



1200 Caroline Street, Fredericksburg, VA 22401

May 28, 2026

City of Fredericksburg Mayor and City Council

RE: Did you know that May is National Preservation Month?

Good day, Madam Mayor and City Council:

As we mark the end of National Historic Preservation Month, we'd like to share with local leaders some information about this year's theme. It is based on America's most powerful promise that "all people are created equal" and calls attention to the places that fulfill that promise as well as the preservationists making sure these places endure.

Like many other localities, the City of Fredericksburg is witnessing the slow and steady erosion of the older smaller buildings, fashioned from natural historic materials by the helping hands of our predecessors, skilled laborers, and small businesses. This rich cultural inheritance connects our community to countless stories from the past, reminding us of how far we've come and how far we still have to go to fulfill the promise of equality.

For the last few years, HFFI has marked the end of Preservation Month with a public address at City Council's last regular meeting in May. However, our repeated pleas for your support in achieving the most widespread, economically beneficial, and culturally enhancing preservation goals of our city—written by City staff, recommended by hired expert consultants, and affirmed by public input from successive Comprehensive Planning efforts—have not brought much progress.

Despite a lack of strong political support for the City's Preservation Program's goals, some important achievements will be had in 2025 and 2026. These include the addition of two new historic districts in the City to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), and a preliminary determination of another historic neighborhood's eligibility for such honorary designation. This "historic" status gives property owners access to what few state and federal financial incentives are available to support high-quality rehabilitations and sensitive reuse of our built environment.

HFFI has repeatedly advocated for the National Register listing of the Renwick Complex since 2019, hosting public lectures from area experts and compiling a Preliminary Information Form (PIF) that resulted in the state historic preservation office's 2020 determination that the property is significant at the local and state levels, with the potential for national-level significance as well. The years have passed and the significance of the Renwick Courthouse has not been clearly evaluated and defined. A formal National Register evaluation of the property's historic significance was one of the Renwick Working Group's recommendations to assist with obtaining grant funding. It would also provide a clearer picture for its rehabilitation by identifying the most important or "character-defining" physical features to its cultural historic significance.

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Without this kind of evaluation and assessment for the property, we are failing to articulate what it is we value most about it. Thus, we are actually doing the Renwick Complex (and the residents who funded its construction and maintenance for the last 160+ years) a serious disservice. As “contributing” resources to the Old & Historic National Register district, the preservation of the physical features of all three buildings in the complex (the 1852 courthouse, 1908 library, and 1927 jail) fall within a broader period of significance (1728–1951). This wider time frame could negatively impact the most historically significant components of the Courthouse, including its mid-19th century architectural design, materials, and Civil War associations, and prioritize the preservation of later modifications to the old jail and library as well.

Why shouldn't the preservation of its authenticity and historically significant features be the driving force of its adaptive reuse? If there ever was a place to hold to a high standard for historic preservation in this city, should it not be our historic and symbolic seat of local government? Perhaps this is why only three of 180 historic courthouses in Virginia are privately owned. Thus, in honor of National Preservation Month 2026, HFFI is again asking our City's leaders to prioritize a professional approach to the sensitive historic rehabilitation of this treasured public asset and affirm our commitment to maintaining the public ownership of the courthouse.

While documenting historic resources and the cultural value(s) they possess is critical to raising the education and awareness of residents and property owners, being listed in the City's local inventory, and even in the state and national registries, does not provide any tangible protection for such unique and irreplaceable assets. The City needs new tools to support the stewardship of its historic built environment. Another important, longstanding goal of Fredericksburg's Preservation Program has been to protect and preserve the historic character of its older, established neighborhoods. For the past 30 years, each of the City's strategic and comprehensive plans have affirmed the economic, cultural, health, and environmental benefits of preservation to enhance the community's “spirit of place.”

The last three Comprehensive Plans (2015, 2021, and 2025 versions) call for the creation of Conservation District zoning where residents support such efforts. One staff initiative from the 2021 plan called for the development of “informational resources such as sample guidelines for neighborhood associations or interested groups to communicate these options within potential neighborhoods” (p. 8–3). City Preservation Planner Kate Schwartz, former Councilman Jon Gerlach, and HFFI representatives did just that beginning in 2024—working with residents in the College Terrace Neighborhood Association (CTNA) to educate and support area residents regarding how Neighborhood Conservation Districts (NCDs) might be used to curb unnecessary demolitions and ensure the architectural compatibility of new construction and large additions.

For two years, area residents have gathered regularly to discuss this preservation planning tool, learning more about the history of their neighborhood, the people that have called it home, and the physical characteristics that make it unique and distinct within their city. After garnering roughly 400 signatures in support of the kind of NCD zoning presented to the neighborhood association and its supporters, a handful of politicians took over the initiative, changing the framework and stipulations for such zoning. When Council charged staff to start drafting a NCD ordinance in August 2024, HFFI asked City Council to maintain this grassroots connection with local residents.

HFFI reiterates our call for a grassroots approach to accomplishing this long-aspired planning goal and ask you to revise staff's effort with a clear directive for the proposed NCD ordinance to be based on the

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robust support of residents in potentially affected areas. The residents and property owners of our City's older established neighborhoods should not be shamed for taking an interest in the future of their neighborhoods, nor is the political engagement of residents in shaping development around their property something to be discouraged, denied, or viewed as an obstacle to progress.

The perception that residents who seek more managed growth in the City are negatively affecting our community or their own neighborhoods has been perpetuated by leaders of the national "Yes in My Back Yard" or YIMBY movement, fostering a culture of toxic positivity surrounding public engagement in the planning process. Claims that any new zoning regulations are a deterrent to the creation of affordable housing is demonstrably false, as national expert and real estate economist Donovan Rypkema observes in "[Historic Preservation's Response to the YIMBY Movement](#)":

The idea of the YIMBY as a friendly and welcoming neighbor offers an approachable face for a large, well-organized, and well-funded movement to deregulate cities, outsourcing all decisions about the development of neighborhoods to the whims of the real estate industry. YIMBY arguments are often framed using social and environmental justice language, while the policies they support are decidedly contrary to those goals.... Communities deserve better policies that meet their needs and are shaped by their input (Rypkema, p. 2).

HFFI hopes that all local leaders—those elected, appointed, and employed—in our city deeply consider the diverse and plentiful benefits that Historic Preservation policies and practices have given to our community since the 1890s when local residents prevented Mary Washington's house from being dismantled and carted away; since Kenmore and its surrounding block was purchased from a local developer who sought to convert it into a subdivision; since HFFI preserved iconic 18th-century resources such as the Silversmith House, Old Stone Warehouse, and Chimneys; and since local advocates launched a national campaign to save Ferry Farm from becoming another Walmart. What would our city be like if these places were gone? Aren't we lucky to live in a community that cares deeply for its cultural inheritance and the older, smaller, charming, and historic resources that make Fredericksburg diverse, unique, and distinct?

We at HFFI hope you agree that Historic Preservation policies and practices continue to pay dividends for our quality of life and sense of place in this great city. Furthermore, we hope that you will consider the input of volunteers from Fredericksburg's professional preservation community and its development-conscious residents alike as we move forward together toward greater equality.

Sincerely,



Danae Peckler, HFFI Preservationist



Debbie Pederson, President, HFFI Board of Directors

Enclosure: Timeline of HFFI's efforts in support of Renwick's historic significance

Timeline of HFFI's advocacy efforts to recognize the cultural historic significance of the Renwick Courthouse Complex

March–April 2019: HFFI submits a Freedom of Information Act to the City to obtain a final copy of the 2016 Historic Structures Report for the Renwick Complex and data gathered from the associated 2015 public input survey.

August–September 2019: HFFI hosts public lecture series to examine the cultural and historic significance of the Renwick Complex. Speakers included local teacher, Barbra Anderson, National Park Service Historians, Noel Harrison and Eric Mink; and University of Virginia Commonwealth Professor and nationally recognized Architectural Historian Richard Guy Wilson.

12 Dec 2019: HFFI writes a letter to City Council requesting the preparation of a National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Renwick Courthouse, noting its potential for national significance.

July–August 2020: HFFI produces and submits a Preliminary Information Form (PIF) for the courthouse complex to the Department of Historic Resources staff in order to complete the first step in a National Register nomination in the state.

18 Sept 2020: Virginia Department of Historic Resources and its State Review Board reviewed the PIF and confirmed that the Renwick Courthouse Complex is historically significant at the State Level for listing in the National Register. The Board suggested that additional information be compiled in order to evaluate the property's potential for National-Level significance.

14 March 2023: Councilor Matt Kelly adds "Renwick Courthouse National Register of Historic Places Nomination" (NRHP) on City Council's regular agenda. He reminded Council about HFFI's 2019 request and offer to help cover the cost of its production, and the DHR's approval of the property's PIF. He indicated that listing in the NRHP would expand opportunities for grants to assist in its preservation and rehabilitation. [The minutes from this meeting](#) note:

Mayor Greenlaw stated that she has no problem moving this forward but she said it should come from the City and not paid for by anyone else....Councilor Gerlach noted that there was no downside to NRHP listing.

Mr. Baroody reminded Council that staff came to the Council last summer about next steps and from that conversation, staff returned in January, and suggested finding a consultant to help with multiple things to plan the future of Renwick appropriately. Mr. Baroody said putting it on the National Register was very appropriate but suggested it be part of the project for the consultant.... Mayor Greenlaw asked if the work with the consultant could happen within this calendar year and Mr. Baroody agreed.

Councilor Gerlach was in agreement that we should move forward with the designation. He said this was last discussed at the [June 14, 2022 work session](#) and there was discussion as to whether it should remain publicly owned and he said no one on the Council wanted it to become privately owned. The draft Request for Quote (RFQ) was prepared and it said the City was interested in retaining ownership of the complex although it would consider other alternatives that would allow financing flexibility while insuring a long-term public-private partnership. He said it had not been fully determined but everything is pointing to the direction that the City wants to retain ownership.

20 April 2023: HFFI writes a letter to City Council to report on the deteriorating condition of the Renwick Courthouse and lack of funding in FY2024 Budget to address its basic maintenance.

July–December 2023: HFFI Preservationist, Danae Peckler, active participates in the City's Renwick Working Group, serving on the Historic Preservation subcommittee. She provided the group rehabilitation cost estimates for all three buildings; a list of roughly 180 historic courthouses in the state with their dates of construction, use, and ownership status; recovered lost measured drawings for all three structures with assistance from professional volunteers; supported the effort to stabilize the tower; and explored grant opportunities for the complex.

12 December 2023: The Renwick Working Group report and recommendations are presented to City Council, which include consulting with the DHR and begin assessment for individual National Register of Historic Places nomination ([page 13 of presentation](#)).

27 Feb 2024: City Preservation Planner, Kate Schwartz gave a presentation at a City Council work session based on the Renwick Working Group's recommendations, [the minutes](#) of which note:

In the PowerPoint presentation she spoke about the Action Plan Steps, Site Overview, and the Working Group Recommendations. The recommendations were to solicit proposals for adaptive reuse, updated market analysis, consulting with Department of Historic Resources, and prepare for an individual National Register Nomination for the property of the Courthouse, conducting Critical maintenance repair assessment task and providing for public outreach and access to information.... she talked about the Maintenance and Repairs, the Evaluation Steps, PPEA Solicitation and Recommendation.

Councilor Mackintosh asked were there opportunities for other entities to be involved when talking about the comprehensive ownership models of the PPEA. Ms. Dooley explained that because the City is not a tax payer it could not qualify for tax credit and you have to rely on a tax paying entity.

Councilor Gerlach clarified that the City was not interested in selling to a private entity because it was the most significant architectural building in the City and they have an obligation and interest in keeping the building.