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Alexandria to have do-over on waterfront vote

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The Alexandria City Council said Friday that it will have a do-over of last year's contentious vote to redevelop the Potomac River waterfront, an attempt to push past the lawsuits that have tied up the plan in court.

The city is calculating that if the council passes the plan by a supermajority this time and clarifies a portion of the zoning law, there's a chance the lawsuits will be thrown out or withdrawn — or at least won't linger and hamper economic investment in the city's most valuable real estate.

“That litigation . . . is now preventing the plan from moving forward,” Mayor William D. Euille (D) said Friday.

The waterfront plan, which allows private developers to build hotels and other commercial enterprises along the city's scenic but disjointed frontage, was approved in January 2012 by a 5 to 2 council vote. Opponents, who object to increased density in the area, had staged a year-long battle against it. They argued that because they filed a protest, the council was required to pass the plan by a supermajority, or six votes.

“We are agreeing to meet the supermajority standards the litigation asks for, even though we don't agree it's required,” City Manager Rashad M. Young said.

The council, meeting in a closed-door executive session Tuesday, told him to figure out a way to “move the city forward” so private landowners are assured that the waterfront issue is resolved, he said.

The city envisions a comprehensive plan that would unify the multiple parks, parking lots, two marinas, boat club, residences and bike trail, as well as address the area's persistent flooding. Outside the boundaries of the waterfront plan, but still along the waterfront, are high-rise hotels, office buildings and a now-abandoned power plant.

The area is also home to hundreds of well-to-do residents who say the plan would allow too much new development, causing increased traffic and hampering historic preservation.

Several legal challenges have been filed since the plan was approved, and a new council has been elected. The two council members who voted no on the plan were ousted, and a mayoral candidate who led the waterfront opponents' organization lost by a 20 percent margin.

At least six current council members said during the campaign that they support the waterfront plan. And 10 days ago, The Washington Post Co. put its two Robinson Terminal warehouses on the waterfront up for sale, a prospect that opponents had worried would accelerate development. District-based Carr Hospitality has already submitted plans for a 120-room hotel on separate property it owns along the waterfront.

The first of the two lawsuits over the waterfront plan is set to be heard by the Circuit Court on April 8 and 9. It is the city's appeal of its own Board of Zoning Appeals decision overturning the local planning director's rejection of the residents' protest petition.

The Virginia Supreme Court is awaiting the hearing in that suit before deciding whether to act on another case — filed by three local women known as “the Iron Ladies” — involving the issue of whether a supermajority vote was required, City Attorney James Banks said.

The city plans to put its proposal to rewrite the zoning law before the Planning Commission on March 5, with a council vote March 16. At that time, the council plans to “reaffirm” the waterfront plan, Euille said.

Planning Commission Chairman John Komoroske said Friday afternoon that “nothing sails through” his group and that the seven-member commission will closely examine the changes that the city suggests.

“What we're doing is truing up the zoning to match the plan,” he said.

Bert Ely, co-chairman of the group that opposes the city's plan to redevelop the waterfront, attended the news conference but said he couldn't comment on the city's proposal until he saw the language in the zoning law rewrite. That language won't be released for another week.

“This is a quick fix, and they're hoping people buy into it,” said Roy Shannon, attorney for some of the opponents.

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