



HORD COPLAN MACHT

Alexandria planners excoriate Old Town Redevelopment: 'We can't put lipstick on this pig.'

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Sep 15, 2020, 11:57am EDT Updated: Sep 15, 2020, 12:10pm EDT

<https://www.bizjournals.com/washington/news/2020/09/15/planners-heritage-at-old-town-redevelopment-pitch.html>

"I don't believe any period of time in history should remain in stasis and that includes architecture. That includes buildings," Simmons said. "Otherwise, we'd all be living in lean-tos." James H. Simmons III CEO & Founding Partner Asland Capital Partners New York

"You might need a new architect." "We can't put lipstick on this pig." "You've got to go back to the drawing board." None of those phrases are what a developer wants to hear from city planners about a big project. But that's just the sort of feedback Asland Capital Partners received for its Heritage at Old Town development in Alexandria.

Plans for the 777-unit residential project now look very much up in the air. The New York developer is hoping to replace an aging garden-style apartment complex just south of Duke Street and bounded by South Patrick and North Washington streets with a mixed-income community, but it may have to massively shrink its plans to appease some influential design officials.

The Heritage project was set to become one of the city's largest residential developments in recent years, yet its height, density and design all attracted the ire of the city's Board of Architectural Review. That body doesn't have the power to block a project outright, but it did recently issue a series of scathing condemnations as the Planning Commission and Alexandria City Council prepare to consider zoning approvals for the development early next year. "It doesn't fly in this city," John Sprinkle, a member of the BAR, said during a marathon Sept. 2 hearing on the project. "It doesn't appear to be this city."

James Simmons, Asland's CEO and founding partner, said in an interview he believes the size of the project fully matches the city's plans for the area. Alexandria officials planned out an "affordability strategy" for the neighborhood several years ago, allowing for additional density if a

developer could preserve the 144 affordable homes currently on the site. Simmons said simple economics dictate the project needs to be large enough to include its planned 190 affordable units without any subsidy from the city, a point he felt was often overlooked by the BAR. Even still, he said he is open to scaling back the project to address those concerns.

“The goal is preserving and expanding the number of affordable units for people living there, so it’s worth compromising on the scale if it’s going to achieve that goal,” Simmons said. But Simmons said he will only be able to shrink the project so much before he’s unable to make things pencil out, adding he’s already shrunk it down from an originally planned 842 units. There’s also the matter of the severity of the concerns by the architecture panel, which has purview only over certain historic districts in Alexandria, including Old Town.

“They’re very nice buildings, but they don’t belong in Old Town,” BAR member Lynn Neihardt said during the Sept. 2 meeting. “We’re getting buildings that don’t reflect the Old Town context at all under the guise of providing affordable housing. ... The buildings to me speak Ballston, Crystal City, but not Old Town.” BAR member Christine Sennott underlined that point in saying: “This is Ballston. We don’t want to be Ballston.”

Some city residents echoed their points. “It is an unfortunate fact that these buildings could be built anywhere in Alexandria or even Arlington,” said Yvonne Callahan, vice president of the Old Town Civic Association, who testified against the project. “They do not work with Old Town.” Design elements were another issue. Asland’s architects at Hord Coplan Macht insisted they took a variety of steps to match the neighborhood’s architecture, but BAR members were decidedly unconvinced.

“I think you might need a new architect,” BAR Chair Christine Roberts said. “Because we had some very serious concerns at our last meeting and what came back as changes weren’t actually changes. ... It felt like it was almost a slap in the face to the process. Why are you asking for our opinion if what we get back isn’t actually changed and is just more lipstick on a pig?”

Simmons said “our ears are open and remain open” when it comes to the design of the building, and he is committed to matching Old Town’s architectural style in some senses. But he also believes criticism of the “world-class” design team he assembled for the project was a bit misplaced — his land-use attorney, Cathy Puskar of Walsh, Colucci, Lubeley and Walsh PC, similarly dubbed the board’s attacks on the architectural style as “over the top” during the meeting and suggested “any additional items we’d bring back to you would make no difference.” **“I don’t believe any period of time in history should remain in stasis and that includes architecture. That includes buildings,” Simmons said. “Otherwise, we’d all be living in lean-tos.”**

The back and forth leaves open the possibility that Asland could advance the project without the board’s endorsement. Simmons would not delineate his next steps. Puskar told the BAR her tentative plan was to bring the project to the Planning Commission and City Council by February, giving Asland some time yet to refine its designs. “My hope is that between the city, the BAR and us as developers, we can come to an agreement,” Simmons said.