

# MASONRY ORDINANCE CASE STUDY

## FALLS CHURCH, VIRGINIA

The story of Falls Church, a small community of approximately 10,000 people, began in pre-colonial America long before near-by Washington D.C. developed into the major city it is today. Over the past 250 years, Falls Church has balanced progress and development while preserving its history and maintaining its charm.

### Executive Summary

When Falls Church, Virginia started to feel the pressures from neighboring Washington D.C., City Council members knew they had to develop a planning strategy that would accommodate growth and maintain the history and appeal of the community. Designating a historic district, the city has successfully applied design guidelines that call for the use of brick for new developments in this area and throughout neighboring corridors.

### Just The Facts

- City: Falls Church, Virginia
- Population: 10,400
- Area: 2.2 Square Miles
- Type of Government: Council-Manager
- Masonry Requirement: There is no official requirement, but the Design Guidelines recommending masonry products as building materials have been extremely well-received by builders and architects in Falls Church.
- Contact: Elizabeth Friel, AICP, General Manager, Development Services/Planning Director  
703-248-5040  
efriel@ci.falls-church.va.us
- Web site: [www.ci.falls-church.va.us](http://www.ci.falls-church.va.us)



Recognizing that growth was inevitable, Falls Church viewed this experience as an opportunity to protect the community's aesthetics and preserve the heritage reflected in its homes, businesses, and community gathering places. Not surprisingly in a town only 2 miles square, Falls Church was almost entirely built out, with no ability to annex neighboring areas. As a result, the focus for the last 10 years has been on redevelopment, creating the need for high-density residential, retail, and mixed-use development.

Falls Church planned for this new growth by exercising its authority from the Commonwealth of Virginia to mandate aesthetics and building materials in historic districts and corridors leading to historic districts. In 1997, a citizen's Architectural Advisory Board was formed, with the architecture/planning firm of Frazier Associates commissioned to help community leaders designate appropriate districts and develop a comprehensive set of design guidelines.

The intent of the guidelines is to ensure the preservation of architectural features on existing structures, and encourage that new development and infill reflects the tradition and style that gives Falls Church its distinct appeal. In many cases, Falls Church determined that the use of brick and masonry was the most effective, tasteful application to achieve these goals. Commercial and office uses, for example are held to the following guidelines:

1. Masonry is the most appropriate material for commercial buildings.
2. Use consistent materials on all sides of a building.
3. Use material, texture and color changes to help reduce mass and provide visual interest but also avoid overly busy designs.

Guides for multi-family residential and single family residential uses recommend similar regulations and imply the use of brick and masonry stating, "One of the strongest aspects of Falls Church is its attractive neighborhoods. Tree-lined streets wind through many residential areas that are filled with a variety of architectural styles of the early to mid-twentieth century. These well-preserved and stable neighborhoods deserve to maintain the integrity of their character. The recommendations are designed to ensure that any new houses respect that existing character."

According to Elizabeth Friel, General Manager of Development Services and Planning Director, the city chose to recommend brick in its Design Guidelines because "brick helps to create and maintain the traditional atmosphere of Falls Church. Protecting the city's beautiful older neighborhoods filled with 1940's brick style bungalows, and renovating downtown's historic structures necessitated that masonry products become the standard for our community."

While Falls Church does not mandate the amount of brick used on new construction, since the design guidelines were enacted, approximately 80 percent of the development proposals submitted to the city have included clay brick and masonry as the exterior building material. The popularity and effectiveness of the design guidelines has also provided an opportunity for city staff

and members of the Planning Commission to suggest the use of brick and masonry during the site plan review process.

One recently completed mixed-use development, representing a \$300 million capital investment, will generate \$500,000 in new tax revenue for the town. Two similar projects currently under construction will bring that total above \$1million, and two more are approved to break ground. The increased tax base helps to fund municipal services and amenities such as new entertainment venues, and the town's nationally-ranked public education system.

Through the use of Design Guidelines, Falls Church has accommodated growth without sacrificing the quality of its structures. This approach to growth ensures Falls Church will continue to practice a philosophy of protecting its future and preserving its past.

