

# *City of Alexandria, Virginia*

## MEMORANDUM

**DATE**           DECEMBER 13, 2021

**TO:**            MEMBERS OF THE CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:**        MAYOR JUSTIN WILSON

**SUBJECT:**    TORPEDO FACTORY NEXT STEPS

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For over 40 years, the Torpedo Factory has been an iconic part of Alexandria, a location where visitors from around the world can interact with artists and the artistic process. The City-owned facility provides artistic small businesses with subsidized space and an opportunity to work alongside some of the best artists in our nation. The facility has been a core component of why visitors from around the world come to our City.

The City has been engaged in a community debate about the future of the Torpedo Factory for almost 2 decades. A facility long regarded as a national leader should be innovating, adapting, and progressing. Instead, Alexandria has been arguing and recriminating about the Torpedo Factory. This cycle must end.

In a 2010 study, the Management Analysis, Incorporated<sup>1</sup> told us that it was imperative to:

- Improve vibrancy and cultural and economic benefits
- Increase economic self-sufficiency
- Better nurture and grow artistic talent

In a 2016 study, The Cultural Planning Group<sup>2</sup> told us that the Torpedo Factory had been “mired in internal disagreements that have prevented it from keeping pace with changes in the field and evolving the model to be responsive to the needs of both artists and its community.” This study recommended:

- Establishing the Torpedo Factory as an independent, focused institution
- Streamline management functions
- Create a compelling vision
- Define a new relationship with the City

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.torpedofactory.org/board\\_member\\_public/MAI%20Report.pdf](https://www.torpedofactory.org/board_member_public/MAI%20Report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://torpedofactory.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Torpedo20Factory20Art20Center20CPG20Report20Revised20120312016.pdf>

In 2019, the Smith Group<sup>3</sup> examined 15 studies that have been conducted, and made their own recommendations, including:

- Providing effective governance
- Improving the management
- Creating a distinct and unified vision, purpose and mission
- Develop a sustainable financial model
- Forge a new relationship with the City
- Enhance and enliven the physical space

On top of the various studies imploring change, our own boards and commissions have joined the chorus. In a letter last week, the Alexandria Commission for the Arts endorsed change at the Torpedo Factory, citing the promise of “increased funding through private interest” while urging “vibrancy and sustainability.” A day later, the Alexandria Waterfront Commission offered their support for “...reinvigoration of the Torpedo Factory Art Center (TFAC), including maintaining the TFAC as a center for the arts, creating a lively draw for visitors to the City and Alexandria residents, creating a more welcoming entrance to the center from the waterfront, and continuing the role of working artists as a major feature.”

While the studies, debate and acrimony surrounding the Torpedo Factory have continued, the City has worked to expand the amount of space in our community dedicated to the arts. Just north of the Torpedo Factory, the City created the Old Town North Arts and Cultural District Overlay<sup>4</sup>, implementing a zoning incentive for the creation of new real estate dedicated to arts and cultural uses. This zoning tool has already led to the creation of over 24,000 square feet of new space, with more than 75,000 additional square feet possible during plan implementation, which is approximately the same amount of space that the Torpedo Factory Arts Center comprises today.

With City Council approval of our first tranche plan<sup>5</sup> for allocation of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) money, the City included \$560,000 to create a Community Development Authority designed to hold and manage these real estate assets.

The volume of analysis that has been performed on the Torpedo Factory might exceed nearly any other issue facing the City in recent times. Perhaps more notable is the remarkable agreement that has emerged from this body of work. The findings and recommendations across the myriad of surveys are generally in alignment.

In Old Town North, we have made the largest-ever commitment of land-use policy to expand the arts in our city. At the Torpedo Factory, we are continuing to make our largest financial commitment to the arts. The City can and should expand its commitment to the vibrancy of our city by fusing together the planning and execution of the revitalization of the Torpedo Factory Arts Factory with the planning and execution of the Old Town North Arts & Cultural District as a comprehensive concept.

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<sup>3</sup>

<https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/recreation/arts/TFAC%20SmithGroup%20Chora%20Report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://library.municode.com/va/alexandria/codes/zoning?nodeId=ARTVISPOVZO\\_S6-900OLTONOARCUDIOV](https://library.municode.com/va/alexandria/codes/zoning?nodeId=ARTVISPOVZO_S6-900OLTONOARCUDIOV)

<sup>5</sup>

[https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/budget/info/ARPA%20FINAL%20LIST%20TRANCHE%201\\_APPROVED.pdf](https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/budget/info/ARPA%20FINAL%20LIST%20TRANCHE%201_APPROVED.pdf)

Per our request, our staff has brought us a series of alternatives to consider. While a decision to select an individual alternative would not be immediately actionable in its current form, the areas of broad agreement from the various studies provide a set of principles that can and should be adopted by City Council at this time.

***I believe that Council should endorse principles and ask that our City staff work with partners (AEDP, etc) to return with a plan in alignment with this approach:***

- 1) Create a separate public entity (e.g. Arts Community Development Authority) to consolidate Alexandria's artistic real estate assets (Old Town North arts space, Torpedo Factory and beyond) with the mission to:***
  - a. Strategically manage Alexandria's artistic real estate***
  - b. Take advantage of unique financing tools to rehabilitate, build-out and sustain real estate assets***
  - c. Provide a framework for future consideration of public/private partnerships***
  - d. Project financing and a schedule of City facility capital investments***
- 2) Ensure that the Torpedo Factory remains a world-class center for the arts, by defining a structure within the newly-created authority that:***
  - a. Implements the approved Action Plan for Vibrancy and Sustainability<sup>6</sup>, to build and sustain a high-quality arts program and visitor experience***
  - b. Retains a place for Torpedo Factory artists as the facility evolves***
  - c. Broadens scope of artistic expression included in the Art Center and throughout the district (e.g. performing arts, etc)***
  - d. Solicits and incorporates structural changes from the City's Race and Social Equity Officer to improve diversity of artists***
  - e. Retains a place for non-Art Center tenants (Art League and Archaeology Museum)***
  - f. Extends the Torpedo Factory brand: combine with the Old Town North Arts District (e.g. "The Torpedo Factory Arts District")***
  - g. Engage with all stakeholders to develop a coherent vision/mission for the Torpedo Factory and the connected Arts District***

I look forward to our discussion as we work to ensure the success of the Torpedo Factory and expand Alexandria's commitment to the arts for generations to come.

Cc: Mark Jinks, City Manager  
Stephanie Landrum, CEO, Alexandria Economic Development Partnership  
Emily Baker, Deputy City Manager  
Julian Gonsalves, Assistant City Manager  
Diane Ruggerio, Deputy Director, RPCA