

ASF QUESTIONS FOR ARLINGTON SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATES

I. APS ROLE IN SHAPING ARLINGTON'S GROWTH

APS enrollment has reached an all-time high, induced by Arlington's record population, the annual addition of thousands of multi-family housing units, and the continued tear-down of modest homes in favor of large single-family residences with as many as six bedrooms. Given the rising cost of school construction and the severe overcrowding of many of our schools at all grade levels—despite additions in recent years and the pending construction of several new schools, is it time to take steps to better manage and direct Arlington's growth in a more paced and modulated manner?

(A) Would you favor the county taking steps like these:

-- A project-specific cost-benefit analysis for new developments, examining both incoming revenue impacts as well as potential incremental impacts on school enrollment, limiting new development to what is already allowed under the existing General Land Use Plan (GLUP), the Zoning Ordinance and other pertinent planning efforts governing particular sites.

-- The retrofit and repurposing of existing but under-utilized/outmoded commercial or residential buildings for APS facilities, similar to what has been done in the City of Alexandria and Fairfax County in recent years? While APS is repurposing the old Education Center office building adjacent to Washington-Liberty High School for classrooms, our school system has been much more reluctant to look in this direction than have other systems, despite the fact that such retrofits have the potential to be less destructive and disruptive to the natural environment.

(B) The County Manager submitted a letter to APS in November, 2019, listing several county parks as potential places for new school sites. What is your opinion of using parkland for future schools and why?

Answers to Question I:

Diaz-Torres

The rising cost of school construction and the severe overcrowding of many of our schools, at all grade levels, are serious concerns. One fundamental responsibility of the School Board is to provide all students with a healthy and sustainable school environment wherein they can thrive and succeed. Arlington must take steps to understand the nature of recent growth and to create a sustainable and healthy community for all students and their families - no matter their background, race, ability, family context, or legal status.

A) The short answer to both of these proposals is: Yes. As a member of the Joint Facilities Advisory Committee, I have long supported APS and the County engaging in more robust cost-benefit analysis procedures for construction. This is particularly important given the current economic crisis and the likely drop in both tax revenue and (potentially) bond capacity. We must know in advance what the implications are for construction on our potential revenue, expenditures, and student capacity in order to make the best decisions for all students.

B) I also support considering a broader plan to repurpose existing but under-utilized commercial or residential buildings. Given our limited geographic capacity, we must be creative in identifying new sites for potential school construction. Investigating innovative options, like repurposing or creating flexible community spaces, is a critical tool for ensuring that we can adjust dynamically as our student population ebbs and flows. We must encourage and support the efforts of the Joint Facilities Advisory Committee to create a comprehensive Public Facilities Master Plan that investigates all possible solutions that support sustainable school district and county government growth.

B) I would prefer we not use parkland to build future schools. However, I recognize that our county faces significant geographic constraints and may need to make difficult decisions in the future. This is why I support a collaborative framework for education governance that brings together APS staff, community leaders, and other stakeholders to make choices that represent the interests of our entire community. When we all engage authentically with the intention of improving outcomes for all students, these choices are transparent and understood by all - even when they are not agreeable to everyone.

Priddy

If you go back and look at my opening speech for the first debate hosted by the Arlington Democrats back in early March (Pre-COVID-19), I referenced the letter from the County Manager as the framework to create a true 15-year plan for facilities. For years we have had conversations around facilities owned by the county and facilities owned by APS. The two were not in agreement. That meant we did not have the full picture when properly planning for future growth. Now that we have a list of facilities that we can bring into the conversation, the Joint Facilities Advisory Committee (JFAC) can have substantive conversations on where the fourth comprehensive high school and new elementary schools will be located, and how to plan for future growth. We can use that list to provide options around using existing buildings to account for growth, which will minimize construction in the county.

As your elected official, I will support creating a substantive plan for new buildings and retrofitting existing facilities. As for using parkland, we need to understand why the parks were built in their respective locations before we decide to build over them: “Beginning with its first stormwater management plan in 1958, Arlington recognized the need to acquire low-lying, flood-prone areas near streams to use them as public parkland and keep them largely undeveloped to reduce flood damage and mitigate flood risk. . . . This recommendation led to the acquisition of parkland along most County streams and was the basis for a number of the parks adjacent to Lubber Run, Four Mile Run, Gulf Branch, Donaldson Run, Doctor’s Branch and Windy Run.”¹ Therefore, if those parks were created with the intent of using them to reduce potential flood damage, then we should acknowledge that concept before deciding to build on parkland. I support keeping parkland undeveloped.

¹ email from Suzanne Smith Sundburg to David Priddy on 9/18/19

Walker

(A) I agree that it is time to take steps to better manage and direct Arlington’s growth in a more paced and modulated manner. I favor the approach to retrofit and repurpose existing APS and county facilities as has been done in Fairfax County and the City of Alexandria. I favor this approach as practical, more efficient and environmentally friendly, and the most cost-effective.

(B) Using more parkland for schools is not ideal, and should only be considered as a last resort if no facilities exist that can be cost-effectively retrofitted for a school, and only after studying the environmental impact. Similar to the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), Arlington should be required to conduct a study that outlays (i) the environmental impact of the proposed action; (2) any adverse effects that cannot be avoided; (3) alternatives to the proposed action; and (4) any irreversible and irretrievable commitments of resources that would be involved in the proposed action.

II. APS AS ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARD

APS has done a commendable job in recent years in upgrading energy efficiency at existing schools and ensuring that new schools meet state-of-the-art clean and efficient energy standards through LEED certification and the like. Yet beyond school walls, APS has faced strong and, in the ASF view, justifiable criticism for:

(A) Stormwater management issues at the renewed Ashlawn Elementary School that caused damage and inconvenience to surrounding residents and neighborhood traffic hazards that took years and millions of extra dollars to correct. There is now concern at the new Reed School in Westover that, after APS first pledged enhanced stormwater management devices such as an underground detention pond to help mitigate Torreyson Run runoff issues during

intense storms, APS may now be backing away and signaling that any such improvements will not be done by the target delivery time for the new school in the fall of 2021. Rather, we understand that APS may do this work a year or two later, causing newly-grassed athletic fields to be dug up once again, and at greater expense and disruption. What would you do to ensure that APS is part of the solution to a holistic County-wide approach to the increasing challenge of stormwater management?

(B) Precipitous or unauthorized tree destruction during the construction of the Ashlawn Elementary addition and in building the new Alice West Fleet Elementary School that have caused community alarm. Meanwhile, neglected tree maintenance and watering at Wakefield High School and other properties has required multiple replacements at great taxpayer expense. The Alice Fleet and Wakefield episodes occurred despite the fact that APS hired an arborist several years ago to avoid such problems.

What steps will you take to ensure that APS is a better steward of all of its grounds and, in particular, its trees?

Answers to Question II:

Diaz-Torres

(A) Issues like these are precisely why I believe in a collaborative framework for governance. As demonstrated by the massive and devastating flooding last July, we have a critical gap in our stormwater planning and response systems. This issue is not a problem that can be resolved in a silo. We must work closely with the county to establish a flood and land use plan that uses the best data available that allows us to understand root flood causes, watershed carrying capacity, and the implications of climate change. Then, we must make decisions about construction and development that align with that plan and do not exacerbate the issues Arlington experienced last summer.

(B) In years past, I lived in urban environments essentially devoid of nature. After seven years of living in New York City and Las Vegas, I was determined to live somewhere where I could look outside my window and see trees. I chose to live in Arlington because it blends urban living with access to green spaces—and I strongly believe we must maintain this delicate balance as we grow. All public construction and maintenance projects should proceed in accordance with plans developed to account for the diverse perspectives of community stakeholders. Unauthorized tree destruction shouldn't be tolerated and neither should careless negligence. I am ready to address these problems dynamically as they arise— with careful consideration of the impacts on our community.

Priddy

As part of the Building Level Planning Committee (BLPC) for the Career Center expansion, both

of these topics were discussed. I'm using this example because it is the most current BLPC project that APS is undergoing. Therefore, it gives an idea of where APS is in their planning now that they have been through the community conversations with the Reed School and Fleet. The subject of cutting down trees came up on multiple occasions. First, there was a plan to keep the largest and oldest tree on the property. Then, the design team talked about removing the tree entirely. Finally, it was researched and found the tree was protected and the design concept would require building around the tree and keeping it. All this to say that there is more awareness to this issue than before. The experiences at Fleet and Wakefield have made APS more aware of the tree issue and both APS and the design team staff are making a conscious effort to discuss options in the community meetings. If elected, I will continue to make sure those discussions are taking place and that the benefits of keeping long-standing trees vs. planting new ones are explained. I support keeping mature trees and not paving over green space.

There were also discussions dedicated to stormwater management. We talked about vegetated roofs, pervious pavers, and bioretention as well as green space. While I am pleased to see that we are discussing stormwater management and runoff, this was an overall concept meeting and did not go into detail, nor did it give solutions for the project. As a result, the BLPC asked questions about the site-specific issues that were going to be answered at the next meeting – Unfortunately, COVID-19 hit us shortly thereafter. We have not had a meeting since. We need to take a deeper dive into this issue and I am hopeful that when we reconvene we will have answers for that project. Looking at this issue from a county-wide perspective, we need to monitor the percentage of Arlington's impervious surfaces year over year and make sure it is not growing at a rapid pace. As of 2018 it was at 43%. If I am elected, I will make sure this conversation is ongoing for all APS projects and in greater detail than what was brought forth in the BLPC for the Career Center.

Walker

Answer: I would ensure that the Assistant Superintendent for Facilities and Operations coordinate with the county's stormwater management experts regarding all school construction projects. I would ensure that there is an updated APS policy on environmental stewardship that requires coordination with Arlington County on this, as well as require environmental impact studies I alluded to in # 1. (B) above.

Answer: I would request estimates from landscaping companies that incorporate stormwater best management practices and focus on sustainable ecological landscaping to benefit the environment. An example of such a company in Arlington is Deco Footprint. I would compare those estimates to what APS is currently paying for maintenance. I would implement a similar approach for our tree care.