

Waterfront Commission and Park & Recreation Commission

Department of Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities
1108 Jefferson Street
Alexandria VA 22311

May 21, 2025

To: The Honorable Mayor and Members of City Council

Re: Joint Letter on Robinson Terminal North (RTN) Development Proposal

We write to share recommendations from both the Waterfront Commission and the Park and Recreation Commission on the development of the Robinson Terminal North (RTN) site. Attached also is a more detailed report developed by the Waterfront Commission Subcommittee on this project.

RTN is one of the last remaining waterfront development sites in Alexandria. The process to bring the development to this point has taken many years and considerable planning, and the Commissions commend the progress made. It is imperative to learn from the lessons of past developments along the waterfront and incorporate these lessons into RTN. We recognize that waterfront property in Alexandria is a scarce resource and important for both the enjoyment and economic needs of the city, residents and visitors. We strongly encourage the City to work with the developer to maximize the public amenity space on the site, develop a plan for providing near-term public access to the water, and visibly recognize the historic nature of the site.

Several points are paramount to the success of RTN, consistent with the Waterfront Small Area Plan Development Goals and Guidelines:

- Designing and maintaining a continuous waterfront pedestrian promenade has long been a tenant of Alexandria's waterfront improvement efforts. The complexity and cost of the development has the potential to lead the developer to complete the work in two phases (West and East) with a lengthy delay in construction possible between the two phases. The project is expected to start with the West building. If there is a delay in start of construction of the East portion of the development, the City should require the developer to complete a public access path along the riverfront as soon as the developer is aware of its need for delays. It could be an extended period for the second (East) phase to be completed and leaving the waterfront access unavailable during this period is not acceptable.
- The site is contiguous to a large, dilapidated and complex pier. The pier is owned by the current owner of the site. We are pleased that the developer's demolition plan calls for cutting the pilings to a level close to the riverbed to allow for and protect waterborne traffic. We understand this work will begin in early summer 2025. The City should work towards replacing the pier and/or make improvements to the shoreline to enable use by pedestrians and boats or a floating dock (for kayaks, paddleboards or other non-motorized vehicles). This

enhancement would help accomplish the long-term vision of the Waterfront Plan to provide multiple water access points to Alexandria.

- The Commissions discussed at great length the optimal ownership of the public access areas of RTN. Ultimately, the Commission supports having the area that is contiguous to the river, including a walking path, owned by the City. Ongoing, daily maintenance would be the responsibility of the condominium residents and major capital improvements to be the responsibility of the City. The Commission saw merits to the City in having the Condominium owners retain ownership and full maintenance responsibilities with public access and authority given to the City for future development of the riverfront including a dock and access points. But ultimately it is decided that the City's ownership of the land along the river is in the public's best interest.
- The Commissions support construction of up to five pavilions with supporting infrastructure on the unit block of Oronoco Street and in the public access areas of the development to allow for publicly accessible areas for shade and for small gathering spaces. We request ongoing updates and consultation on the planned amenities and activation in the public access spaces in the development so that we may provide additional feedback.
- Finally, we urge the City and the developers to consider ways to visibly recognize the historic nature of the site through appropriate signage or art installations that would serve as a reminder of the vibrant past and present of this unique Alexandria space.

Thank you for the opportunity to review plans for this site and provide feedback to City Council. The two Commissions welcome further opportunities to review development plans as they are refined and finalized.

Sincerely,

Lebaron K Reid
Lebaron Reid, Chair
Alexandria Waterfront Commission

Dana R. Colarulli
Dana Robert Colarulli, Chair
Park & Recreation Commission

Janice M. Abraham
Jan Abraham, Chair
Robinson Terminal North Subcommittee

Attachment:

Report of Waterfront Commission Subcommittee on Robinson Terminal North
Development

Report of Waterfront Commission Subcommittee on Robinson Terminal North Development

The Subcommittee, which was chaired by Jan Abraham and included Sydney Smith, David Robbins, Louise Roseman, and William Vesilind, met on October 8 and 16, 2024, and January 29 and May 14, 2025 to review the proposed Robinson Terminal North Development. The discussion focused on adherence to Waterfront Small Area Plan Development Goals and Development Guidelines for the RTN site. The meetings were announced and open to the public. Representative City staff attended the meetings.

Development Goals

- 1. Employ a land use mix and design which invites the public and encourages activity within the proposed development in the adjacent public spaces.**

The proposed development plan achieves land use mix.

- 2. Provide extensive public amenities and free access to and along the water's edge.**

Free access to and along the water's edge is achieved. The Commission requests ongoing engagement and consultation on the yet-to-be-designed public amenities. The Commission strongly encourages extensive interactive amenities (e.g., game tables, places for music concerts, exercise classes, and other public events). Bryant Park in New York City can be a model of a public space with high interactive amenities and engagement by the public. Chicago has also invested heavily in enhancing and supporting the waterfront as a community asset, notably with The Wild Mile, which is an example of a public-private partnership that enhances urban living.

Although the intent of the developer is to have the two phases (East and West of Union St.) be developed sequentially and as a continuous construction project, external and financial factors could delay construction of the East portion. The Commission strongly recommends, as a condition of DSUP, that if the construction of the East portion is delayed, the public riverfront path be completed as soon as the delay of the East project is identified by the developer and the City. This would allow continuous riverfront access throughout the City, if for some reason the East portion of the project is delayed.

To support public activation of the site, the Commission encourages utilities and other supporting infrastructure, including water fountains, electricity, and generator support, be installed in the public access area and up to five pavilions be constructed and located in the unit block of Oronoco and in the public access area of the development.

Public restrooms are planned for the West building. We believe these restrooms are an important element of the planned development and should be a condition of the DSUP.

The on-site restrooms should be publicly available 7 days a week, 365 days per year, from 7 am – 10 pm.

3. Improve access by extending Pendleton Street as a pedestrian connection to an improved public pier.

Pedestrian connection to the waterfront via Pendleton Street and Oronoco St. is achieved. No public pier is included in the proposed development and the current pier will be removed by the developer due to lack of structural integrity. The Commission encourages the City to retain the flexibility to build a public pier at Robinson Terminal North in the future to provide water access to the site for kayakers, paddle boarders, and boats. We believe amenities, either a fixed pier or a floating dock, should exist to encourage public access via the river.

The Waterfront Commission believes the park should be accessible to visitors who arrive from the river in various modalities. Robinson Terminal North is a historical deep-water port and a key connection between Alexandria and the river. Access from/to the river is also a key component of the Waterfront Plan. The current Robinson Terminal North development plan provides no access for visiting kayakers, paddle boarders or boaters. Access to Robinson Landing by boat, kayak and paddleboard has proven to be a huge success that both provides revenue to the City through docking fees, as well as public "parking" to access retail, restaurants, and adjacent parks.

4. Pay homage to historic West's Point through public space design and interpretive features.

The Commission has not yet seen the public space design and interpretive features paying homage to West's Point. The Commission requests an update on the plans before they go to the City for approval.

5. Maintain a building scale compatible with existing fabric to the south and west.

The proposed development is compatible in scale.

6. Maximize water views from buildings, streets and rooftop open spaces.

Many portions of the development have water views, which are primarily accessible to residents, such as from many of the condominium units and from the building rooftops. Residents will have access to water views from the West Building and restaurant patrons will have water views from the West and East Building restaurants. The public will have views and access to the water from the areas along the waterfront.

Development Guidelines

- 1. Active uses should be part of any development and should constitute the predominant ground floor uses.**

Two ground-floor restaurants are included in the West building and one ground-floor restaurant is included in the East building. Most of the ground floor space in the East building is devoted to residential units.

- 2. Preferred use on the site is mixed use, emphasizing arts, history and culture (including a museum) and including vibrant commercial uses (such as hotel).**

The proposed use of the site does not emphasize arts, history, and culture. Three restaurants on site support vibrant commercial use. The Waterfront Commission has been an advocate for a high level of activation for portions of the waterfront and encourages the plans to include appropriate infrastructure (electricity, plumbing etc.) to allow for active use of the public space, including the adjacent AlexRenew site, the football-shaped site on the southeast portion of the public space and up to five pavilions to provide sun protection and casual gathering spaces. The Commission requests updates on the plans as they are further developed.

- 3. Residential use and design should be compatible with a high level of public activity and located away from the water.**

The design currently has residential units in the East building on the ground floor and in close proximity to the area of public activity. There should be a requirement that the residential units have robust soundproofing to minimize noise complaints.

- 4. Residential use should not be the primary use of the site. The location, design and specific type of residential use proposed must coexist well with the other planned uses on the site and planned public activity in the public spaces adjacent to the residential development. Ground floor residential units are not permitted.**

This guideline is not met. While the development plan includes three restaurants, residential use is the primary use of the site. The East building has ground floor residential units. The Commission is concerned with the interface between the public activation of the area and the highly priced residential condominium units with special attention on the ground floor condominium units. The Commission encourages sound insulation, privacy screens and triple-pane windows for ground-floor condominium units as well as full disclosure for all residents in condominium documents, describing the public access to the surrounding areas.

- 5. The streetscape and pedestrian experience along North Union Street should be enhanced; in addition to undergrounding utilities, providing street trees and appropriate light fixtures.**

This guideline appears to be met. Union St will have areas for ride share drop offs and quick delivery of people and things to access the two residential buildings, East and West.

6. **Historic interpretation, consistent with the recommendations of the History Plan, should inform every aspect of the redevelopment and adjacent public spaces, with particular attention given to the West's Point site which is the area which extends from the water west up Oronoco Street to Union Street and represents the origins of Alexandria.**

We encourage implementation of this guideline but have not seen the developer's plans in this regard. The Commission requests updates on the plans as they are developed.

7. **Encourage modern design inspired by historic precedent while maintaining compatibility with the nearby residential neighborhoods and ensuring compliance with the Potomac River Vicinity Height District regulations.**

This guideline appears to be met.

8. **Redevelopment proposals shall require review on an advisory basis by the Old and Historic District Board Architectural Review prior to being considered by the Planning Commission and City Council prior to approval.**

This guideline has been met.

9. **Parking for new buildings should be accommodated on site and below grade. Although the Plan anticipates low parking ratios, the applied ratio must be consistent with industry norms for similar hotels.**

Parking for East building is below grade, but building constraints require parking for the West building to be at grade. The current plan does not include a hotel. The Commission does not believe that 12 public parking spaces are adequate for the three restaurants and guests of residents in the condominium units.

10. **The bulk and scale of the buildings should be stepped down from Union Street toward the water.**

This guideline appears to be met; the East building is a smaller bulk and scale than the West building.

11. **Curb cuts should not be located on any building and/or block frontages facing the water or North Union Street, and should be minimized if facing open space along Oronoco Street.**

There are two curb cuts at the development, one facing Pendleton Street for deliveries, trash collection and parking for the West building and one facing North Union Street for deliveries and the underground parking garage in the East building.

The Commission suggests that trash removal and deliveries, particularly supporting the East building 35 condominium units and a full-service restaurant, be further studied as the amount of activity for deliveries and trash will be considerable and the practicality of using smaller vans for trash collection and delivery is questionable. Much more frequent trash collection than specified in the DSUP application is encouraged.

12. Shoreline treatment at Robinson Terminal North should include native plantings and naturalization where possible.

The Commission does not have information regarding the landscape design and requests further updates as the plans are developed. The Commission supports ensuring that nothing is done during or after development that will hinder stabilization of the shore line.

13. Redevelopment should be compatible with any biosparging technology, or other bioremediation being employed by the City in treatment of the Oronoco Outfall-Alexandria Town Gas site located at the eastern end of Oronoco Street.

City staff confirmed these requirements have been met.

14. As part of the redevelopment, on and off-site public amenities shall be provided by the developer of the site. The specific amenities to be provided will be determined during the development review process. Desirable public amenities include:

- **Public art**
- **Open spaces with public access easements**
- **Retention of the Robinson Terminal pier**
- **Environmental amenities above and beyond minimum required**

Public art. The Commission is very supportive of public art on this site but has not yet seen the proposed art. We request that the Commission be updated as the plans are developed.

Open spaces with public access easements. The Commission strongly recommends that the RTN condominium association retain ownership of and maintenance/upkeep responsibilities for the public space (excluding the AlexRenew portion of the site), subject to a public access easement. The Commission believes this model of ownership will provide the highest level of maintenance and upkeep to this important public area and has been successfully adopted elsewhere along the waterfront, such as Harborside's ownership of and responsibility to maintain Shipyard Park including the shoreline.

The open space development plans should be coordinated with the contiguous AlexRenew space which while under separate ownership will flow naturally from the visitors' perspective.

Retention of the Robinson Terminal pier. The Commission recognizes the financial challenges of rebuilding the pier/dock at this time but strongly encourages the City to work towards replacing the pier in the near future with either another fixed pier for use by pedestrians and boats or a floating kayak/dinghy/paddleboard/dock. This enhancement would help accomplish the long-term vision of the Waterfront Plan with multiple water access points to Alexandria.

The Commission is pleased that the developer has assumed responsibility to remove the existing pier, including the pilings (to a level at or slightly above the river bed), and believes it is essential that it be done in an environmentally sensitive way. We also encourage the City begin the planning process for a replacement recreational, aesthetically pleasing shore line. The photo below illustrates the scale and complexity of the current dock with the numerous pilings supporting the pier. The Commission strongly recommends that nothing be done in the development of the RTN that would preclude long-term development of the waterfront for a future dock/pier. The Commission needs clarity on the future plans for the pier/dock and while this process evolves.



Environmental amenities. The Commission encourages the inclusion of one or more water fountains in the public space, consistent with City standards. Also, the Commission supports the removal of the railroad tracks on the street to support safer bike traffic. Special attention to the bike trail to road intersection is needed for safety of pedestrians and bikers, focusing on the corner of Pendelton and Union Streets.

The Commission encourages additional amenities, such as pavilions with utilities, games and recreational amenities on the public access area including a fire pit, lawn games, seating to watch the river and an area for small musical performances.

15. The maximum FAR and floor area allowed is included on the chart.

City staff confirm this condition has been met.

Signature: OK
Lebaron Reid (May 22, 2025 13:21 EDT)

Signature: D. Colarulli
Dana Colarulli (May 22, 2025 14:22 EDT)

Signature: Janice M. Abraham
Janice M. Abraham (May 22, 2025 14:32 EDT)