


City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: APRIL 13, 2007

TO: CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF:
ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGICAL COMMISSION
ALEXANDRIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
FRIENDS OF FREEDMEN'S CEMETERY
HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA RESOURCES COMMISSION
OLD TOWN CIVIC ASSOCIATION
PARK AND RECREATION COMMISSION
PLANNING COMMISSION
SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF BLACK HERITAGE
WOODROW WILSON BRIDGE NEIGHBORHOOD TASK FORCE

RONALDO T. "NICK" NICHOLSON, VDOT

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER 

SUBJECT: UPDATE ON ALEXANDRIA FREEDMEN'S CEMETERY MEMORIAL PARK

The purpose of this memo is to provide you and your organization with an update on the on-going implementation of the Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial Park project, as well as to obtain feedback from your organization in regard to the proposed memorial park design process.

BACKGROUND: On August 27, 2002, the City of Alexandria executed a Letter Modification to the 2000 Settlement Agreement between the City and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) relating to the replacement of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and the decision to change substantially the design of the previously planned urban deck. This Letter provided new alternative mitigation measures in the City, including the acquisition and enhancement of the Freedmen's Cemetery site at South Washington and Church Streets as well as funding for the purchase of land to construct ballfields on Witter Drive adjacent to Telegraph Road. In 2004, the City of Alexandria entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Federal Highway Administration and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) regarding Freedmen's Cemetery which stipulated the measures necessary to ensure the protection of the graves.

As you may know, the Alexandria Freedmen's Cemetery is located in the 1000 block of South Washington Street and the 700 block of Church Street. From 1864 until 1869, the cemetery was the burial ground for as many as 1,800 freedmen-black men, women and children who escaped

slavery and sought refuge in Alexandria during the Civil War. More than 100 African American soldiers were also buried in this cemetery, but were moved in 1865 to Alexandria National Cemetery. The Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial Park project plans to honor the heroic efforts of these African Americans and commemorates their sacrifice as they found freedom. Limited archaeological investigations in just a few areas of the site, which were conducted as part of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Improvement Project and by the City archaeologists from 1999 through 2004, resulted in the identification of 123 graves. This work also determined that the graves are very fragile and, in some cases, situated close to the ground surface and near building foundations. Undoubtedly, many graves have been lost due to previous regrading, building construction, as well as excavation to install and replace fuel and oil tanks.

PROPERTY ACQUISITION: There are three properties that will ultimately comprise Alexandria Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial Park. The City acquired 714 Church Street, which is the western portion of Freedmen's Cemetery, January 31, 2007. The City paid \$3.5 million for this property with reimbursement by VDOT. Sunoco Inc., the current owner of 1001 South Washington Street, completed the close-out of the underground storage tanks. All four of the underground tanks will remain in place to prevent impacting the adjacent graves by removal. The City's acquisition of this gas station parcel, the eastern part of Freedmen's Cemetery, for \$2.3 million, should occur in April. VDOT will also reimburse the City for this acquisition out of bridge settlement funds. Two other properties of the original Freedmen's Cemetery are currently owned by VDOT and consists of the land adjacent to the I-95/Capital Beltway and in the vicinity of the Church Street ramp. The City and VDOT are negotiating an agreement for ownership and/or long term use and maintenance by the City of the VDOT-owned adjacent areas to the south and west of the two lots the City is buying so that these VDOT "out parcels" can be incorporated into the memorial park planning and upkeep.

The City Department of Transportation and Environmental Services has developed specifications for demolition of existing structures on both the Church Street and Washington Street properties and submitted them to VDOT for a cost estimate from Corman Construction Inc. Corman is already under contract to VDOT, and the City is expediting the demolition process by "piggy-backing" this work on VDOT's existing contract. The demolition specifications call for the retention of all foundations, footings and asphalt in order to protect graves. The City archaeologists will monitor the demolition to ensure that no graves are disturbed or that no further desecration of graves occurs in areas that were disturbed from previous excavations. The demolition is expected to be completed by late Spring 2007.

After demolition, the City will hold a Re-dedication ceremony to consecrate the land as a burial ground after 138 years of disregard and destruction. May 12 at 6 p.m. is planned for this ceremony. The cemetery will be treated with proper respect during all phases of the City's implementation process.

NEXT STEPS:

Archaeology: Archaeological investigations will begin after the Re-dedication Ceremony and follow the treatment plan approved by VDOT and the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. The City archaeologists and temporary crew will carefully excavate soil on the site in order to determine areas where graves no longer are preserved and where ones still remain. Care will be taken so no grave shaft or burial is disturbed. A consultant historian will conduct research and write a history of Alexandria Freedmen's Cemetery during this phase of the project. Funds have been provided by a Save America's Treasures grant from the National Park Service to include publication of the history and preparation of web materials. A map documenting locations of graves in the cemetery will be produced from the archaeological work and guidelines prepared to make sure that the graves are protected during construction of the memorial park. The archaeological work should not take more than six months, and should finish before the end of 2007.

Proposed Design Process: It is proposed that a design competition will be held to select the design concept for the memorial park. This process will begin after the archaeological investigation has been completed, and will occur approximately from Winter 2007 to Spring 2008. The competition will be widely advertised to target national, as well as local, and minority participation which will be strongly encouraged (including students and faculty at college and university level in fields related to design, architecture, landscape design, as well as working professionals and non-professionals who may be interested in submitting proposed designs). Design competitions have been successfully used in local projects such as the Vietnam Memorials and the planned Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial projects in Washington, D.C. The current thinking that in order to create interest in this project, and to encourage many quality entries that the top three designs will be awarded a cash prize in the range of approximately \$10,000, \$5,000 and \$2,500, respectively.

The proposed design competition process is at the conceptual stage at this point. City staff, and a City-retained architectural/engineering/landscape design team, will be responsible for executing, in collaboration with the winning designer, the design of the winning concept. This memorial park design will go through the City's Development Special Use Permit process, including an extensive public participation process.

A Project Design Steering Committee is proposed to be appointed by the City Manager to assist with finalizing materials and in implementing the design competition and in recommending the top three designs. The charge of the Steering Committee is proposed to be as follows:

- Involvement in developing and reviewing draft solicitation for the design competition, along with required oversight by VDOT/FHWA;
- Review the entries of the competition, and make a recommendation to the City Manager on the selection of the three winning entries;
- Review the implementation of the design of the park for conformance with the selected design concept; and

- Sponsor outreach meetings with the community and interested boards and commissions relating to this project.

The Steering Committee is proposed to be composed of appointees from the following organizations:

- Two members from the Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery
- One member from the Historical Alexandria Resources Commission
- One member from the Alexandria Archaeological Commission
- One member from the Planning Commission
- One member from the Parks & Recreation Commission
- One member from the Alexandria Historical Society
- One member from the Society for the Preservation of Black Heritage
- One member who is a resident in a neighboring civic association
- One representative from the VDOT/FHWA team
- One representative from the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Neighborhood Task Force

The City Manager would designate the chair (or co-chairs). Staff anticipates that the preliminary plan for the memorial park will be before the City Council for approval in early 2009. Construction is expected to be completed in 2010.

If you have any questions about the status of this project or would like a presentation to your group about this subject, please contact Emily Baker (design process) (703.838.4327) or Pam Cressey (archaeological process) (703.838.4399).

We would like to get all comments from your organizations by no later than May 30, so we can get the design process approval by City Council before the end of the June. Please send your comments to Emily Baker.

cc: Mark Jinks, Deputy City Manager
Kirk Kincannon, Director, Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities
Jim Mackay, Acting Director, Office of Historic Alexandria
Richard J. Baier, P.E., Director, Transportation & Environmental Services
Christopher Spera, Assistant City Attorney
Pamela Cressey, City Archaeologist, Office of Historic Alexandria
Emily Baker, P.E., City Engineer, Transportation & Environmental Services