

**BOARD OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW
TOWN OF FRONT ROYAL, VIRGINIA**

August 22, 2017

**Regular Meeting
Town Hall**

Present: Angela Toler, Chairman
Joan Harding, Vice Chairman
Gary Vaughan
Nancy LeHew
Michael Whitlow

Staff: Jeremy F. Camp, Planning Director/Zoning Administrator
Doug Napier, Town Attorney
Connie L. Potter, Sr. Administrative Assistant

CALL TO ORDER

The August 22, 2017 meeting of the Front Royal Board of Architectural Review was called to order by Chairman Toler at 7:00 p.m.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM JUNE 13, 2017

Vice Chairman Harding moved, seconded by Mr. Whitlow to approve the meeting minutes as written.

VOTE: Yes – Toler, Harding, Vaughan, LeHew, Whitlow

NEW BUSINESS

- Historic Overlay District Guidelines, Demolition Review Guidelines Addendum.

Mr. Camp noted that the word “not” needed to be removed from item number 1 in the first line.

Mr. Whitlow moved, seconded by Mr. Vaughan to accept the Addendum into the packet.

VOTE: Yes – Toler, Harding, Vaughan, LeHew, Whitlow

- **FRCOA-000455-2017, Afton Inn.** A Certificate of Appropriateness Application submitted by the Economic Development Authority for the demolition of 2 E. Main Street, the Afton Inn.

Mr. Camp said the application was submitted by the Economic Development Authority. He noted there were several items in the meeting packet, including the Staff report, a letter from the Economic Development Authority, as well as additional information provided by the Economic Development Authority on the application, including the intended future reuse of what the property could be. The application before the BAR is for demolition of the structure and not for the proposed use.

If the BAR determines it to be appropriate to demolish the building, Staff recommends that the demolition not take place until the applicant submits plans for the new building and that a development surety be in place before demolition approved to the form by the Town Attorney in order to guarantee that the demolition is completed once started. Mr. Camp said he believes the applicant is in agreement on both of those conditions.

Chairman Toler opened the public hearing. Each person will be allowed 3 minutes to speak.

Shelly Cook expressed that she did not want to see the Afton Inn torn down. She is a lifetime resident of Warren County and like others, she has a vested interest in what happens to this building. It would be a shame to tear the building down given the historic sentiment it has with many residents of the community and that it was the first pre-historic building built after the civil war was over. Ms. Cook would like to see the building remodeled and not torn down and noted that the applicant is willing to do so, returning it to its once similar grandeur that it had on Main Street.

William Huck, a property/business owner at 409/413 E. Main Street. Mr. Huck believes that history should be preserved if possible. He would like to see that it is put into writing that there is some form of bond when demolition takes place and when the demolition has taken place we have a start date on the new construction. It will take years of planning to revitalize this building. He would like to see it rebuilt back to the historic age and time period of the original construction.

Bret Hrbek stated that he moved here in 1975 and grew up here. He served on Town Council from 2006-2010 and 2012-2016. Mr. Hrbek said he was in favor of taking the structure down. Town Council swapped that building several years ago, for the purpose of seeing it redeveloped. The EDA was charged with trying to find a developer that could do that. It has been nearly impossible to find someone that would do that with private funds within the confines of what the building is now. Based off comments from friends who have visited Front Royal who ask what is going on with the building and offer to take it down themselves. The structure is an eye sore and a detriment to the community. He is not a business owner, but is a business man in the community and he is proud of our Town and the revitalization that is happening on Main Street as well as

throughout the whole community and he thinks that it is important that the space be an anchor. He urged the BAR to look at Blacksburg. Blacksburg has had a nice renaissance as well, where they have taken older buildings down and left them as vacant lots or replaced them with new economic development that has revitalized the town. He is not so hinged on old buildings and history that we should not move forward with the progress that is right for our community today. Part of that is creating new economic opportunities with a new building. Mr. Hrbek thanked the BAR for their efforts.

Sonja Carlborg said she is mixed on how she feels. She watched the tour and the meeting online and was impressed by it and grateful for the commitment to the historic aesthetic stewardship expressed by Board of Architectural Review. During last fall's branding work for Front Royal, she was heartened to see the strong preference for maintaining façades and repairing and enhancing the many treasures the community already has in place. She personally would like to see the façade and roof line preserved. Preferably with the same materials. The rear and interior are less important. She can imagine little sadder than doing a tour of the battle of Front Royal with nothing but a historical marker that describes what once was. Once the building is demolished, what insurance do we have that a developer would not default. She knows that grants have already been sought, but as a grant writer she wonders if the USDA Rural Development program might offer a funding opportunity not yet explored. The work on Carter and Burtons, the architect's website, is beautiful and the Farms at Rose Hill is an apt comparison to this project in terms of adaptive reuse. Overall, the aesthetics shown on the website trends to modernist solutions which she also enjoys, but not in this situation. We need to take the case of the Afton Inn as an object lesson. Our historic district needs to be respected and supported. Not just with guidelines, but with accountability to rules. Why, for example, have we allowed a building to be painted Remax blue? Why is another being painted, its trim, bubble gum pink. Neither of these pigments was even available before the turn of the century. She is as fond of these businesses as anyone and personally respects and appreciates the generous contribution and support they provide, but neither of these choices is appropriate for the historic district. Naysayers may claim that rules sway businesses from moving in, but she sees plenty of evidence to the contrary. Take a look at Winchester, Staunton, Culpepper, Middleburg, Fredericksburg, which all hold developers and businesses accountable and all have effective stunning downtown revitalizations over the past 10 years. Embodying the authenticity that residents and visitors cherish. Throughout our Town are derelict properties, residential and commercial in various stages of decay, whose owners have not been held accountable. How does this benefit us? Many of these buildings should not be torn down, but restored or adapted for contemporary use. She also sees us slowly, but surely losing the opportunity to have a second historic district on Shenandoah Avenue where iconic, mid-century gems, such as the Howard Johnson's and Silver Diner have already been replaced with generic architecture and franchise businesses. When representatives from the Virginia Tourism Corporation visited Front Royal a couple of years ago, they could not believe we had such treasures as that row of 1950s motels intact. While the rest of the world has made mid-century modern a priority we don't even recognize what we have. Ms. Carlborg thanked Anne Rose for the beauty she has brought to our Town through her departments care of our public landscape and to Felicia Hart for the energy she has

brought to revitalizing our downtown with appropriate visuals and businesses. She also thanked the EDA for persistence in seeking a solution for this difficult challenge.

Joe Andrews stated that he owns property in the County and the Town. Mr. Andrews expressed that he has a deep love for historic buildings and all things historic. Thumbs down for demolition. He was privileged through a friend of his to meet a developer in Winchester who is very skilled at preparing these types of old structures for re-entry into business through both residential and commercial development. He believes that his friend has a plan to move forward with saving this building for monies far less than it would cost to even demolish it. There will be a day when tourist will not come to Front Royal to see the Verizon building and the building that we stand in now because they are not historic. We only have one chance to preserve this history and that falls on the BAR to do the right thing.

Craig Laird, said he owned a couple businesses in downtown Front Royal and other properties within the Town. He recalls a Victorian building that sat on S. Royal Avenue that housed My Fathers Mustache that was very quickly demolished, with very little input from the public. Mr. Laird stated that he appreciated the fact that the public could come and provide input before a big decision is made. At the time My Fathers Mustache had been certified that it needed to be demolished and was demolished, the Afton Inn was closed down at that point. Many efforts have been made to revitalize the Afton Inn. Unfortunately, it looks like the cost to renovate this building far exceeds the value that would be gained from any type of revitalization. He is in favor of demolition of this building and bringing something new. The citizens need to be protected. Who's to say we demolish this building and someone comes and puts up a garish building or other types of buildings that would not be appropriate at the gateway to our downtown. Mr. Laird expressed that he would like to see the Town put into place some type of bond to show that someone is going to submit plans that will be developed, not sold to another developer and that the time for construction beginning and ending have certain dates provided so the Town and citizens know the plan is not going to fall apart. The former Town Hall was supposed to be occupied and unfortunately is not. He urged the BAR to make sure the proper verbiage is in place, that should we vote to demolish this building we do end up with something very appropriate for the entrance to the downtown.

June Rinehart explained that she had moved to Front Royal 22 years ago because she loved the historic part of Town. She is against demolition of the structure unless every avenue has been explored to restore the building. Ms. Rinehart said they own property in another historic Town and have seen buildings much worse than the Afton Inn that have been rehabbed and turned into a wonderful benefit to the community through taxes and new businesses going in to the building. It may be difficult but not impossible. She would suggest repainting the structure and referred to the BAR Historic District Guidelines. It is important to have historic looking buildings and feels the guidelines should include requirements for paint colors. Ms. Rinehart encouraged BAR members to amend the guidelines in a way that would allow them to review color choices before buildings located in the historic district are painted and then present those amended guidelines to Town Council.

Rick Novak referred to the swap of buildings with the Town Hall and the Afton Inn and noted that he came to meetings 3 years ago in favor of the swap. Mr. Novak has operated the theater on Main Street since 1994 and came to Front Royal in 1990. He served on the Economic Development Authority for almost 13 years and was deeply involved in much of this project when he was chairman. Three years ago, the building swap occurred because Mr. Barrows who owned it at the time had decided not to do anything with the property. His decision seemed to be directly related to what we are going through now with the building. Mr. Barrows had a great plan for the building, which included going up one story. This body, Town Council, and the Planning Department stopped it from moving forward. He decided he wasn't welcome and went somewhere else and he left the building worse than it is now until he was instructed to board up the windows and keep things from falling off the building. Mr. Novak noted he had been looking at the building for over 20 years just the way it is now or in worse condition. For those that want to preserve the building, he can appreciate their sentiment. Many avenues regarding this building have been explored over time with multiple developers in the last 3 years. It's unfortunate, but we have all watched it deteriorate with bricks falling out of the back of the building. After watching the video of the tour of the building, it showed that restoring the building will cost a lot of money. Just because we can do it, doesn't mean we should do it. The building was attractive when the building had the porches, but the porches had to be removed and the building is not as attractive now and mostly boarded up and falling apart. He believes that the building should be torn down and put a fountain at the location. As mentioned by others, this is the gateway to our community and across from the court house. It is embarrassing for the building to be left in this condition. The BAR's purpose is to "preserve and improve the quality of life for residents of the Town of Front Royal by protecting familiar and treasured visual elements in the area". It also says the purpose of the BAR is to "help stabilize and improve property values by providing incentives for upkeep and rehabilitation of older structures and by encouraging desirable uses in forms of economic development". This has not happened. There is nothing treasured about the Afton Inn and it seems obvious the building should come down. We are fortunate to have somebody who wants to redevelop the building so that it closely resembles what is there now. It is also fortunate that someone is willing to reclaim much of the materials from the site. He challenged the BAR to find out how hard it is to do economic development. To make money in a small town is challenging and the BAR wants to get in the way. Mr. Novak encouraged the BAR not to do that, let the demolition occur and let them build a building that resembles the one there. He also expressed that the BAR is not going to tell him what color to paint his buildings and if they tried to tell him, there will be a war.

Mary Ryan said she lived in Rockland but works in the Town every day and considers it her hometown. The Afton Inn is an icon in the Town both historically and culturally and is located in the center of Town. Why as a community do we not invest in our cultural history and take pleasure in the opportunity to create something special at this location. We as a community own this building and why allow this icon to be torn down before there is even a real proposal. Ms. Ryan believes we need to look further and possibly have a charrette, to come up with ideas inviting Town and County residents for input.

Tin Darr, 428 W. 15th Street stated he was a lifetime resident of Front Royal. He is neither thumbs up or thumbs down. One of the biggest complaints he received while serving in local politics was the Afton Inn. We are left with 2 choices. Demolish the building, but as spoken by others, he agrees there needs to be bonds and securities put in place. Once the building is torn down and a contract is put in place then it needs to be carried through. The only other option is for the EDA to convert the building back to the Town of Front Royal and the Town of Front Royal redevelop the building themselves which will cost tax payer dollars. If everyone is willing to raise their taxes 5/6 cents on the \$100 to do the building correctly, then he would agree with that, but feels when the rubber meets the road, that is not going to happen. If that is the case, he agrees with the fact that we have exhausted every avenue and thinks that whatever we put there will be beneficial. He also agrees with Bret Hrbek that if nothing is there it would be better than what is there now. Either the citizens and the community need to give it back to the Town, spend the money and redevelop the building which won't be cheap or let this developer move in and do what he needs to do to fix the problems.

Dean Corwin said he was born in 1944 and that is when he came to Front Royal. In the 60s and 70s the Afton Inn was an eyesore at that time and has not improved. Mr. Corwin lives on Main Street and he feels the building needs to come down and it is past time in doing so.

Mike Grivoswky disclosed that he was not a Town resident and did not have a dog in the hunt. As mentioned we are late comers to the game with regards to the building but the game is rapidly changing. There is a return to urban centers within suburban towns around DC. If they are properly done, they become economic engines for the entire community. His concern is if it is the intent for the Town to head in the direction of downtown Front Royal and follow the path of many other communities, that setting a pattern of demolition as opposed to restoration does not catalyze that process. In many ways, it may make it difficult for future developers to qualify historic buildings in downtown Front Royal for historic tax credits. The syndication of these historic tax credits is how you attract an investor to what is a marginal project in terms of return on investment and it makes it a viable project by the investors ability to capture the state and federal tax credits. If you set a pattern of demolition and you have to go to Richmond to tee up another project for historic tax credits and the people of the Department of Interior see Front Royal as more inclined to knock things down and the historic core shrinking, they will be less inclined to approve marginal projects for tax credit eligibility. That is a very real process the Town will have to face if you have several buildings downtown that need to be renovated and repaired. Sooner or later the Town will attract those investors that will need the tax credits to get the work done. In the case of Winchester, city management was very proactive in laying the foundation to attract developers, businesses and revenues by subtle changes investing in downtown and paving the way in administrative processes to attract people to do more redevelopment downtown. He is concerned that demolition will set a dangerous precedent that may send people looking elsewhere, rather than attracting more focus to the Front Royal downtown area as an investment opportunity.

Curtis Siever said he moved to Front Royal in 1981 and has since moved to Winchester and started a business there. As a realtor, he sees the Afton Inn as a piece of history. He agrees yes we are late to the game, but he does believe there is a process that could happen so that the building could be renovated and restored. It could be a key piece to the gateway of Main Street. Millennials want walkable amenities and they want it to be a piece of history. As a realtor and a broker, he sees that as the next generation of people that are moving into Front Royal and he is all for keeping the building and trying to renovate it.

Stan Brooks stated that anybody that has been involved in Main Street understands the importance of this corner. He can understand those that want to preserve the building. The last he looked, it was about the same price to renovate at least the façade, as it would be to tear down and start over. From that point he was always under the impression it was about equal. As an investor he has looked at this building several times and there are a lot of problems with this building. One of the bigger challenges is parking, as well as how do you get a return on your investment. The best scenario for that corner would be for the Town to get a way to get the entire corner. In addition, the Town should own the Afton Inn and not the EDA. The Town needs to acquire the Duncan Building that is between the Afton Inn and the Town owned building where the cable company is located. If the Town could acquire the entire corner, they could do something very substantial that would make a big impact on those coming through Town.

There were no additional speakers.

Chairman Toler thanked everyone for coming out regardless of which side they were on. She expressed that the BAR members wanted to hear from citizens because there were a lot of feelings and opinions on this building.

Town Attorney, Douglas Napier recommended to either move to act on the application or move to postpone.

Chairman Toler asked Mr. Napier if the BAR could hold a closed-door meeting.

Mr. Napier explained that there are certain reasons that allow you to have a closed meeting but you are required to follow the Freedom of Information Act or the BAR can have an open work session.

Chairman Toler moved, seconded by Ms. LeHew to postpone any vote on the demolition application until the next meeting scheduled for September 12, 2017.

VOTE: Yes – Harding, LeHew, Toler, Whitlow, Vaughan

OLD BUSINESS

There were no items for old business.

OTHER

There were no additional comments.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Whitlow moved, seconded by Mr. Vaughan to adjourn the meeting.

VOTE: Yes – Harding, LeHew, Toler, Whitlow, Vaughan

The meeting adjourned at 7:56 p.m.

Connie L. Potter
Sr. Administrative Assistant