

Testimony in Support of the Heritage at Old Town

Rezoning #2020-00006
Development Special Use Permit #2020-10032
Transportation Management Plan Special Use Permit 2020-00084

February 2, 2020

Stewart Schwartz, Executive Director

Good evening, my name is Stewart Schwartz and I am the Executive Director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, the leading organization in the D.C. region advocating for walkable, inclusive, transit-oriented communities as the most sustainable and equitable way to grow and provide opportunities for all. We are a 24-year-old non-profit with partnerships that span the conservation, affordable housing, social equity, transit, bicycle-pedestrian, and business sectors. In 2017, we received the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) Regional Partnership Award.

We urge you to approve the Heritage at Old Town. Alexandria has lost over 90% of its affordable housing over the past two decades. We face a housing affordability crisis in Alexandria and neighboring jurisdictions. Multiple studies including those by COG, the Urban Institute, and others demonstrate that we need both more supply and more long-term committed affordable units. This project provides both. Supply is critical to avoid displacement, and a range of tools are needed including leveraging projects like these to ensure we create more affordable units.

We work in multiple jurisdictions in the DC region and support groups in other parts of Virginia, and we can confirm that the City of Alexandria does its homework. The result here from city and community input is a project that provides the housing we need in a well-designed development, with much improved streetscape and park spaces. Alexandria offers a very walkable, mixed-use environment with excellent transit – planned to be even better with the redesigned bus network which will provide frequent all-day, seven day per week service.

The project has been designed to step down to the adjacent rowhouses. For those who claim that nearby seven-story buildings are the end of the world. They are not. For nearly 25 years I lived in Alexandria near Braddock Metro (we moved due to the need to take care of a family member) in a four-story condo building next to townhomes and 7 and 9 story condo buildings, and within sight of much taller buildings. Public housing was just a block away. The neighborhood, however, lost diversity because when those buildings were built the city did not have the strategies in place to ensure a mix of housing affordability. That's why the Residential Multifamily Zoning applied here is such an important tool – and passed unanimously by Council in 2019.

The pandemic has illustrated just who are our most essential workers and the extreme stress they are under due to high housing prices. The racial equity crisis has demonstrated how poorly we have served people of color in our community and nation. It is time to ensure a more inclusive community for the long-term. We urge you to approve the Heritage at Old Town.

Thank you.