

Letters

Important work ahead during ZFH pause

To the editor:

The seven undersigned historic preservation organizations provided the following comments to City Council before the “Zoning for Housing” vote on November 28, because we are concerned about the impact of zoning changes on the city’s historic buildings and places. Alexandria has a sense of place that is valued and appreciated by residents and visitors alike, because Alexandrians have worked together to keep history alive and our historic resources cared for amid decades of change.

Now that Phase II of this rezoning initiative has been paused, even though Council passed Phase I last week, the community and the city can use this time to work together to build safeguards for the city’s many unprotected historic buildings.

“Dear Mayor Wilson

and members of Council:

The undersigned organizations that work to preserve historic architecture and/or cultural resources in Alexandria write to express our opposition to the Council’s rushed, blanket adoption of the Zoning for Housing package of proposals, because it has been drafted without first having done any underlying study of the irreversible negative impact these proposals could have on the city’s critical historic resources.

The Council is about to make broad and momentous changes to the city’s land use policies. Just as residents have raised questions about the effects these policies will have on infrastructure, schools, parking, etc., there should be some evidence-based analysis of the impact they will have on historic buildings and historic districts. Alexandria’s historic

SEE HISTORIC | 28

ALLGOOD FROM | 26

It’s an altogether different factor in the decision equation to ignore respected experts, not to mention large civic organizations. Eric Wagner, former nine-year chair of the Planning Commission, made a compelling, fact-based case for opposing ZFH. Impact: Zero.

Similarly, Sandy Modell, former long-time DASH manager, made a powerful argument against the flawed “Duke Street in Motion” initiative. Result: Nada.

If not one Council member has the sense of decency to vote with the view of the majority of Alexandria’s citizens, two things need to happen. First, the city needs to return to a ward-based system of City Council representation so that Council decisions will more accurately and rightly reflect citizens’ needs. Second, the entire “leadership” needs to be voted out of office. Enough is enough. Vote them all out of office!

—James E. Allgood,
Alexandria



About Alexandria

Hits and misses in 2023

BY MARK EATON

About Alexandria reached its second anniversary last month, so it is time to look back on 2023’s columns to assess the hits, in-betweens, misses and a follow-up item.

The hits

Requiring schools to tell students about awards: A March column, “Using a sledgehammer to swat a fly” criticizing a House of Delegates bill requiring public schools to notify students when they receive awards, and Gov. Glenn Youngkin’s indignant response when the bill was blocked in committee, elicited strong reactions. The theme that every oversight by teachers or administrators need not be remedied by state-wide legislation seemed to resonate.

The challenges of running Virginia’s largest public high school: “Congratulations, Mr. Duncan,” a July column welcoming Alexandria City High School’s new Executive Principal and exploring the challenges of the position, and its turnover, also generated comments. ACHS’ 25 administrators manage the biggest high school in Virginia which makes it hard to establish constructive relationships with students.

School Board considers staggered election terms: “Staggering forward” in May looked at the School Board’s debate about staggered terms of office. A School Board member told me the timeline on implementing staggered terms has slowed and that it is unlikely that a staggered terms proposal will be included in the city’s legislative package for the 2024 General Assembly session.

The in-betweens

Conspiracy theories and giving public officials a break: The columns titled “Look at the facts, not rumors” in October and “We’re all human, give them a break” in November were suggestions for tolerance, or fewer automatic negative assumptions. The former argued against conspiracy theories in city management and the latter sought to see things through the eyes of public officials who endure meeting after meeting, some of which run very late.

Public schools issues: “TINA [“There is no alternative”] to chance for change” in April explored the built-in potential for City Council-School Board conflict in the ways that public schools are managed and funded in Virginia. “Reversing learning loss” in September talked about the asymmetry between standardized test results and what opinion polls show parents think about their children’s

post-pandemic academic performance. Recent studies show that grade inflation contributes to this disconnect. The column included a shout-out about the Alexandria Tutoring Consortium’s important work. January’s “Book objections in public schools” explored how ACPS responds to book objections, how some teachers handle such objections and urged reasoned conversations with teachers and administrators as a constructive and nontheatrical approach.



MARK EATON

The misses

Renaming Minnie Howard: August’s column, “Renaming Minnie Howard?” suggested renaming/rebranding the new and dramatically expanded ACHS Minnie

Howard Campus. The column landed with a thud. Maybe everyone was away on vacation, but if there is any interest in this I have not heard it.

Zoning for Housing reform: Zoning for Housing, unanimously adopted by City Council last week, is deemed a “miss” because it was not the subject of a 2023 column. There were so many aspects to the city’s reform proposals, and so much discussion, that it was hard to find something useful to say in 700 words. I tried to add clarity to the debate in other writings. The polarity of reactions to ZFH was remarkable: Some saw it as having modest impact and others viewed it as apocalyptic.

Following up

We close with an update on a February 2022 column urging ACPS to repair the 400,000-gallon underground cistern at ACHS that would collect and recycle runoff surface water. The cistern has not operated for many years. In a November 13 statement, ACPS Executive Director of Facilities Erika Gulick said, “A formal request for the cistern’s specifications was submitted, and a purchase order has been issued to the contractor. The contractor has initiated the procurement of essential long-lead items, and a timeline is currently in the works for the equipment installation. Anticipated completion is slated for Spring 2024.”

Maybe patience really is a virtue.

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Kwanzaa celebrates cultural identity

“Harambee!” Let’s pull together! As friends and family, let’s celebrate our unity and collaboration to work for the common good and betterment of our surrounding world. This sentiment embodies the spirit of Kwanzaa.

Celebrated from December 26 to January 1, Kwanzaa is a Pan-African holiday that commemorates family, community and culture through core principles, song, dance, storytelling, poetry, reading, African drumming and feasting.

Such a celebration is especially important for Blacks in the United States due to the complex American history related to race relations. Established in 1966, amid the Black Freedom Movement, the celebration of Kwanzaa aimed to reaffirm and celebrate cultural identity, emphasizing the Nguzo Saba or the Seven Principles.

These ideals were created by author and scholar-activist, Maulana Karenga, Ph.D.,

who stresses the indispensable need to preserve, continually revitalize and promote Black/African American culture. Karenga, professor and chair of Africana studies at California State, in Long Beach, established Kwanzaa following extensive research on African harvest celebrations and other aspects of the Ashanti and Zulu.

In fact, Karenga’s choice in naming the celebration was influenced by the Swahili phrase, “Matunda ya kwanza,” meaning first fruits or harvest. Thus, namesaked after a phrase with origins in the first harvest celebrations of Africa. This embodies the core premise of the establishment of Kwanzaa: To reaffirm and re-establish the ties of Black Americans to African culture and to African people across the diaspora.

Most importantly, the following seven principles are at the heart of such celebrations:

- **Umoja**, or unity: To strive

for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race.

- **Kujichagulia**, self-determination: To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves.

- **Ujima**, collective work and responsibility: To build and maintain our community together and make our brothers’ and sisters’ problems our problems and to solve them together.

- **Ujamaa**, cooperative economics: To build and maintain our own stores, shops and other businesses and to profit from them together.

- **Nia**, purpose: To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.

- **Kuumba**, creativity: To always do as much as we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited.

- **Imani**, faith: To believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.

To honor this legacy and to support Kwanzaa celebrations, the Alexandria Black History Museum will host its annual Kwanzaa Workshop December 9 from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. The museum is located at 902 Wythe St. It is a family friendly, interactive workshop covering the history and principles of the holiday.

The event will start with a story for younger children and then will progress to stories and activities for older children. It will also include activities and decorating ideas to aid in planning your own Kwanzaa celebration. Reservations are suggested. For tickets, go to alexandriava.gov/shop.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.

HISTORIC

FROM | 27

and cultural resources are critical to residents’ sense of place and they generate a significant heritage tourism component of the city’s economy. Consequently, historic preservation deserves to be an express part of the calculus in weighing the proposals.

This cannot happen, however, without first conducting an independent, objective assessment of the effects each of the proposals is likely to have on historic assets. We thus urge you to postpone adoption of Zoning for Housing until a historic preservation study is completed and shared with the community. At a minimum,

Council should require such an analysis as an added part of any decision on Phase I, and the scope of that analysis should encompass the proposals contained in both Phase I and Phase II of the Initiative. Please slow down and make sure that zoning and policy changes are informed by evidence and examination of their likely impact

on the city’s historic architectural and cultural resources.”

-The Alexandria Association; Historic Alexandria Foundation; Historic Alexandria Resources Commission; The Old Town Civic Association; Town of Potomac Historical Association; Save Del Ray; Art Deco Society of Washington

Weekly Poll

Last Week

Should the city paint the crosswalks surrounding Market Square the Pride colors?

66% No.

22% Yes.

10% I like the concept, but not in the historic district.

2% I’m not sure.

This Week

Take the poll at alextimes.com

Do you prefer renaming or rededicating streets currently named for Confederates?

A) Rename to get a different name entirely.

B) Rededicate so residents don’t have to change everything.

C) I’m not sure.

D) I don’t understand the difference.