

ASF | ARLINGTONIANS FOR OUR SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

October 26, 2021

Arlington County Joint Facilities Advisory Commission

Dear Commissioners,

[Arlington forecasts a total population of 301,200 in 2045 compared to 234,200 residents in 2021.](#) These additional 67,000 residents are coming to Arlington under existing zoning. Arlington County government is expecting these new residents to come here regardless of whether the County does or does not adopt any up-zoning proposals to enable new Missing Middle (“MM”) housing.

JFAC needs to address some questions about these 67,000 new residents

Infrastructure

Can Arlington’s infrastructure accommodate them? For starters, where, exactly, are we going to put the new school facilities that will be required for the children of these new residents? In November 2019 the County Manager sent a letter to the acting school superintendent offering County properties – including parks – to be turned into school properties. But those same parks are needed to support these new residents. This overture by the Manager just highlights that the County has not adequately planned for either additional school capacity or additional parks.

The core problem here is that the County and APS have failed to adopt a comprehensive plan for *all* major public facilities, i.e., a Public Facilities Master Plan, despite the fact that six years have passed since the 2015 recommendation of the Community Facilities Study Group that such a Master Plan was critical to Arlington’s future. During those six years, while County government dithered, many potential sites for important public facilities have been lost permanently to private development.

Arlington leaders have announced some new initiatives to achieve some goals partially to address our public facilities gap, but they have failed anywhere near adequately to follow through to enable the implementation of such goals. For example, the Arlington County Board approved the 2019 Public Spaces Master Plan, which called for the County to add at least 30 acres of new public space (e.g., parks, including “passive” facilities) over the next 10 years. But this is not happening because the County has failed to develop a long-range plan to *finance* this goal. Moreover, demands under COVID-19 for outdoor space have increased the stress on our parks and recreation facilities.

It is true that some new public infrastructure, including “public spaces” is being added in the County via the site planning process, e.g., the public park that Amazon is adding near its new HQ2. But the County is not on pace to achieve the 30-acre goal of adding new park green space. Moreover, whereas the bonus density granted to developers as part of the site plan process is always legally guaranteed, the community benefits have proven to be a hit or miss proposition. The County shouldn’t be permitted to shirk its own responsibility to finance critical public

infrastructure such as parks and stormwater protection by outsourcing this public responsibility to the vicissitudes of the site plan process.

We regularly see [water](#) and [sewage](#) pipeline breaks in our old systems. Those systems are not adequate to serve our current population, much less the increased population of 67,000 coming here under existing zoning or the tens of thousands of more residents—in addition to those 67,000—that the County seems bent on adding under MM up-zoning.

Infrastructure problems are acute in many other areas as well, including [flooding](#), [power failures](#), [building integrity](#), [tree maintenance and protection](#), and [competition for parking spaces as population increases](#).

Generational Transformation

Arlington County is not identifying the costs of future critical capital expenses that will be generated as our population increases. In fact, the County Manager told the County Board in [his message of November 12, 2020](#): “[G]iven that *we are undergoing a generational transformation in how we provide services and use facilities, this is the wrong time to*” support JFAC’s proposal for long-range planning. (Emphasis in original.) If we are undergoing a “generational transformation,” and this is the wrong time to do long-range planning, is this really the time to take actions (e.g., up-zoning) that could have a huge negative impact on Arlington’s future?

Adverse Impacts on our Most Vulnerable Residents

Can Arlington’s most vulnerable residents – lower income residents and older residents on fixed incomes – continue to pay [Arlington taxes, which have been increasing faster than inflation](#)? Will low- and fixed-income renters be able to handle the higher rent costs as landlords pass along tax increases?

Housing is a Regional Issue

Housing is a regional issue, and all the communities in the region need to do their part. Other than the District itself and Alexandria, Arlington already is the most densely populated jurisdiction in the region – and [that’s just comparing our density to the parts of Fairfax, Montgomery and Prince George’s counties that are inside the Beltway \(and thus are comparable in terms of distance from the District and Metro accessibility\)](#). We are already doing our fair share. It’s time for the far larger jurisdictions – e.g., Fairfax, Montgomery, and Prince George’s counties – to do their fair share.

Also, in a trend that preceded the pandemic but is increasing as a result of the pandemic, many people no longer need to live near where they work. This could have significant impacts on Arlington’s commercial and residential real estate markets including long term demand, tax revenue generation, etc. Does the County have sufficient confidence that it has a reliable grasp on what those impacts might be? How will those impacts affect the relative property tax burdens of residential and commercial property owners?

Insufficient Evidence that Up-zoning Works as Intended

Finally, can the County point to any community like Arlington that has made changes like the Missing Middle up-zoning changes that the County is proposing, and show us that making those changes has made local housing more affordable for lower- and middle-income people?

Sure, some places have up-zoned, but have we had adequate time to see the results of those changes? Given the history of unanticipated, often negative consequences flowing from urban planning initiatives, maybe we should let those other communities show us whether up-zoning is a good idea – or whether, in the alternative, up-zoning will lead to more of what we’ve been seeing lately in Arlington: gentrification, flooding, water and sewer system breakdowns, even larger and faster increases in taxation, more crowding, more noise, more traffic and more cars trying to park in already crowded neighborhoods, reduction in permeable surfaces, loss of tree canopy, heat islands, and more battles over school redistricting.

If we up-zone and then discover that we’ve created a serious negative unintended consequence, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to walk that back (Slide 8).

Conclusion

ASF asks that JFAC play the role it was created to play and sought to play in the recent past: provide input to the County and School Boards on long-range planning that is needed to prepare the County for the 67,000 new residents that are coming under current zoning, and to evaluate whether the County can accommodate even more residents if MM up-zoning were to be implemented.

Specifically, JFAC should strongly encourage the County and School Boards to –

- Perform site-specific **fiscal impact analyses** for new, multi-unit residential projects
- Release all existing long-term **operating budget forecasts**;
- Prepare three **county forecasts comparing current zoning with up-zoning**:
 1. Long-term **operating budget**;
 2. Long-term **environmental impact**;
 3. Long-term **household income by quintiles** showing projected disparities among different household groups compared to national average.

ASF reaffirms its prior offers to present to JFAC in person or virtually, to further highlight our concerns as well as our proposals.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable Future