

ASF 2021 GENERAL ELECTION QUESTIONS FOR COUNTY BOARD CANDIDATES
Candidate Theo Response, Oct 12, 2021

1—PARKS, FORESTRY AND NATURAL RESOURCES:

A. The County's overdue updating of the Urban Forestry Master Plan and Natural Resources Management Plan is in full swing. What are your specific goals for this update, especially as they may relate to tree canopy, green space and the County's natural environment? Please be specific.

Considering the 300-word limit for all four questions, there isn't nearly enough space for an answer.

B. Critics contend that both North Arlington's Gulf Branch Nature Center and South Arlington's Long Branch Nature Center have endured benign neglect by the County in recent years, with both facilities suffering from deferred maintenance and programming cutbacks. What do you see as the value of these facilities and what is the right amount of operating and capital expenditures for them?

There is tremendous value in these facilities for natural enjoyment, environmental protection, stormwater relief, and education. But let's face it: they are not a priority for the county, and that's not likely to change any time soon. Instead of waiting for a politician to come along and save the day, let's get creative. Perhaps the county should partner with one of the many excellent non-profit or regional agencies such as NOVA Parks, American Horticultural Society, or the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust to take over management and operations of our under-funded but valuable assets. There would still be some funding needed, but it could be manageable.

C. The County is not on track at this point to accomplish the Public Open Spaces Master Plan (PSMP) goal of adding 30 acres of public space in 10 years. What actions would you support by the Board to ensure meeting this goal?

I'm aware that ASF is adamantly against development and densification in the county – but in my opinion it really shouldn't be. There are many ways to use densification and urbanization to not only protect but even *expand* green space in the county.

One potential method is to allow density and height bonuses for development in areas with metro or bus service in exchange for the developer providing (even purchasing if necessary) nearby property to have deed restrictions applied for conversion into protected natural space by the county. Something similar is already allowed for affordable housing units – let's do the same for green space. With all the development going on in the county, we'd finally begin to reverse the decline of natural space.

D. The County Manager has offered to APS a list of existing parks that could be considered for potential school sites. Do you believe that this was appropriate, and if so, how do you square that with the PSMP goal of adding 30 acres of public space in 10 years and in light of the dramatic growth occurring in our County?

As desperately needed as new schools are, I am still adamantly against the conversion of county parks and other public green spaces into school sites. We have lost too much already. The solution here is make use of already-developed sites for new schools, especially making use of many smaller developed sites throughout the county instead of relying on one or two large "campus-style" schools. The only possible exception I can think of is purchasing and conversion of a small part of the golf courses in the county. Considering the vast area used by the country clubs, there is plenty of opportunity for a school without impacting their amenities.

2--COST/BENEFIT FISCAL IMPACT STUDIES:

In March 2021, the County entered into a contract with the TischlerBise consulting firm. The contract includes a provision under which TischlerBise will develop "methodologies for forecasting future demand for services and facilities from new development." Do you support requiring and publicly disclosing the results of such forecasts prior to approving major projects or major zoning initiatives, such as the "Missing Middle"?

Robust impact studies for school enrollment, traffic, transit use, and environmental changes are definitely needed for major site plans, land use changes, and re-zoning.

I'll take a minute to criticize ASF, however. All too often it seems ASF supporters want to use impact studies as merely an opportunity to slow down or reject development and re-zoning plans. Comprehensive impact studies are desperately needed but the requirements and processes must be realistic and with the goal of encouraging development and density, not erecting hurdles in front of them. Progressing with development planning in conjunction with impact studies is possible. We need to walk and chew gum at the same time.

3--PLAN LANGSTON BOULEVARD AND MISSING MIDDLE HOUSING:

A number of civic associations flanking Lee Highway, including Lyon Village and Donaldson Run, have gone on record to sharply criticize current planning efforts as leading to the widespread loss, over time, of small, locally owned businesses, the reduction of relatively modest single family homes, trees and greenspace, the addition of large, multi-story structures that would be starkly out-of-scale with surrounding neighborhoods, and a sharp rise in property values that would induce gentrification of both residential and commercial development. Proponents argue that Langston Boulevard is ripe for redevelopment and that increased density would yield additional housing, commercial growth and amenities that would benefit all demographic groups and people of all income levels. Who is right and is the County on the right path or does it need to stop and reconsider?

Arlington desperately needs more housing of all types. There's no way around that fact. 30,000 new households will be needed by 2045.

Trying to deny upzoning and updates to land use plans will have disastrous consequences for the long-term livability of our community. There have been many other cities that have responded to these same problems by limiting growth, restricting housing development, and preventing densification. San Francisco, San Jose, Seattle, among many others. In every single case it's resulted in housing affordability becoming far, far worse – not better. Each of those communities become playgrounds for the wealthy, where only the upper class can afford to live comfortably, a large underclass of homelessness and subsidized housing, and a destroyed middle class squeezed out of the homes and neighborhoods they once raised families in.

I don't want the same to happen to Arlington. So, proponents of expanded development along Langston Boulevard are largely correct and we need to follow through with the potential that Langston Boulevard allows.

4--LARGE SINGLE FAMILY HOUSING REDEVELOPMENT:

Arlington loses over 200 older single-family homes a year to redevelopment, with often modest ramblers, bungalows and split levels--and the mature trees that often surround them--bulldozed to yield much larger, much more expensive, and less affordable homes that tower over and cast shadows upon their neighbors, feature greatly expanded footprints and impervious surfaces, and no mature landscaping. Is it time to dial back what a private property owner can build on their land and still be sensitive to private property rights? Why or why not, and if so, how would you accomplish that given Virginia property laws?

Allowing the county or neighbors to control what homeowners can do with real estate they've purchased is not a good approach to this problem. I admittedly hate these horrendously large "McMansions" that use up almost every square foot of a property, and can sympathize with the urge to limit them, but let's try to understand why these houses are built in the first place.

Look at the underlying financial and permitting causes and you see the county inadvertently incentivizes this kind of development.

- (1) High real estate property taxes can lead to land that is more costly to "maintain" than the old structure that sits on it. Owners then feel the need to recoup those costs, which means tearing down and building with additional rooms and Accessory Dwelling Units that could be rented out or make the property more desirable to potential future owners if the new McMansion can be sold a few years later.
- (2) Our permitting process is far more cumbersome and time-consuming than it needs to be, making renovations and add-ons of existing structures more difficult than complete teardowns to rebuild a huge new custom home.
- (3) And finally, our county is forced to tax property based on total market value instead of how the land is used (or not used, in the case of green space and tree preservation), which would allow straightforward tax benefits for tree preservation or maximizing open space instead of maximizing home floor area.

To reduce teardowns and construction of McMansions, we must reduce property taxes; simplify (and in some cases even eliminate) our permitting requirements for renovations and add-ons of existing structures; and lobby the state legislature to allow "land use" style of property taxation.