

# City of Alexandria, Virginia

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## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** APRIL 4, 2012, *UPDATED APRIL 18, 2012*

**TO:** CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF OLD AND HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA DISTRICT BOARD OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

**FROM:** AL COX, FAIA, HISTORIC PRESERVATION MANAGER

**SUBJECT:** 509 AND 517 NORTH SAINT ASAPH STREET (FORMER HEALTH DEPARTMENT BUILDING)

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### *Update*

*After the Board's comments and deferral at the April 4, 2012 OHAD BAR hearing, a site visit has been scheduled for Board members and the public at 6:45pm on Wednesday, April 18, 2012 prior to the regular hearing. This will give the Board members an opportunity to examine the exterior architectural features and site context of the building before making a finding about historic significance. Staff has also had the opportunity to do additional research on the history of the building and new information is noted below in italics.*

By this memo, City Staff is requesting a determination from the OHAD BAR regarding historic *and architectural* significance for the former Health Department building located at 509/517 North Saint Asaph Street, pursuant to release of an RFP for disposition of this surplus City property. The cornerstone of the central block of the building reads **1947** *however the building was designed and construction began in 1944*. An addition was constructed at the north end in **1970**. The BAR approved the mirror image southern addition in **1974**. The south portion of the building is in the Old and Historic Alexandria District so, by prior City Attorney opinion and longstanding BAR practice, if any portion of a building is within the district boundaries, the entire building is regulated by the Board.

### **History**

When the OHAD district was originally created in 1946, the entire newly constructed Health Department building site was located within the district's boundaries. In 1951, the boundaries changed to cut this block approximately in half—with the southern half (closer to Oronoco St) remaining in the district and the northern half (closer to Pendleton) out of the district. The reason half of the block was removed from the district in 1951 was, likely, to allow for high rise construction in North Old Town and because there were few historic resources in this area. A boundary change in 1958 did not affect this site.

In 1965 this block was again affected, with the western portion (adjacent to North Saint Asaph) remaining in the district and the portion adjacent to North Pitt St removed from the district. Effectively, this left only the southwest quarter of the block, bounded by North Saint Asaph, North Pitt, Oronoco and Pendleton streets (including the southern end of the Health Department building) subject to BAR review. While the district boundaries were changed again

in 1970 and 1984, there was no impact on this particular block.

*The BAR did not review the original portion of the building, as construction began in 1944 and the BAR did not first meet until late in 1946 (that is when our minutes start). On September 18, 1974 the BAR did review and approve an addition to the Health Department building, which we take to be the southern wing, though we have no application graphics from that period to confirm what portions they reviewed.*



### **Architecture**

*The 1944 center block was designed by Riffin Buckler and George Corner Fenhagen of Buckler & Fenhagen, a highly-regarded architecture firm from Baltimore, Maryland. The firm designed a number of prominent buildings throughout the mid-Atlantic region including the Federal Reserve Bank in Richmond (1915), the Mausoleum and other improvements at Green Mount Cemetery in Baltimore (1924), and Baltimore City College (1928), a Gothic Revival design selected from 18 entries in a design competition. The original Alexandria Health Center, as it is referred to on building plans, is an excellent example of the Colonial Revival style displaying a high degree of material selection and craftsmanship with its Flemish bond brickwork, limestone sills and door surround, and the hipped roof with slate shingles and pair of cupolas.*

### **Application of the Demolition Criteria**

While the old Health Department building is partially located within the Alexandria National Register historic district, it falls outside the presently defined 1749 to 1934 period of significance, which was last updated in 1984. At the time it was updated, it included all buildings 50 years or older as contributing resources, a nationally accepted preservation practice. Alexandria does not have a locally defined period of significance or published list of historic buildings. By longstanding practice, all buildings within the Old and Historic Alexandria District are considered significant if they meet any of the following criteria listed in zoning ordinance section 10-105(B) when considering a permit to capulate or demolish:

- (1) Is the building or structure of such architectural or historical interest that its moving, removing, capsulating or razing would be to the detriment of the public interest?
- (2) Is the building or structure of such interest that it could be made into an historic shrine?
- (3) Is the building or structure of such old and unusual or uncommon design, texture and material that it could not be reproduced or be reproduced only with great difficulty?
- (4) Would retention of the building or structure help preserve the memorial character of the George Washington Memorial Parkway?
- (5) Would retention of the building or structure help preserve and protect an historic place or area of historic interest in the city?
- (6) Would retention of the building or structure promote the general welfare by maintaining and increasing real estate values, generating business, creating new positions, attracting tourists, students, writers, historians, artists and artisans, attracting new residents, encouraging study and interest in American history, stimulating interest and study in architecture and design, educating citizens in American culture and heritage, and making the city a more attractive and desirable place in which to live?

The old Health Department building remains remarkably intact, with a majority of its original exterior features and materials, and is an excellent representation of post-war Colonial Revival architecture. Furthermore, it exemplifies the City's institutional architecture program from the post-war period. This two story red brick, slate roofed, Colonial Revival Style building is solidly constructed, well-proportioned and has a significant amount of architectural detail, such as the delicate leaded glass transoms over the entrance and carved stone surrounding the entry doorways. In Staff's experience, this 68 year old building is clearly of "old and unusual or uncommon design, texture and material" that could only be reproduced today with great difficulty (*criteria #1 & #3*).

*In addition, the structure is representative of the work of a well-known regional architecture firm who excelled at various Revival architectural styles. While many buildings constructed in the DC area at the end of World War II and immediately thereafter featured minimal ornament and a very pared down red brick Modernist architectural style, this building had a much more deliberate design intention that, like the Alexandria Union Station or Alexandria City Hall, reflected a conscious aspiration to high quality civic architecture in a traditional or historic revival style.*

The building is across North Saint Asaph Street from Robert E. Lee's boyhood home, constructed 1795, and adjacent to two late 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings at the south end of the block. The historic Portner Brewery bottling building is across Pendleton Street to the north. The urban design qualities of the existing building are, therefore, in scale with the surrounding historic and more recent townhouses buildings. There are mature trees in the front yard and an appropriate set back from North Saint Asaph Street to emphasize its civic status. (*criteria #5*)

The Historic Preservation section of the City's Master Plan calls for protection and preservation of historic resources and development in a manner that is compatible with the historic character and resources of the site and surrounding neighborhood. Further, the structure represents a significant amount of embodied energy and preservation of these materials is consistent with the goals of the City's Green Building Policy.

### **Summary**

Due to the architectural significance of the building, the primary Colonial Revival character-defining features and details, as well as the existing mass, scale and overall character, at least the original central portion of the building should be maintained on the exterior. Staff believes there are opportunities to renovate and modify the building for a number of compatible uses that may include potential additions to the rear of the property or on the flat roofs of the north and south wings. Staff notes that the adaptive reuse of the old Portner's Brewery building in the 600 block of North Saint Asaph Street represents the successful preservation of a large historic building and its conversion to residential use. The reuse of 509 N. St. Asaph will likely require substantial interior alteration, including structural and accessibility improvements, and may require some additions and alterations to the existing structure to meet modern program needs. The design of these alterations or new construction must, of course, be compatible with the overall character of the building and will be brought to the OHAD BAR for a Certificate of Appropriateness at that time.

*As Staff noted at the previous hearing, potential City uses for this building have been studied many times since the Health Department moved and each time they have been rejected. The building has now been placed on the list of surplus City real estate and will be sold. While the future use of the building, including necessary interior alterations and associated costs are not within the purview of the BAR, City Staff and several consultants have studied a number of viable alternatives for residential and commercial reuse of the structure.*

### **Staff Recommendation**

Staff recommends that the Board find the old Health Department building architecturally significant under criteria #1, #5 and #6 and recommends that it be retained and adaptively reused, with any necessary alterations and modifications to be approved by the BAR in the future.

### **Images**



**Figure 1. Front (west) elevation and central entrance at the original, main building block.**



**Figure 2. Front (west) elevation showing main block and southern addition.**



**Figure 3. Front (west) elevation main block and northern addition.**



Figure 4. Limestone carving over front entrance.



Figure 5. Detail of leaded glass at front entry.



**Figure 6. Rear (east) elevation and parking lot.**