, because TFAC is in the Old and Historic District, plans will require approval by the Board of Architectural Review.
- ***Vibrancy report highlights included:***
 - A structural report, including an assessment of the building's current condition, including, for example, its rooftop, entrances, and restrooms.
 - Preliminary cost estimates for building improvements that would be needed for support some of the activities being considered as *possible* TFAC uses, e.g., roof/deck add-ons and enhancements needed to improve the building's Waterfront access.
 - A prediction that a TFAC rooftop restaurant is unlikely to generate enough revenue to cover the substantial costs of major structural improvements to the building that would be needed to modify the building.

Commission Comments/ Issues Raised

- Keep much of what is there now – but make it new and different, the strategy used for the expanded Waterfront Park.
- TFAC artists and their work should be preserved as a key element of TFAC.
- TFAC revitalization is necessary to make TFAC more appealing to residents who live outside Old Town.
- Agreement that capital improvements are needed to enhance the visitor experience.
- Most art centers have additional features that increase their appeal to visitors, e.g., a museum and/or gallery space; culinary arts, performing arts.
- ***Broadening TFAC's arts focus*** - TFAC's arts-related activities should expand beyond its current visual-arts-only focus.
- ***Art-related retail*** - Siefelden noted Council's earlier TFAC discussion had focused on art-based retail space such as Busboys and Poets. Consider adding performing arts, recognizing that acoustic, flooring and other improvements would be needed to accommodate these.

- **Culinary arts**- Mixed opinions for the idea of including culinary arts with, for example, the possibility of hosting world class chef events.
- **TFAC as a historic asset** - Support for ensuring the Office of Historic Alexandria and Board of Architectural Review be actively involved in the planning process.
- **Ground Lease Option**
 - Skepticism that this would be financially viable
 - Residents’ concerns that a private leaseholder would reduce the amount of influence the community would have over decisions affecting TFAC activities.
 - Would the City using a ground lease gradually phase out the actual “artist experience” and / or lessen the quality of artists working at TFAC if subsidized lease rates were reduced?
- **Observation deck** - Interest in the type of structural enhancements needed to add a waterside observation deck on the outside of the building and whether BAR approval might be an obstacle to this option.
- **Potential impact on artists during and after redevelopment**
 - Relocating artists for up to two years to avoid incremental building improvements - Interest in having more details on how an all-at-once TFAC redevelopment could be managed while preserving a workspace for TFAC artists. How could temporary relocation of TFAC artists be coordinated with Old Town North’s arts district?
 - **Using incremental building improvements while keeping the building open** – Would a building perpetually under construction make TFAC a less desirable place to work and/or visit?
- **Improving community engagement** –TFAC planning process needs to substantially improve community engagement, including continuing involvement of civic associations and advisory commissions in the TFAC planning process.
- **Transparency** - City needs to increase the community’s understanding of the planning process and improving stakeholder trust in the TFAC decision making process.

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Financial viability/ revenue generation

- **Revenue generation** - General support for including TFAC activities that generate revenue that can help fund TFAC capital improvements.
- **Public Private Partnership– Custom option:** Middle option (Custom), with a public-private partnership, seems the most realistic scenario.
- **More calculations are need on revenue generation projections, e.g.,** the rooftop restaurant’s structural requirements, costs and potential revenue generation.
 - Concern the report’s financial projections for revenues generated by a roof-top restaurant were too pessimistic.
 - Shaw, drawing on his own restaurant experience, offered a quick ‘back of the envelope’ calculation that predicted as much as 10 million dollars could be generated by meals and sales tax revenue over time.

Motion: Supports the second option w/constructive advice on a path forward

Public Comments

- **Melinda Wilcox**, Board Chair of the Alexandria Symphony Orchestra (ASO), speaking in a personal capacity. ASO is the City's largest performing arts organization. She recommended TFAC become a center for all arts, not just the visual arts and suggested TFAC common areas be made suitable for concerts with acoustic and other modifications as needed. ASO would like to be part of the TFAC planning process. A TFAC artist receives a lease subsidy, but ASO loses money every time it presents a Waterfront concert.
- Wilcox, speaking as a resident, said TFAC has lost its vibrancy and appeal. Status quo is not an option. She supported having a restaurant on the third floor, not first floor, to move TFAC's visitor flow upward.

NOTE: The finalized version of the Commission's letter is posted at:

<https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/recreation/info/WCTFACLetter10Dec2021.pdf>

Motion: *Macek moved, and Baum seconded* that the Waterfront Commission (a) rescind the motion approved at its November 2021 meeting, and (b) draft a letter to Council that reiterates the Commission's previous positions taken in its December 2020 letter to Council on the need for changes at TFAC.

Issues to be highlighted by the Commission in its final wording include:

- The WC supports reinvigoration of the Torpedo Factory Art Center (TFAC), including maintaining the TFAC as a center for the arts, creating a lively draw for visitors to the City and Alexandria residents, creating a more welcoming entrance to the center from the waterfront, and continuing the role of working artists as a major feature. WC is encouraged by the City's progress over the past year in completing a series of studies that underpin the City's scenarios and the WC's recommendations to City Council.
- As described in this letter, the WC has reviewed the illustrative scenarios for TFAC investment prepared by City Staff, the Commission recommends City Council pursue the Custom Program scenario.
- At a special meeting of the WC on December 6, 2021, the WC received a presentation from City staff on the Torpedo Factory Implementation Strategy which included financial information.
- Staff outlined three illustrative scenarios for reinvestment in the center, the Incremental, Custom Program, and Ground Lease Scenarios.
- The WC endorses the Custom Program scenario as the best path forward to reinvigorating the TFAC, in partnership with various private and non-profit stakeholders. It offers the best opportunity to make timely investments in the facility and provides a balanced mix of space allocation and programming potential.
- The Custom Program scenario best facilitates continued use of TFAC as an arts center, including space for working artist galleries and other arts uses such as performing arts, culinary arts, glass blowing, and other uses. In contrast, the Incremental Scenario would take too long to implement and upgrade facilities and would not result in significant changes in the offerings of the TFAC.

The motion passed by voice vote.

City Updates

PUBLIC SAFETY - Jamie M. Bridgeman, Captain (APD)–

- Significant congestion related to the Scottish Walk was the major issue highlighted.

Commissioner comment:

- Saperstone recommended that the new traffic patterns created by the King Street pedestrian plaza be studied.

COMMUNITY PROJECT UPDATES – Jack Browand (RPCA)

- First Night is the next large City event planned.

Commissioner Announcements/Reports

- **Seifert** reported that Seaport Foundation plans to request City approval for building a second facility next to its existing Seaport Center since it is operating at capacity with a waiting list. Building a second facility will let it expand its services to at-risk youth and adults. Its proposal should be considered by Council in January or February and a capital campaign will be launched after that.
- **Shaw (Robinson Landing Pier Management)** – In light of City plans to take over management of the pier from EYA, Shaw reported Alexandria Restaurant Partners (ARP) has offered to manage Robinson Landing pier for the City as it had done for EYA.
- **Boes** reported RiverRenew’s tunnel construction is scheduled to begin in February 2022.

Next Meeting – January 18, 2022

Proposed Topics

- Noise ordinance.
- New traffic patterns related to King Street pedestrian plaza
- Flood Mitigation Committee update –To be the major focus of a future meeting.
- Robinson Landing Pier Management.
- RiverRenew construction update.

Adjournment

At 9:30 a.m. Baum moved, and Shaw seconded that the meeting adjourn. Motion passed by unanimous voice vote.