



Historic Fredericksburg Foundation, Inc.

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April 20, 2023

Dear Madam Mayor and Council Members:

The Board of Directors at Historic Fredericksburg Foundation, Inc. (HFFI) has reviewed the 2024 Budget materials presented to City Council last month and would like to comment on components that impact important historic resources in our community.

HFFI is pleased to see that \$100,000 is allocated in 2024 and another \$250,000 in 2025 in the current Capital Improvements Plan for much-needed work to stabilize and repair the physical remains of Idlewild—an individually listed property on the National Register of Historic Places that has suffered greatly over the past 15 years since the last treatment plan (Schaffer, Wilson, Sarver & Gray 2006). The preservation and interpretation of this historic site will be of great interest and cultural value to the neighborhood that surrounds it and the new school to be constructed on the property.

But the current conditions of Idlewild also serve as a reminder of the costly problems that often result from deferred maintenance and more than a decade of inaction. In the past year, two consultant reports identified the three extant outbuildings as safety hazards whose interiors could not be safely accessed—a strong contrast to conditions documented in its Preliminary Information Form (PIF) (Chasen 2008) (Figure 1, page 2). Though it is now water under the bridge, it is important to note that the severity of deterioration at the property could have been prevented by earlier intervention at lesser cost than what is now required.

The funding for Idlewild's stabilization and interpretation appears to be the only project listed as Historic Preservation (noted as "8 – Historic Preservation") in the 2024 Capital Improvements Plan. However, several proposed projects will physically impact important historic resources in our community. These include alterations to the buildings that currently house the Fredericksburg Area Museum, the downtown branch of the Central Rappahannock Regional Library, Dorothy Hart community center, and the Walker-Grant school—all of which are identified as "4 - Public Services, Facilities, and Preserved Open Space."

One of these projects allocates more than \$1.2 million to replace the original freestone/sandstone foundation of Fredericksburg's old Town Hall with an additional \$175,000 for the installation of a new HVAC system to better protect the Fredericksburg Area Museum's collections. Another preservation project in the budget allocates \$325,000 to replace the original wood windows at the downtown library. Sadly, this is another example of a preventable problem created by deferred and inadequate maintenance. It is also a costly solution that is at odds with the City's own historic district guidelines. Private property owners are expected to maintain and repair historic wood windows in the historic district and the library should be no exception; careful inspection and a window-by-window assessment should be prepared before this project is greenlighted.

"To preserve, protect and revitalize the distinctive historic environment and cultural resources of the Fredericksburg area."



Figure 1: At Left, 2008 Images of Smokehouse and Dairy Building Submitted with the Property’s Preliminary Information Form; At Right, Recent Images of Collapsed Smokehouse (Top) and Dairy Building (Bottom) Included in the 2022 Report.

New construction is often just as expensive as the conservation and repair of existing materials, if not higher. The high-cost of continuously replacing building materials is exhibited by the Capital Improvement Plan’s estimate for removing the 10-year-old carpet in the new courthouse—costing a total of \$426,800 over a period of three years! That work, as noted in the project description, is part of the building’s “scheduled maintenance program” though it is a surprisingly large sum for one element of its interior finish.

Keeping up with the maintenance needs of City-owned property is important and that is why it is critical to note that, sadly, the 2024 improvement plan includes no additional funding for the preservation of the Renwick courthouse or other buildings within the complex.

The 2016 Historic Structures Report (HSR) prepared by Commonwealth Architects outlined maintenance needs of all three buildings encompassed by the study where “Priority 1 and 2” items were described as critical to retaining the physical fabric with the recommendation that such work be completed immediately or within the next year. While it is wonderful that needed work to the bell tower is currently underway, six years have passed and the unnecessary, costly, and deteriorating effects of deferred maintenance are taking a toll on our town’s architectural centerpiece (Figure 2). The tower windows are currently in desperate need of attention. This work appears in the 2016 HSR (page 8.8) along with the need for painting and reglazing (as

needed) of all windows in the courthouse at a total estimated cost of \$75,000. Another component of the HSR’s recommendations in critical need of funding is the investigation of potential water problems and structural stress being placed on the building’s roof truss. Outlined on pages 8.5 and 8.6, this work begins with relatively inexpensive “in-situ testing”—estimated to cost roughly \$25,000 for the entire building—which will catch small problems with the potential to cause catastrophic and costly structural issues.¹



Figure 2: At Left, August 2020 Image Showing Missing Glass in Tower Windows; at Right, April 2023 Image Depicting Further Deterioration with Loss of Additional Panes and Loosened/Failing Components of Original Wood Window Frames.

Such preventative work is a fairly small investment of time, responsibility, and revenue when viewed in the context of the larger 2024 budget. Please put a priority on basic life-saving maintenance at the Renwick complex. Do not let this treasured gem become the next Idlewild. Do not keep holding out for a white knight or kick the can an inch further.

Act now to prevent further deterioration of the original historic materials, design, and craftsmanship of the Renwick Courthouse with an allocation of no less than \$100,000 in support of basic window maintenance and an investigative study into potential damage and structural strains in the roof system. And encourage staff to put a priority on this matter and establishing “a process for the regular assessment of the condition, use, and status of City-owned historic properties” with input from a “committed and knowledgeable standing advisory group” as outlined in the Preservation Plan.

¹ Much of this in-situ testing can be done with inexpensive and even analog technologies like simple crack monitors and battery-operated, wifi-enabled moisture monitors that are routinely inspected to measure environmental change(s). Such tools can be installed and monitored by City staff in consultation with trained Preservation professionals. UMW Professor Michael Spencer has been using such tools to assess moisture and structural conditions at the Lewis Store while HFFI volunteers gather and track necessary data.

Thank you for considering these matters and for all that you do to make Fredericksburg the kind of place that the Board of Directors at HFFI is proud to call home.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Kelly James". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

David Kelly James

President, Historic Fredericksburg Foundation Inc.

Enclosure

Comprehensive Plan, page 8-15:

GOAL 7: ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY AND CONSISTENCY IN LAW, REGULATION, ENFORCEMENT, AND PRACTICE. ENSURE THE CITY PURSUES BEST PRACTICES WITH RESPECT TO THE MANAGEMENT OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES IT OWNS.

In 2016, the City Council included in its 20-year vision a goal that Fredericksburg will be a proven leader in historic preservation. This means the City must lead by example with respect to historic properties in public ownership, projects undertaken by the City, and future planning initiatives. Advancing a culture of proactive preservation within the organization can be accomplished by creating clear standards of protocol and inviting community stakeholders to assist in planning for and assessing these practices.

POLICIES

1. Establish a committed and knowledgeable standing advisory group that constantly refreshes the discourse about preservation through outreach, annually assesses the community’s progress, and supports the emerging preservation culture within the community. The group should include a mix of citizens and professionals and include representatives from stakeholder groups.
2. Establish clear reporting channels and protocols for the discovery of archaeological and historic resources during the course of any City-led land disturbance or construction activity.
3. Improve the standards of practice within city government by developing policies that will govern the treatment of historic buildings in its ownership. This should include a companion to the Historic District Handbook that is geared specifically for City staff.
4. Ensure the integrity of Fredericksburg’s signature historic skyline and visual connections between key historic resources by incorporating preservation of viewsheds into citywide, small area, and neighborhood planning initiatives.
5. Develop programs and resources to educate City staff on best practices for historic preservation, including training on the identification of archaeological resources.
6. Encourage the Economic Development Authority to include best preservation practices as a factor in their decisions to invest in the Historic District. Ensure EDA decisions and investments support preservation goals rather than work against them.
7. Establish a process for regular assessment of the condition, use, and status of City-owned historic properties including the Mary Washington Monument Caretaker’s Lodge, Visitor Center, City Hall, old Town Hall, Renwick Courthouse, and others.

Do not limit! Should apply to all historic resources.

LIVABLE COMMUNITY



HISTORIC POSTCARD OF FREDERICKSBURG, c.1930s