

# OLD TOWN COMMONS

## ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

### Summary

Built in a five-block area in the historic Parker-Gray District in Alexandria, Virginia, Old Town Commons is a \$148.3 million redevelopment of public housing into 379 townhome, condominium and multifamily units. The project includes 245 units of market-rate housing and 134 public housing apartments. A public-private partnership among the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority, the City of Alexandria and EYA produced the project. Located five miles from Washington, D.C., the project was produced with innovative financing that leveraged the high real estate value of the land and Low Income Housing Tax Credits. Today, the result is a vibrant, revitalized neighborhood combined with a nearby community center and public parks in a pedestrian-friendly, transit-oriented community.

### Dealmakers

- Strong housing market
- Collaborative public-private partnership
- Experienced developer of mixed-income communities
- Leadership from the housing authority
- Supportive city council
- New community center

### Overview

Location	Alexandria, Virginia (Washington, D.C., metro area)
Project Type	Market-rate, affordable housing, public housing
Developers	EYA Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority (ARHA)
Contributing Partners	Virginia Housing Development Authority City of Alexandria Boston Capital (Equity Syndicator)
Housing Types	Townhomes, triplexes, multifamily, condominiums
Site Size	8.49 acres (5 blocks)
Units	<b>379 units:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 134 public housing apartments</li><li>• 159 market-rate, for-sale townhouses</li><li>• 86 market-rate multifamily condominiums</li></ul>
Sustainability	LEED certified and/or EarthCraft certified
Development Costs	\$148,250,000

<b>Development Timeline</b>	2006: Public-private partnership established 2009: Site acquired 2010: Construction started May 2010: Sales/rentals opened (pre-construction sales) October 2014: Completed
<b>Funding Sources</b>	Nine-percent Low Income Housing Tax Credits City of Alexandria: loans for gap financing Leveraging of high land values
<b>Websites</b>	<a href="http://www.vhdllc.us/old-town-commons.html">http://www.vhdllc.us/old-town-commons.html</a> <a href="http://eya.com">http://eya.com</a>

## Development Partners

This mixed-income project is the result of a successful collaboration between Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority (ARHA), EYA and the City of Alexandria. ARHA is a public agency charged with ensuring affordable housing opportunities for Alexandria’s low-income households. The affordable housing rental units are owned and managed by ARHA.

EYA served as the site’s land developer, home builder and general contractor. EYA manages the market-rate housing. Specializing in walkable, new townhome communities and mixed-use developments, the company has built more than 3,500 homes and 32 communities in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area since its founding in 1992.

“The partners formed a senior-level working group to agree on what the strategy was going to be and keep the communications flowing.”

**Brian J. (AJ) Jackson**  
Senior Vice President, EYA



Photography by Thomas All-Edge



## Site Development

Situated in the Parker-Gray historic district, Old Town Commons is within walking distance of the Braddock Road Metro Station, as well as restaurants, retail stores and other amenities. Since its construction in the 1940s, many of the original blocks of public housing row houses in the area just north of King Street in Old Town Alexandria had also become a concentration of poverty, with significant crime and little private investment

Local housing and land use policies were influential in the development of the Old Town Commons project. By the 2000s, city leaders aimed to reduce concentrations of public housing in favor of scattered-site public housing that combined market-rate units and public housing in the same block. The Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority (ARHA) sought to leverage this mixed-income strategy to resolve difficulties with the rundown and mostly vacant Glebe Park public housing units. The agency issued an RFP to redevelop the Glebe Park property and selected EYA for a public-private partnership.

However, there was not a viable plan for redevelopment to get the Glebe Park property up to full occupancy. To comply with the City of Alexandria's Resolution 830 requiring a one-for-one replacement of all public housing units, other public housing—with a better location and higher land values—became a key part of the solution. Thus, ARHA offset the losses at Glebe Park by also redeveloping James Bland, a more valuable piece of land well-located between Braddock Metro station and the Potomac River, to become the Old Town Commons project.

The production of 379 housing units at Old Town Commons doubled the density of the 194 original units on the site. Increasing the density required the development of the Braddock East Master Plan, a small area plan that included the James Bland site. Public housing residents from the original units were relocated onsite or relocated to other available ARHA housing in the community.

## Design

Design considerations were crucial in a project that substantially increased the neighborhood density and height, required approval from the Board of Architectural Review, mixed single-family with multifamily units, and sought to ease concerns from area residents. Colorful paint schemes and trim details are compatible with the neighborhood's historic character. Units range in size from one to four bedrooms. Rear-load parking garages, street-facing residences with doors that open directly onto the streets, wide sidewalks, and community parks contribute to a pedestrian-friendly environment.

“The city invested in a brand new community center in the middle of the site early in the project. This created a common place for entire community that serves everyone and encourages ‘neighbor to neighbor’ interactions.”

**Brian J. (AJ) Jackson**  
Senior Vice President, EYA

“With so many people moving into a new community at the same time, it is important to have ‘Know your neighbor’ events. That way, people learn about the neighborhood, and residents create personal relationships.”

**Brian J. (AJ) Jackson**  
Senior Vice President, EYA

Closer to the Braddock Metro station and along Route 1, the design team developed a plan for taller multifamily buildings, with decreased height further from the Metro. Three-story buildings with set-back terraces were located closer to the existing, historic row houses as a “step down” technique. Exterior design features include brick and HardiePanel siding, brick stoops with wrought-iron rails, and rooftop terraces. Some units have decks or front porches.

Stacking public housing apartments in rowhouse flats helped increase the density without increasing the perception of increased density and assisted with community buy-in. The stacked public housing apartments are indistinguishable from market-rate townhomes and feature the same quality materials. The affordable units are visually compatible with the historic rowhome community. Two of the buildings are owned by ARHA and provide 32 units of below-market rental housing.

Residents gather at the nearby Charles Houston Recreation Center for community meetings, events and entertainment that appeal to both old and new residents. The City of Alexandria completely rebuilt and expanded this longtime community center in a \$15.3 million project that was completed in 2009. The 35,000-square-foot center includes a gymnasium, dance studio, meeting space for seniors, several multipurpose rooms, areas for preschoolers, an outdoor swimming pool and a tot lot.

Old Town Commons is also built to U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED for Homes and/or EarthCraft specifications, with features that not only conserve energy and water but also save residents hundreds of dollars in annual water, heating and cooling costs.

## Public Outreach

As can often happen with the development of affordable housing, some in the community initially opposed the plans and sought to minimize the amount of affordable housing on the site. Ongoing communication and public outreach were essential to address concerns. EYA, city staff and ARHA met regularly with existing residents and neighbors to ensure the proposed plan was consistent with the Braddock East Master Plan and to discuss density, height, open space, parking, historic context and other areas of concern until consensus was reached. ARHA employed a consultant to facilitate further outreach with public housing residents. Since the project is located in a city historic district, the historic preservation review process was also a necessary consideration in the development.

Coordination for internal consistency among ARHA, EYA, and the City of Alexandria was also very important. For example, planning staff regularly attended ARHA board meetings to better understand their goals and keep them updated on the City’s plans.



Photography by Thomas Kiedge

## Financing

The project was financed exclusively by market-rate land value and federal low-income housing tax credits, without the assistance of any subsidies. The transit-accessible location in a close-in Washington, D.C., suburb helped to create the high land values that were a key factor in the success of the project.

The partnership among the City of Alexandria, ARHA, and EYA assisted with financing the project and created some flexibility for the development schedule. The City of Alexandria loaned \$6 million to ARHA to allow them to pay off the HUD mortgage on the Glebe Park site. ARHA repaid the loan from the Old Town Commons development proceeds. EYA, the developer, purchased the land beneath the market-rate units from ARHA. ARHA then put the proceeds towards funding the public housing units. The public housing was also funded through low-income housing tax credits. In a key strategic move, the city also acquired four lots that had been approved for market-rate townhomes on the property and used the land to expand public open space. The expansion of park space helped mitigate the increased density on the site.

The state housing finance agency, the Virginia Housing Development Authority, awarded the tax credit equity to ARHA through a competitive process. The tax credits were syndicated by Boston Capital. Boston Capital and ARHA secured \$24.6 million in equity for the project.

Old Town Commons was built in five phases. To finance the project, a new tax credit application was filed annually. The tax credits offered a two-year window to complete each phase of construction on the public housing portion. With this schedule, it was critical that market-rate sales kept up with plan, so that each phase was pre-sold in advance of applying for the next tax credit. Market-rate units, including 159 townhomes selling up to \$1 million and 86 condominiums in the mid \$300,000s–\$400,000s, provided the necessary land value to offset the cost of rebuilding 134 ARHA units. Predicted market demand actually exceeded expectations, as sales prices of the market-rate units increased by 20 percent over the initial prices.



## Observations and Lessons Learned

Good communication is essential—internal as well as external. EYA, ARHA, and the City of Alexandria formed a senior-level working group to manage communication in their public-private partnership. Communication with other agencies not directly part of the partnership was important, too. For example, the City of Alexandria’s Office of Housing’s support for Old Town Commons was crucial.

Work to get the city council on board, too. While it was clear that the city had a strong public policy commitment to scattered site affordable housing, this was politically a more difficult situation for city council members. Valuable time and money needed to be expended to get city council’s buy-in for the project.

Phase one in a larger project often offers lessons for later phases. Project challenges included poor soil and site conditions, including abandoned utilities. EYA and its subcontractor companies applied lessons learned from early stages of construction to later and future phases.

Don’t underestimate the social dimension in a mixed-income development. An integrated homeowner’s association, in which participation is encouraged among all groups, facilitates good relations for both market-rate owners and public housing. A salaried community facilitator helps resolve minor housekeeping issues and also coordinates community events designed to get neighbors interacting in a positive way. In addition, the city’s investment in a new recreation center in the neighborhood created a central point for residents to enjoy community meetings, events and entertainment. The community center’s varied programming is designed to appeal to the all residents.

With a strong project, everyone wins. The neighborhood surrounding Old Town Commons has benefited from the development, too. With an influx of residents, there is renewed retail investment in the form of new shops, restaurants and even a new grocery store.



Photography by Thomas Arledge

This document is a portion of NAHB's report  
*How Did They Do It? Discovering New Opportunities for Affordable Housing.*

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# How Did They Do It?

Discovering New Opportunities  
for Affordable Housing



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