



# Town of Vienna

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## Meeting Minutes Board of Architectural Review

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Thursday, October 16, 2025

7:30 PM

Charles Robinson Jr. Town Hall, 127 Center  
St. South

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### Roll Call

The Board of Architectural Review met in a regular session on Thursday, October 16, 2025, at 7:30 p.m. in Town Hall, 127 Center St S, Vienna, VA 22180.

Roll Call: Ms. Couchman, Ms. Shelly, Mr. O'Keefe, and Ms. Hanley were present.

Absent Member: Mr. Penati

Staff present: Director David Levy, Planner Sharmaine Abaied, and Board Clerk Yaska Camacho Castillo.

### Approval of the Minutes

The September 18, 2025, meeting minutes and the September 23, 2025, work session minutes were accepted into the record.

### Regular Business:

[BAR25-638](#)

513 Maple Ave - Sunshine Mobile Shop - Signs

Request approval of new signs for Sunshine Mobile Shop, located at 513 Maple Ave W., Docket No. PF-1866120-BAR, in the AW, Avenue West zoning district; filed by Jack Shin, Beltway Sign Team Inc., Project Contact.

Applicant present: Sahriah

Ms. Abaied confirmed that the project involves a panel replacement that will match the existing signs in the shopping center, including the tenant panel on the monument sign. The new panel will use the same brown background with white lettering and identical fonts. There will be no changes to the lighting.

There were no comments from the board or the public.

Mr. O'Keefe made a motion to approve the request for new signs for Sunshine Mobile Shop, located at 513 Maple Ave W., Docket No. PF-1866120-BAR, in the AW, Avenue West zoning district; filed by Jack Shin, Beltway Sign Team Inc, as submitted.

Motion: Mr. O'Keefe

Second: Ms. Couchman

Motion Carried

**[BAR25-639](#)** 176 Maple Ave W - Electric Bull - Sign

Request approval of a new wall sign for Electric Bull, located at 176 Maple Ave W., Docket No. PF-1883736-BAR, in the AC, Avenue Center zoning district; filed by Matthew Higgins, Concept Unlimited, Inc., Project Contact.

**Applicant Present: Sawyer Leopold**

The applicant explained that the work on the electric pole involves matching the company's branded logo and colors, with no changes made since the submission. When asked about illumination details, he mentioned the lighting would be 3000K LED lights, but clarified that he did not have specific information for this sign, as it is not his project. He offered to contact Matt, who was on standby and could answer any technical questions.

Ms. Hanley asked for confirmation that the proposal includes 98 lumens per module and a 3000 Kelvin color temperature for the sign, noting that these specifications are consistent with the lighting used throughout the shopping center, to which Ms. Abaied confirmed.

The applicant provided samples for the board's review and confirmed that it will not be mounted in a raceway. The letters are individual.

Mr. O'Keefe noted that the board had previously approved changing the backdrop color from yellow to gray, to which Ms. Hanley confirmed.

Mr. Couchman asked whether the red portion of the sign would remain visible at night. The response confirmed that it will be illuminated, using cardinal red vinyl over acrylic. It was further clarified that both the red and white areas of the sign, including the white on the logo, will be illuminated.

Ms. Couchman made a motion to approve the request for a new wall sign for Electric Bull, located at 176 Maple Ave W., Docket No. PF-1883736-BAR, in the AC, Avenue Center zoning district; filed by Matthew Higgins, Concept Unlimited, Inc., as submitted.

**Motion: Ms. Couchman**

**Second: Ms. Shelly**

**Motion Carried**

[BAR25-640](#) 515 Maple Ave E - Sekas Homes - Exterior Modification - Mixed Use

Request for approval for exterior modifications, listed in the staff report, for a mixed-use project for Sekas Homes LTD located at 515 Maple Ave E, Docket No. PF-1880827-BAR, in the AE, Avenue East Zoning District, filed by Mike Van Atta of Sekas Homes LTD, Project Contact.

Applicants Present: Mike Van Ata & John Sekas

Ms. Hanley noted that two work sessions had been held with many comments provided and requested a review of the elevations to highlight any changes made since the previous meeting.

The applicant stated that they incorporated a limestone cap for the retaining wall, as previously discussed. They modified the rustication lines on the building's exterior by removing them from certain side areas to add visual interest and better emphasize the main entrance. On the elevation referred to as the "Anita's side," rustication lines were added to the panels near the garage for consistency with other façades. Aside from adding notations for light fixtures, these were the only significant changes made to the elevations since the last review.

There was a discussion about the sidewalk along Berry Street, noting that the rendering shows a detail that differs from what the town prefers, a brick-banded concrete sidewalk. The landscape plan and some received documents still show the old detail, leading to potential inconsistency with the site plan. It was noted that this will likely be resolved during site plan review, and the outdated detail on the landscape plan should be removed to match the approved sidewalk design.

Mr. O'Keefe asked if there was anything preventing vehicles from mistakenly driving over an area that is not a curb cut. Mr. Sekas stated that there were several options considered, including installing a gate, cable, or breakaway sign or post that would deter regular drivers while still allowing emergency access for fire trucks. The fire marshal's input will guide the final decision. It was agreed that the solution should be effective yet visually unobtrusive. Additionally, the idea of adding ground cover or low landscaping (such as Mondo grass or lirioppe) along the edge was suggested as an extra deterrent, provided it meets the fire marshal's approval.

The landscape plan discussion began with concerns about the use of Echinacea and other plant selections. Ms. Couchman reiterated her recommendation to consult a landscape architect or garden designer, emphasizing that the current plant choices, such as large groupings of Echinacea, could appear floppy, messy, and unappealing after their bloom period. She suggested incorporating more variety and smaller groupings for better visual balance.

She also noted that having two similar grasses near the Anita's egress would lack contrast and that the overall plant selections do not align with the building's aesthetic. Regarding the front planters, she mentioned that Carex, which dies back in winter, might not be appropriate and suggested alternatives such as lirioppe or other more interesting plant options.

In the rear area, she expressed concern that grass would not thrive due to limited sunlight from large shade trees and suggested alternative ground covers. Additionally, she and Ms. Hanley observed that the masonry wall is set several feet inside the property line, questioning the reasoning behind that placement since shifting it could allow for more layered and visually appealing plantings instead of the current linear layout.

The applicant discussed the placement, construction, and maintenance of the masonry wall along the property line. He clarified that the wall will be six feet tall and set several feet inside the property line to allow space for construction access and long-term maintenance without encroaching on the neighbor's property.

The board raised concerns about the maintenance of the rear side of the wall, which would be difficult to access and could become unsightly if neglected. Mr. Sekas noted that while a temporary letter of permission might be obtained from the neighboring property owner to facilitate construction, a permanent easement would likely be impossible due to mortgage restrictions.

Some members suggested moving the wall closer to the property line to eliminate the unused strip of land that would otherwise require upkeep and limit space for layered landscaping within the buffer zone. It was confirmed that a masonry wall is required by code for this type of boundary, as opposed to a wooden fence, unless a modification is granted by the town council.

The discussion continued with the board and the applicant reviewing the placement of the masonry wall and the landscape design within the buffer zone. One member preferred positioning the wall about one foot off the property line, keeping the footings on the applicant's property, while the applicant wanted enough space for maintenance access without encroaching on the neighbor's land.

The board's main concern was creating visual depth and variation in the plantings rather than a strictly linear layout, suggesting that additional or staggered plantings could enhance the buffer's appearance without affecting compliance since the site is already over-planted.

It was noted that grass is unlikely to grow successfully in this area due to the shade and density of planting. The applicant confirmed that an HOA will maintain the property and that nearby neighbors are supportive of the plan, including their agreement to plant evergreens on their side for additional screening.

There was an agreement to explore converting some deciduous trees to evergreens along the property edge to strengthen the privacy buffer, consistent with feedback from the town's consultant and urban forester.

The board reiterated its desire for staggered plantings, the wall positioned closer to the property line, more evergreen trees instead of deciduous, and less grass, suggesting ground cover as an alternative.

The applicant responded that while they understood these preferences, drainage and stormwater management constraints make grass necessary in some areas to prevent water retention and soggy conditions. They explained that the team had consulted engineers and was exploring alternative plant options, such as ornamental grasses, sages, Carex, and Little Bluestem, should traditional grass not perform well.

Both parties agreed that the goal is to balance aesthetics with practicality, allowing for flexibility in adjusting plant selections as site conditions become clearer.

Mr. O'Keefe commented on the masonry wall. The discussion focused on the placement and maintenance implications of the proposed masonry wall and adjacent landscaping. The main concern is ensuring there is enough space, a "buffer zone", behind the wall so it can be accessed for future maintenance without requiring trespassing. It was noted that if the

neighboring homeowner were to install a fence on their own property line, access to the back of the wall could be blocked entirely, creating an unusable “no man’s land.”

Some participants expect that the neighboring property might eventually absorb any small buffer space and then rely on the HOA to maintain the wall. The group is weighing whether to keep the buffer or reconsider the choice and placement of evergreen plantings.

There is also discussion about needing clarity on the specific plant species, particularly the type of American Holly, before granting landscape approval. The board is willing to approve the building portion now and handle the buffer zone and landscape details separately, so that county approvals are not delayed. The applicant requests guidance and comments from the board to give to their landscape architect, noting that they have already reviewed earlier feedback point-by-point.

Mr. Mike Van Ata commented on previous landscaping comments. He noted that they added a dwarf conifer to the Echinacea area to create more visual variety. Ms. Couchman emphasized that perennial beds need more than one type of plant and cautioned that mixing multiple grasses (like little bluestem and switchgrass) may look messy, especially after seasonal cutbacks. She also suggested that certain plants, like *Carex pennsylvanica*, may appear too thin or wiry when planted in rows.

Several recommendations are made for a more structured, manicured look, especially near entrances and corners. Boxwoods are suggested as reliable, tidy evergreens that suit the site better than some of the native choices. Some native plants, like the ground-hug *Aronia*, may spread too much for the proposed locations and might be better placed in larger corner beds or informal areas.

The applicant expresses willingness to revise the plan toward a more formal landscape while still incorporating natives where appropriate, such as in the rear buffer zone, where shade and water-loving native plants could work well.

Ms. Hanley commented that the landscape details can be finalized without delaying the overall project. It was agreed that there are plenty of suitable plant options and that canopy and coverage requirements should be met, even if some deciduous species are replaced with evergreens. The priority is selecting the right species so the approved site plan matches what will ultimately be installed.

Ms. Hanley maintains open communication among the applicant, the board, and the county’s urban forester to ensure alignment. The remaining landscape issues are described as minor “button-up” items that can be resolved quickly and well before planting actually happens, so there is no need to slow down project approvals.

Ms. Couchman noted that she will not oppose the proposal based solely on plant choices but reminds the applicant that this has been described as a “legacy project.” She encouraged the applicant to work with their designer to create a final landscape that reflects the long-term vision and results in a finished appearance they will truly be satisfied with.

Ms. Couchman made a motion to approve the request for exterior modifications listed on the staff report with the exception of the plant selections in the buffer zone and established planting beds for a mixed-use project for Sekas Homes Limited, located at 515 Maple Ave E, docket number PF-1880827-BAR in the AE, Avenue East Zoning District, filed by Mike Van Atta of Sekas Homes Limited.

Motion: Ms. Couchman

Second: Mr. O'Keefe  
Motion Carried

## Other Business:

### Comprehensive Plan discussion

Mr. Levy stated that the town is updating its comprehensive plan, a long-term (10–20 year) vision and goals document. The Planning Commission has prepared a draft and is now taking public input: oral testimony on November 12 and written comments until December 1.

Boards, including the Board of Architectural Review, are encouraged to review the draft, discuss any concerns or suggestions, and decide whether to submit formal comments. This timeline allows boards to meet, deliberate, and approve any collective statements they wish to provide before the record closes.

### Chapter 4 discussion

The board is being asked to undertake a deeper review of Chapter 4 of the town code, which appears to have been repeatedly added to over time but never comprehensively reviewed or updated. Some sections are outdated or problematic and may require clarification, revision, or removal.

No decisions will be made immediately; instead, the board will likely schedule a work session and approach this as a longer-term project. Any final changes to the chapter would ultimately need to be approved by the Town Council, since it is part of the town code.

Work Session – The board was made aware that Smark Link – AT&T telecommunications is requesting a work session. The board decided on 10/29/25 at 8 am.

**Buzzer Zone:** Board members discussed concerns about how required buffer zones are being implemented in development projects, noting that current rules, particularly the requirement for a masonry wall, may prevent the layered, evergreen-heavy screening they intend to achieve. They questioned whether the zoning code's buffer requirements are producing the noise absorption, privacy, and visual mitigation they were meant to provide. It was pointed out that:

- A masonry wall creates a flat, linear boundary and limits planting space, reducing the effectiveness of the buffer.
- In some contexts (e.g., next to undeveloped land, parks, or churches), a rigid masonry-wall requirement may be unnecessary.
- Allowing or requiring evergreens instead of deciduous trees in certain locations would better support privacy and sound absorption.
- Limited space between a wall and property lines creates practical maintenance issues for both developers and adjacent homeowners.
- There is confusion among applicants about whether evergreens are permitted under the tree and buffer code.

The board acknowledged that the zoning code governs buffer zones and may need clarification or revision. They recommended further discussion with the zoning administrator (Ms. West) and highlighted ongoing efforts by the Urban Forester and staff to update the tree code. They also suggested creating clearer guidance or a “user manual” to convey the true intent of buffer zones to applicants so that future submissions better align with the town's goals.

## Meeting Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 9:24 pm.

**Yaska Camacho Castillo**

**Board Clerk**

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