



**HISTORIC
RICHMOND**

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Cyane B. Crump

August 25, 2023

Via email at Robert.dbecker@vdh.virginia.gov

Robert Becker
Virginia Department of Health

RE: Jackson Ward Community Plan

Dear Mr. Becker:

Historic Richmond is writing to provide feedback regarding the May 2023 draft Jackson Ward Community Plan. We are a local non-profit dedicated to preserving Richmond's diverse historic buildings, neighborhoods, and places, sparking revitalization, and championing our distinctive architectural legacy.

Known at one point as both the "Harlem of the South" and the "black Wall Street of America", Jackson Ward is one of the nation's most important centers of African American history and culture. Its storied past extends back to 1793, when Richmond's first known black property owner Abraham Skipwith built his home in what would by the late nineteenth century be known as Little Africa. The early twentieth century brought a wave of black enterprise, led by notable figures like Maggie Lena Walker and John Mitchell Jr. In addition to spectacular churches and civic structures like the St Luke's Building, a burgeoning black professional elite spurred the construction of handsome, architecturally sophisticated homes, in many cases designed and constructed by black architects and builders. Recognizing this vibrant economic and cultural history, the southern portion of the neighborhood was listed as the Jackson Ward Historic District in the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 and designated a National Historic Landmark in 1978.

The northern portion of Jackson Ward, now home to Gilpin Court, was separated from the southern portion by the construction of the interstate highway in the 1950s-1960s. The highway construction and subsequent policies isolated the northern portion of Jackson Ward and the neighborhood experienced dislocation and demolition. This legacy of urban renewal and infrastructure projects, which did not consider community concerns, and their consequences, makes robust community engagement a crucial part of any future planning process. A 2020 study conducted as part of our own efforts to preserve and support Jackson Ward reinforced this. It also highlighted the community's desire for a holistic approach to any future development, as well as their own awareness and pride in their neighborhood's history. As this Plan states,

Building on history

the vibrant history of Jackson Ward is a point of pride for its inhabitants, and the preservation and celebration of its unique cultural assets is a community priority. As such, if this plan is truly intended to cover all of Jackson Ward, we would expect to find historical preservation as a consistent thread throughout this proposed Community Plan. **The Plan should be revised to incorporate historic preservation of the Jackson Ward built environment as a community priority which touches every aspect of life.**

Vision

We support the Plan's vision of Jackson Ward as an interconnected neighborhood that celebrates Black history, ownership, and culture while supporting a diverse community of current and future residents with quality housing, healthy spaces, and its community traditions of local arts, youth education, and entrepreneurship. We understand that although the document currently under review is called the Jackson Ward Community Plan, this project was funded by a CNP Grant designed to contribute to the rebuilding of Gilpin Court, and the revitalization of the surrounding neighborhood. The resulting document is a blueprint towards achieving those goals but offers little to the wider neighborhood of Jackson Ward beyond broad references to "historical character". Historic Richmond understands and supports city efforts to address the injustices of the past by reunifying Jackson Ward, but this cannot be done in name only. Like the City of Richmond as a whole, Historic Jackson Ward is currently struggling to balance development with affordability and preservation, seeking to grow while maintaining its unique history and character. Historic Jackson Ward deserves a Plan just as much as Gilpin Court does. **The Plan should be revised to include broader recommendations that will address all of Jackson Ward.**

Diverse Economy

We support the renewal of Jackson Ward as "a center for Black education, business, arts, and culture." Goal 2: Post-Secondary Education and Workforce Development is a necessary step in making that happen, providing opportunities for residents to grow and thrive. A number of these opportunities as listed in the Plan relate to construction—this should be broadened to also include the preservation trades. There is currently a shortage of skilled craftspeople able to maintain and repair historic buildings, and those who do possess the necessary skills are in constant demand, particularly in a neighborhood with the amount of historic architectural fabric found in Jackson Ward. **We recommend expanding Goal 2 Strategy F to include education and training in the preservation trades.**

We are particularly pleased to see Goal 4: Tourism, Arts and Culture. History and culture are recognized by the Jackson Ward community as top strengths of the neighborhood. Heritage tourism is a major contributor to the Richmond economy, and our historic built environment is a large part of that. Iconic structures like the Hippodrome, the Maggie L Walker National Historic Site, Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church and the Leigh Street Armory, now the Black History Museum, tell valuable stories about our city and our nation and rightly draw visitors from around the country and around the world. In addition to these iconic civic structures, there are a number of homes, commercial structures, and other buildings in the neighborhood that were designed and/or constructed by architects, builders, businesses, and civic organizations of note, including Charles Russell, Ethel Bailey Furman and Armstead Walker. All of these reflect the unique history of the area as an incubator of black economic and cultural achievement. If a goal of this Plan is promoting the neighborhood's history, then the preservation of these historic structures should be equally important. **We recommend expanding Goal 4 Strategy A to also include the prioritization of saving, stabilizing, and maintaining Jackson Ward's remaining structures.**

Inclusive Housing

We support the effective inclusion of affordable housing throughout the entire community, as well as the emphasis placed on expanding home ownership opportunities. Richmond currently faces a housing crisis. A 2021 study showed that Richmond had a shortage of 11,600 affordable rental units. Affordable long-term housing should be a consideration in every planning decision Richmond makes. While the items listed within this objective focus on future development, it is worth noting that smaller scale historic buildings also provide homes and offices for small and entrepreneurial businesses. The National Trust for Historic Preservation's recently completed study, *Preserving African American Places*, states that "older buildings provide residents with more affordable commercial space and housing options – key assets for African Americans and communities of color. ... To keep our cities equitable, accessible and prosperous, with opportunities for all, we must work to reuse older buildings to create more jobs and walkable neighborhoods, supporting more minority- and women-owned businesses and addressing urban issues of affordability and displacement – issues that disproportionately impact African Americans. In short, cities need old buildings and new solutions for revitalization." Existing structures within Historic Jackson Ward are valuable community resources, and adaptive reuse should be encouraged. Richmond is already home many successful examples of this type of project, including the Richmond Dairy Apartments and Gallery 5. **The list of potential funding sources to support the implementation of this plan (Goal 5, Strategy C) should include Historic Tax Credits and other incentives for preservation, such as façade grants.**

Assistance should be offered not just to rehabilitation projects, but to currently owned and occupied structures throughout Jackson Ward. As outside investors enter the market and property values rise, longtime residents are finding it more and more difficult to keep up with property taxes and necessary maintenance. Thoughtful action is necessary to ensure that what is meant to be an investment in the community does not end up displacing the very same people who were forced out in the name of infrastructure and urban renewal projects in the mid to late twentieth century. We are pleased to see this acknowledged in the Plan but suggest additional language recognizing the unique needs of historic buildings in terms of maintenance. **In promoting housing repair programs (Goal 8, Strategy B), the Plan should work with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and other relevant organizations to include programs aimed specifically at preserving historic structures throughout Jackson Ward.**

High Quality Places

We suggest that Theme 3: Create High Quality Places, be revised to support growth that preserves the historical urban fabric and celebrates the unique heritage of Jackson Ward and the redevelopment of Gilpin. While this is a concept that makes a nominal appearance throughout the Plan, there is little in the way of concrete recommendations for how to accomplish this. In fact, the only actionable item relating to preservation is the expansion of the City Old and Historic District. **We support the expansion of the Jackson Ward City Old and Historic District (OHD) to protect the area's surviving historic fabric and as a means of implementing Goal 10: Land Use and Historic Preservation.** While Historic Richmond is in favor of this expansion, it is important to note that expanding OHDs cannot be done unilaterally by the city, and that expansion involves a lengthy process with extensive community engagement. **While the OHD would provide some level of regulations and review to protect the remaining historical fabric, we recommend that Goal 10 be expanded to include additional strategies to incentivize and encourage the rehabilitation of those historic buildings.** For example, the expansion of the partial tax exemption, and/or a revision of the City's tax abatement program to assist the rehabilitation of smaller commercial storefront buildings and housing.

Equitable Transportation

The construction of the interstate highway in the mid-twentieth century bisected a vibrant community, effectively isolating northern Jackson Ward and Gilpin Court from the rest of the city making access to jobs and resources much more difficult. We understand that the Reconnect Jackson Ward project is attempting to address this issue. **We recommend that Goal 17 Strategy A be revised to better integrate the Jackson Ward Community Plan with the Reconnect Jackson Ward project. We support the restoration of the historic street grid (Goal 17 Strategy C).**

Thriving Environment

We want to see Jackson Ward become a sustainable and resilient community with healthy air, clean water, and a flourishing ecosystem. Preservation is an inherently “green” practice, as adaptive reuse reduces material consumption, consuming less energy and putting less waste in landfills than new construction. We are pleased to see this Plan promote opportunities to implement renewable energy and make existing structures more sustainable. We are puzzled as to why historic structures have been separated out, as the methods of implementation would be similar regardless of the age of the building (solar panels, storm windows, improved insulation, etc). **We recommend that Strategies A and D of Goal 19 be combined into a single strategy promoting energy conservation and sustainability for existing structures within Jackson Ward. We likewise support the creation of parks and walking trails (Goal 20, Strategy B), but recommend that it also be addressed under Goal 16: Healthy People.** This would acknowledge and emphasize the positive effects that access to green space and safe places to walk are known to have on individuals’ health, including asthma, depression, and hypertension, the three most common chronic health conditions reported by adults living in Gilpin Court (Goal 16, Strategy B).

History

We appreciate the inclusion of a timeline starting on page 29, but its focus seems to be the planning efforts of the 2020’s. If the plan is truly intended to cover all of Jackson Ward, the history of the neighborhood should be expanded.

We are grateful to RRHA, City staff, and the members of the various working groups for their efforts to produce this draft plan and develop a shared vision for a reunified Jackson Ward. We know this has taken a great deal of time, energy and thought from a great many people. Historic Richmond thanks you for the care and attention you devote to these matters, and we appreciate your efforts to make Richmond a better place—a high quality place—for all.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at ccrump@historicrichmond.com with any questions regarding this letter.

Sincerely,


Cyane Crump
Executive Director

cc: Martha Warthen, President of Historic Richmond Board of Trustees

