

February 10, 2025

To the Harrisonburg City Planning Commission and City Council,

I am writing to you regarding the recently posted signage concerning the closing of the alley behind our home, located parallel to East Gay St. and Kelley St. The alley connects Sterling and Hill St, running between our home and the Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project (SVBHP). *I do not believe that closing the alley is in the best interest of our neighborhood and city because of how much it is used each day by our neighbors and community.*

We are newcomers to the northeast neighborhood. We purchased our home on the corner of Gay and Sterling in 2013, just 12 years ago and we love where we live. Some of our neighbors have been here for decades, many others for a much shorter amount of time.

We understand how valuable adding the alley to the Newtown Cemetery would be. We have listened and learned and know the history of the cemetery and of this neighborhood. Objectively, it is easy to see the value of increasing the footprint of the cemetery: in a city that is rapidly growing, it preserves the little land left available to add to a historic cemetery that is becoming more and more full each year. We understand the value of the proposed course of action.

I think it is harder to get a sense of the alley's value as an alley to our community.

We know firsthand the value of the alley as an alley/green space because we see it every day. We watch how kids use it to go back and forth in the neighborhood to visit friends between “the circle” and the rest of our community. We watch people use it as they go to visit the SVBHP. Some of our neighbors who don't drive vehicles use it as they walk from here to there. It's a rare bit of green, public space in a neighborhood without much of it.

We love living next to Newtown Cemetery. As we walk by, we teach our children about the cemetery and the history of our neighborhood. We read the names, messages and the dates on the tombstones and remember. We walk by as we go back and forth to neighborhood dinners at church, to play at Ralph Sampson Park, and visit our friends in the neighborhood.

We also love the alley system in our neighborhood. We walk the alley between our house and the cemetery as a family several times a week. For being such a tiny, narrow piece of land, it is used a lot. If the city decides that it is in the best interest of our community (present and future) to expand the footprint of the Newtown Cemetery and close the alley, we will understand the reasoning/rationale and respect that decision. We simply wanted you to know why we think keeping the alley open as a public green space is best for our community – for our neighbors, both now and for years to come.

If any of you would like to walk through the alley with me and talk further, I would welcome that conversation. Regardless of what you decide, I'm grateful to call this community home and committed to its flourishing.

Sincerely,
Seth Crissman