



Historic Fredericksburg Foundation, Inc.

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October 21, 2024

Dear Madam Mayor and City Council Members:

As you discuss issues pertaining to important Historic Preservation goals of the City at tonight's work session, Historic Fredericksburg Foundation Inc. (HFFI) would like to offer insight and perspective.

In your discussion of **Neighborhood Conservation Districts** (NCDs), HFFI asks that you weigh these straightforward points from the region's largest and oldest historic preservation organization:

- 1. History sells.** Preserving its tangible bits improves our community, boosts the local economy, stabilizes property values, creates jobs, supports affordable housing and small businesses, attracts visitors and events, revives commercial areas, conserves resources and helps the environment. In short, it makes life better for people and is good for business.
- 2. Greater human investment.** Compared to new construction, repairing or renovating historic structures spends more on labor than materials and supports good-paying local jobs. Rehabilitating older buildings not only means more construction jobs, but all kinds of jobs for small businesses that serve as sources of commercial vitality for our neighborhoods. Older areas with historic character provide a marketing edge for start-ups, renters, and property owners alike.
- 3. Organically dense and diverse.** Older neighborhoods have higher density than newer ones, with smaller lots and units, and a mix of building types like the "missing middle" — duplexes, fourplexes, rowhouses and courtyard apartments. They may have mixed uses and even some ADUs. This mix of housing organically supports diversity as older neighborhoods feature a wider range of incomes by household. Compatible additions and new construction can add high-quality and lasting new housing to these areas where conservation-district zoning guides growth to keep their unique identities while maintaining density at a human scale.
- 4. Utmost affordability.** The most affordable house is already standing; it was built more than 50 years ago. Older and smaller is often better. Most of the nation's affordable rental housing is unsubsidized, privately owned, and at risk. Continued rehabilitation of our existing housing stock keeps these dwellings safe and keeps them affordable at a fraction of new construction's costs. Without conservation, larger, newer houses will displace lower-income residents in older neighborhoods.
- 5. Strength in up and down markets.** Even modest protections for older neighborhoods have been shown to reduce foreclosures, improve property value, and boost tax revenue—providing economic resilience to a community. Fredericksburg's historic district provides all the proof we need. How does the foreclosure rate within the City compare to that of the historic district? Not every property in the historic district is owned or occupied by rich folk. People of all ages and incomes have maintained property ownership within the historic district, often for decades and even generations, despite a steady increase in property value. Maintaining the distinctiveness and desirable characteristics of the historic downtown neighborhood has proven to be a lasting source of economic strength to the City, with ripple effects reaching far beyond the district's boundary. While rising rents and property taxes have been challenging

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

for those with modest financial resources, the steady increase in property value has been an overall wealth enhancement.

6. Preservation is conservation. Maintaining, repairing, and re-using existing buildings greatly reduces greenhouse gases, keeps tons of material out of landfills, and lowers carbon emissions—helping the City better meet its goals for sustainability and climate resilience. Many older structures are more energy efficient than many realize—constructed using naturally renewable, resilient materials, built-in ventilation, thick walls, and well-positioned windows designed to take advantage of natural light and heat.

For years, Fredericksburg’s strategic and comprehensive plans have stressed the need to protect the character of its older neighborhoods. To that end, city staff have discussed Conservation Districts since 2017. Charlottesville, which created its first NCD in 2009, has had its ordinance tested in Virginia courts. It can serve as a model for us.

To create NCD zoning, the city must adopt an ordinance. Further, a majority of landowners must approve the overlay zone for their neighborhood, and neighbors must document their structures to support the design guidelines they choose. HFFI urges you to support the development of conservation district zoning as an option for the residents of Fredericksburg’s distinct and unique neighborhoods to maintain what they love most about the place they call home.

Lastly, we would like to add some context to the **ARB appeal process** discussion. In existence since the 1980s, the city’s ARB follows the same standards and guidelines as all other such commissions across the country, and approves the vast majority of COAs that come before them. The city’s ARB process is upheld by countless legal precedents which requires that City Councilors use the same standards and guidelines in evaluating any appeal. On more than one occasion over the past 40 years, City Councilors have failed to adequately apply the guidelines in evaluating the appropriateness of a given project. Further, council has denied to hear from local preservationists and neighboring property owners with greater understanding of the particulars and higher stakes in the outcome.

As stewards of our unique and irreplaceable historic resources, HFFI requests that City Councilors uphold the legal framework and requirements of the ARB review and appeal process. Honoring our community’s commitment to the principles, guidelines, policies, and planning practices shared by historic district residents, commissions, and localities across the nation.

We appreciate your consideration of HFFI’s extensive knowledge and experience in these matters, and thank you for your leadership in stewarding Fredericksburg’s diverse, historic, and culturally enriching resources for the benefit of the past, present, and future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "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. Board of Directors