

## ASF Questions for School Board Candidates, May 2021

### Responses from Miranda Turner

**1. In November 2019 the County Manager wrote a [letter to the interim superintendent of the Arlington Public Schools offering to provide County lands, including County parks, for use for school facilities](#). Do you agree that school buildings and other facilities should be built on what is now park land? If so, under what conditions would you agree to place school facilities on what is now park land?**

The County Manager's letter was encouraging both in terms of the collaboration between the county and APS and with respect to the three sites identified for near-term study, in particular because seats are needed most urgently in South Arlington. I agree that longer-term collaboration and potential exploration of additional sites is important. However, the normal CIP schedule should be well timed to see the effect of this year's enrollment drop (2,000 students have said they will not return this year), and to try to evaluate whether moving towards use of other sites would be needed.

To the extent yet more sites are needed, park land should be among the last things we resort to for school siting. Space is at a premium in Arlington, and our green space is incredibly important for many reasons, including recreation, field space, tree canopy, and preserving the overall character of Arlington. It's not wise to categorically rule anything out, but before we get to the point of needing to consider using park land, we should have engaged in a joint approach to planning with the county that does not prioritize density if we lack realistic infrastructure to support it, in particular schools for children who live here now and may live here in the future. Then, to the extent we are exploring county lands, we should do so in a way that takes into account current realities and needs. One-quarter of Arlington's schoolchildren live in the Columbia Pike corridor, for example. Siting schools near kids will help us prioritize which sites to further explore, optimize efficiency and minimize transportation costs, and avoid extensive and disruptive boundary redraws down the road.

**2. School grounds need old growth canopy trees and trees in all stages of growth for science lessons and observation of growth and trees' place in the scheme of nature and change of seasons. We are, after all, in favor of respecting**

**the natural world and how everything is interrelated and dependent on each other, and we want to do our part to end climate change. Do you agree? If so, what would you do to ensure trees in all stages of growth are maintained on APS properties?**

One of the many great things about Arlington is its marrying of nature and more urban environments. Everyone, including the school system, should play a role in making sure that balance persists. Future construction projects should attempt to preserve existing, mature trees, not simply agree to replace them with new trees after a project is complete. Mature trees are important for many reasons, including serving as a habitat and opportunity for observation of the natural world, removing carbon from the environment and thus mitigating the effect of climate change, and providing effective stormwater/runoff management.

**3. The County is already projecting an additional 60,000 residents in the County by 2045 and with accelerating growth, the number will undoubtedly be even higher. Given our already overcrowded schools, how do you propose to address the undoubted need for significant additional seats when there is no remaining undeveloped land in the County?**

Future construction should include building up, i.e., buildings with more stories to maximize the space we have, but we do need to ensure our new projects have adequate common space too, such as gyms, cafeteria space, and fields. It is not fair or equitable to build “lesser than” facilities and zone students to them, and not prudent to invest in option programs without assurance that the demand is there and those programs will actually help manage capacity. As an example, Arlington Tech was expected to grow to up to 600 students, but is currently around 350. We also should make sure we are efficiently utilizing the facilities and space we have. In particular, schools cannot be left under-enrolled while neighboring schools are well over capacity, which is currently the situation, for example, with Drew and Abingdon.

More broadly, the county and schools need to plan together to address future needs. Accelerated growth should be accompanied by infrastructure to support our existing and new residents, including schools, transportation and/or parking, and other shared resources. Planning for growth and planning for needed infrastructure should go hand-in-hand. The county and school boards should meet regularly on issues like planning, facilities, enrollment, and not only in the lead-up to annual or semi-annual events like the budget or CIP updates. All

community members are rightfully proud of our public school system, and it should be viewed as a joint effort by both boards to ensure it can provide an excellent and equitable education to all students in the county.

**4. In recent budget cycles, to help APS balance its budget, the County has allocated to APS additional "one-time funds" that exceed the previously agreed allocated percentages of revenues as between County (53%) versus APS (47%) while property taxes have been rising in absolute terms each year and costs per pupil have also been rising. How do you propose to balance the APS budget within the above agreed upon percentage allocations and not contribute to increasing property taxes moving forward?**

Over the past two years, central office spending has risen by 22% while school spending has gone up by only 4% (elementary) and 8% (secondary). This trajectory warrants attention to make sure we are getting value out of our administrative overhead and to make sure we are spending appropriately on student-facing roles. In addition, our budget process in recent years has involved a "needs based" approach rather than budgeting within the total amount allocated to the schools. From a process standpoint, this tends to lock in existing roles as givens, rather than allowing for possible reevaluation of whether any particular position(s), office(s), or organizational structure is appropriate given the costs and the overall budget perspective. The school board should look to a better approach from a process standpoint and a substantive standpoint, with a priority on student-facing positions and expenditures, and should probably consider whether regular, published audits of operations and/or performance could benefit APS.

It is also worth noting, though, that most of the APS budget is personnel salary costs. Because we are falling behind regionally in aspects of the teacher payscale, APS also needs to consider moving towards increasing its teacher pay to be competitive regionally, which will drive costs. Our commitment to providing an excellent public education in our county is something that will need buy-in from all county residents, not only the relatively small percentage of residents with school-age children.