

Dear members of the Planning Commission and City Council,

I support Ord 2018-245 (and 2018-243) and hope you support its approval. This project has a number of benefits:

- It will put housing near downtown, reducing commute times;
- It is a short walk from a major frequent bus line (the 1A/B/C) and a strong 30-minute bus line (the 14), and will help support increasing ridership and future frequency on those lines;
- It is near a current bike lane on Lombardy, and another bike lane that should get built soon, as it has already been approved by city council and the administration, and this project will support increased usage of both lanes;
- It is near a grocery store and will help support more commercial for neighboring residents;
- It is adjacent to an institution of higher learning and near another.

Projects like this will increase the viability of people getting around in safe, economical and efficient modes of transportation. I would also like to commend that the Special Use Permit contains a maximum for the number of parking spots, as opposed to a minimum that has been common in previous projects; I have advocated for this change and am glad the city is moving in this direction. There is no need to allow, for decades in the future, more parking than the developer and the market ask for. While I think there is far too much parking for a project in such a connected neighborhood, and think much of that space could be filled with more housing, a more economically productive use, I'm happy about the direction the city is moving in.

Lastly, I think it's important to think about this project in the context of the Richmond 300 Master Planning Process. One of the main questions being asked is where would we fit 30,000 more people. That is a good question, and if we are going to stop displacement we need more housing. We need more housing not just in areas where residents don't have political power, but everywhere. I was incredibly dismayed to learn that the Westhampton Theatre project could have had over 150 units but was instead built with about a dozen. (I was also not surprised to learn shortly after of people complaining that bus service on Grove was reduced due to low ridership, as if the two issues were unrelated.) Mixed-use growth needs to occur in nodes to support transit, walking and biking, and to support an equitable distribution of new residents. The city needs to be supporting projects like this not just where there are few residents with political influence (industrial and low-income area), but everywhere. Banning apartments by-right in most of the city does not support livable communities or fair housing.

Currently this type of project would be banned in nearly the entirety of the city, requiring costly special use permits. In fact, even here it requires one. That many neighborhoods in Richmond that we love – the Fan, Church Hill, Oregon Hill, etc. – would be illegal to build in most of the city and even those neighborhoods themselves tells us our zoning is not helping us build the Richmond we want to build. The city's zoning code should be updated so that projects that support things we want – walkable communities, livable neighborhoods, neighborhood commercial, frequent transit – by doing the things we want – low setbacks, high lot coverage, higher height limits, reduced parking requirements – should be by-right, while projects that harm those outcomes should require special permits and intense scrutiny, as well as community benefit agreements. I hope the Planning Commission and City Council look to these principles in planning for our city over the coming years.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Smith