



## CITY OF RICHMOND

### Department of Planning & Development Review *Staff Report*

**CPCR.2019-119:** TO DECLARE AN INTENT TO AMEND THE OFFICIAL ZONING MAP AND TEXT FOR THE PURPOSE OF CREATING A HISTORIC VIEWSHED PROTECTION OVERLAY DISTRICT TO PROTECT THE VIEW OF THE JAMES RIVER FROM LIBBY HILL PARK.

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**To:** City Planning Commission  
**From:** Department of Planning and Development Review  
**Date:** January 21, 2020

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#### **PETITIONER**

City of Richmond  
900 East Broad Street  
Richmond, VA 23219

#### **LOCATION**

The Libby Hill Viewshed is a cone-shaped area stretching south of Libby Hill Park, in Richmond's Church Hill neighborhood, including the James River and both banks, and ending at the Richmond City boundary.

#### **PURPOSE**

To amend the official zoning map and text for the purpose of creating a historic viewshed protection overlay district to protect the view of the James River from Libby Hill Park.

#### **SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION**

The view of the bend in the James River from Libby Hill Park is called "the view that named Richmond", because of William Byrd II's observation that it strongly resembled the view of Richmond Upon Thames, outside London. The view is an important part of this City's history and identity, and is an important tourist destination. Because of development interest on parcels between the hill and the river, preserving the view has been the subject of controversy and debate for many years. In 2019, viewshed advocates and the Church Hill Association have come to agreement that the view in question is limited to the river and land just on either side, which makes it feasible to establish viewshed protections. (Please see attached map.)

After adoption of this Resolution, PDR staff will work with staff from the City Attorney's office to draft language to create this district.

**Staff supports the resolution of intent.**

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## FINDINGS OF FACT

### **Background**

The view from Libby Hill Park is culturally, sentimentally and economically important to the Richmond region. Development threatens to impede the view drastically, and putting protections in place at this time demonstrates that the City is prioritizing this viewshed and acknowledging its importance.

### **Master Plan**

The River is one of the “seven foundations” of the Downtown Master Plan (2009), which recommends preserving views to the river by limiting building heights and protecting important view sheds. The plan includes an image of the Libby Hill view shed on page 3.15, stating that “it is essential that rezoning of land and new construction in Downtown be carefully considered and that building heights be controlled to protect these historic views.” Again on page 4.45 the plan states that “future development along the riverfront needs to be carefully considered so that it will not impact significant historic views such as “the view that named Richmond” from the top of Libby Hill Park”.

The Richmond Riverfront Plan (2012) espouses the importance of Richmond’s Scenic Resources, and designates the view from Libby Hill Park as a Priority view that deserves special attention. The plan recommends (p.95) using overlay zoning for “height, massing, setbacks, etc”, while acknowledging that “views from priority vantage points are not purely natural and are not frozen in time; such views already include a mix of built elements...and even with some protections, the broader landscape will continue to evolve.”

The Pulse Corridor Plan (2017) envisions that new development respects the viewshed of the “view that named Richmond” from Libby Hill Park to the James River (p.114).

In short, the last three Master Plan amendments published and adopted by Planning Commission and Council all are in agreement and explicitly state that the view from Libby Hill Park should be preserved.

### **Existing and Proposed Zoning**

Zoning in the viewshed is currently M-2 Heavy Industrial, with the exception of one parcel, part of Rockett’s Landing, zoned RF-1 Riverfront District. The M-2 district allows a great variety of uses, a height limit of 45’ on the exterior of a parcel with greater height allowed in the interior, as well as off-premises and roof signs. The Pulse Corridor Plan depicts a Future Land Use of Neighborhood Mixed Use, which could be achieved by a variety of zoning districts (depending on the specifics of each station area), including B-5, RF- 1 and UB-2. Staff is proposing to do more analysis to determine the correct zoning district to recommend, and rezone the area as part of the next Pulse Corridor Plan rezoning. The proposed Historic Viewshed Protection Overlay District would figuratively lay over the underlying zoning, limiting height, prioritizing landscaping screening and preservation of mature trees, and limiting size and type of signage. Please see attached map for area of coverage.

**Public Engagement**

There has been significant public input over the past decade regarding the preservation of the Libby Hill viewshed. That input has influenced the recommendations in Master Plan amendments, and has led to this proposal. Planning and Development Review has also been in contact with neighborhood associations during this process.

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