The Falls Church Village Preservation and Improvement Society

Mayor Tarter and Members of the City Council
City of Falls Church
303 Park Avenue
Falls Church, VA 22046

June 20, 2017

**Subject: Railroad Cottages Comments**

Dear Mayor Tarter and Members of the City Council:

Thank you for inviting VPIS to comment on the new site plan for the Cottage Housing plan for Railroad Avenue. The Executive Committee of the VPIS Board of Directors of VPIS met with Ms. Twiford, a member of the Railroad, LLC, development team, and two citizens with properties adjacent to the proposed development site. In addition, we reviewed the most recently submitted site plan.

VPIS, for many years, has consistently taken the positon that the City should carefully separate highly dense residential projects, like townhouses, from the existing R-1A and R-1B zones. People purchase single-family detached homes in these two zones – homes with significant yards around them -- and expect that the similarly zoned properties surrounding those homes will maintain a similar density. Whenever there is a significant change in those areas, as here, VPIS has urged the City to create significant buffering between the R-1A or R-1B zones and the higher density project.

In the 1980s the City had a proliferation of townhouse projects placed on relatively small lots. Because of the recognition of the undesirable impacts of the rezoning of R-1A and R-1B property and the placement of these small townhouse projects abutting and in fact intruding into R-1A and R-1B neighborhoods, the City Council in the 1990s significantly changed the City's Zoning Ordinance. In order to stop the proliferation of placing town houses on relatively small lots, the Council required that townhouses could be placed only on lots that were 3 acres or more. This ended the creation of high density housing on lots as small as one acre.

While the Cottage Housing project is not townhouses, it comes very, very close in density and appearance. The project proposes to build ten homes and a common building on essentially one acre of land. There is a portion of the 1.25 acres, on the northeast corner, that is unbuildable but is part of the overall land. In any event, the project is very dense, putting as many houses as possible on that property. Many of our comments are driven by those two facts – this is a very

significant intrusion into an area zoned for single-family homes with significant yards around them, and the density of homes on this lot appears extreme.

1. **Parking.** As stated in our February 10, 2017, letter that addressed the proposed Ordinance itself, we remain very concerned about the lack of parking made available for residents and their guests. Ms. Twiford stated that they have proposed to add five to six parallel parking spaces along Railroad Avenue, contingent on City's approval of a variance. Approval of the variance would increase the number of available spaces from thirteen spaces to eighteen or nineteen, which would help the parking problem inherent in this project. Without this variance, parking undoubtedly will overflow onto neighboring residential streets.

2. **Buffering from the neighboring properties**. This project should be significantly buffered by landscaping from adjoining residential lots. New trees to be planted on the property should include conifers or evergreens, at a minimum of seven feet tall and of substantial width, along the southern and western fence lines to provide buffers to the neighbors on Fowler and Ellison Streets and Railroad Avenue. It is essential, in our view, that the evergreen shrubbery planted provide an **immediate buffer.** The City should not accept an offer to plant smaller shrubbery that might grow to provide a significant barrier in ten years or so. The neighbors deserve a substantial barrier immediately. In addition, the project must provide adequate access to water for this shrubbery, and to make the Homeowners' Association responsible for maintaining this landscape buffer.

3. **Construction schedule.** If the project is approved, the City must require the developer to build all of the approved homes and the club/guest house simultaneously, with completion (defined as granting of occupancy permits) within no more than one year of the start date. Ms. Twiford stated at our meeting that the project could be completed in eight months. The City must, in our view, include in any grant of permission to build this project that the project be completed over one year of construction, and there will be substantial financial penalties, incurred daily, for non-compliance. The City must also commit to enforcing those financial penalties. We do not want the construction to drag on due to lack of sales, interest, and/or funding, and believe implementing a penalty clause would prevent that from occurring. It is unfair to adjoining residents, and others in this neighborhood, to have to endure a long period of construction that would occur were the project to be built in separate phases, with only some houses going in during each phase. That could take years. The entire project must be built at once.

4. **Possible carport relocation.** It appears it would be possible to move the carport from its current location to the apex (northeast point) of the triangular lot and to moves the homes further to the west edge of the property, where the carport is currently located. The neighborhood representative stated this would be preferable to the current location. While this might require some work along Railroad Avenue, it does not appear the cost would be substantial, and this possibility would reduce the effect of this project on immediately neighboring homes.

5. **Density.** The project, as proposed, is at maximum density for buildings and appears to be too

high for the parcel of land proposed. One portion of the property (northeast apex) is of such odd proportions it is unusable for anything more than green space. The City should consider asking the developer to reduce the number of homes on this piece of land.

6. **Setback.** The setback of the rear of the houses along Railroad Avenue should be increased from ten feet to twenty feet from the edge of the pavers, identified as the location for the additional parallel parking spaces.

As we stated in earlier letter to the Council, VPIS does not oppose the concept of cottage homes. The location of this piece of land, adjoining R-1A and R-1B homes, and its odd shape, present some unique obstacles. Our suggestions -- particularly the addition of parking spaces, the taller and broader shrubbery to serve as an immediate buffer, and the binding and enforceable requirement that the entire project be built at one time -- will serve to protect the neighbors. The residents of this neighborhood will be seeing a substantial and apparently unwanted change to their immediate neighborhood through what was essentially a rezoning to permit very dense housing, and should be protected as much as feasible. Without these changes, we find it difficult to fully support this site plan.

Thank you very much for considering our views.

Sincerely,

Mark L. Gross, President
On Behalf of the Board of Directors

cc: Chairman Wodiska and
Members of the Planning Commission
Planning Staff
Ms. Twiford
Ms. Covert
Ms. Harrison