



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Department of Historic Resources

2801 Kensington Avenue, Richmond, Virginia 23221

Matt Strickler
Secretary of Natural Resources

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January 30, 2020

Mr. Stephen King
Rockingham County Administrator
20 East Gay Street
Harrisonburg, VA 22802

Mayor Deanna R. Reed
409 South Main Street
Harrisonburg, VA 22801

Dear Mr. King and Mayor Reed,

RE: Denton Building in Harrisonburg

Recently the Virginia Department of Historic Resources was made aware of Rockingham County's interest in potentially purchasing the historic Denton Buildings with the intent to expand the Harrisonburg-Rockingham County judicial system, which likely would require demolition of the Denton complex. We understand that these plans are in the preliminary phase. We urge the County and City to reconsider the demolition option and to seek an alternative option that serves the County's needs and avoids adversely impacting Harrisonburg's remaining historic resources, especially those surrounding Court Square.

The City of Harrisonburg has made enormous progress during the past 20 years in preserving its historic buildings and recycling them with an eye toward the downtown's continuing revitalization, assisted by the able leadership and support of Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance (HDR). It was HDR that led the successful effort, for instance, to list the Harrisonburg Downtown Historic District on the Virginia Landmarks Register in 2004 and the National Register of Historic Places in 2005. These official listings enabled property owners to use state and federal rehabilitation tax credits to incentivize the reuse of the city's landmark buildings, which effectively kick-started a successful transition of the downtown.

Today the downtown district boasts refurbished historic buildings, anchored by a beautiful, unique Court Square that attracts tourists, local residents, and college students and their parents for food, entertainment, cultural enrichment, and shopping. It represents a remarkable transformation of a downtown that was moribund by the mid-1990s. That transformation has been marked by a

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resurgent interest in preserving and investing in the City's historic resources, which provide touchstones to the City's past, and offer spaces where entrepreneurial enterprises can take root—from restaurants and specialty shops to start ups. In an increasingly homogenous world of strip malls and franchises, visitors look more and more to finding places of genuine authenticity, places imbued with history. Harrisonburg has those attributes. They are inherent in its character-defining historic buildings.

Harrisonburg's historic district and assets are one reason the City can share in the more than \$1.524 billion in direct visitor spending that tourism contributes to the Shenandoah Valley Region, as reported by the Virginia Tourism Corporation in 2019.

The City's is moving in the right direction and its future looks bright—which is why it comes as such a surprise to learn the County is considering the acquisition and demolition of the Denton Buildings. Such a move is contrary to the City's recent arc and spirit of revitalization through a focus on historical assets.

The City can ill-afford to lose more of its historic assets. During the late 20th century, it lost much of its historic fabric, including one entire block along Liberty Street razed for construction of the court and jail complex. The notion of removing yet one more historic resource, in particular one that borders Court Square, represents a step backward in DHR's view.

The Department of Historic Resources stands ready to offer any assistance we can on this matter and we are certainly open to consultation on alternative options or offer insight into ways to re-purpose an existing building in order to adapt it to modern day needs such as the County now requires.

Sincerely,



David Edwards

Director, Community Services Division

CC:

Members of Rockingham County Board of Supervisors

Members of Harrisonburg City Council

Eric D. Campbell, Harrisonburg City Manager

Andrea Dono, Executive Director, Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance

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