

ASF | ARLINGTONIANS FOR OUR SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

May 15, 2020

Honorable Libby Garvey
Chair, Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22201

Dear Madam Chair:

I am writing to convey the sentiments of Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable Future (ASF) regarding the proposed Permanent Continuity of Government Ordinance that would authorize the County Manager to "temporarily suspend enforcement of existing provisions of County ordinances" to meet county needs during the current public health crisis.

ASF supports sentiments expressed by the Urban Forestry Commission (UFC), in a letter of May 15, noting that "Arlington has long stood by the commitment to a public engagement and decisionmaking process that includes broad-based citizen, neighborhood, and advisory board participation. This approach to planning and development results in better overall outcomes and broader public support than a review process that is exclusively staff-driven." ASF is concerned, however, that the Board's agenda item #24 for its May 16 meeting ("Permanent Continuity of Government Ordinance") risks a clear step back from open, democratic governance.

The ordinance would severely reduce public engagement. Its language authorizing the County Manager to "temporarily suspend enforcement of existing provisions of County ordinances" to meet county needs during the current crisis is simply too broad-based and not warranted by circumstances. ASF also opposes the proposal that the Manager be authorized to suspend Site Plan Review Committee (SPRC) meetings for the indefinite future in favor of seeking comment from individual "members of the Planning Commission and other boards and commissions, applicants, and the public electronically without convening a meeting."

As noted by UFC, these changes are without precedent in Arlington and will "significantly change the process through which development of major projects in the county is conducted by removing involvement by the affected communities. The SPRC and Long-Range Planning Committee (LRPC) processes have long proven to be a critical tool for gathering public input in development and planning activities in Arlington. They benefit the board itself, in its approval deliberations, and the community as a whole. Public input into development plans needs to continue as well."

ASF further supports UFC's view that "the SPRC and LRPC processes can adapt to physical distancing, but the county cannot expect the same robust and deliberative feedback without real-time SPRC meetings. The discussions at these meetings have allowed the public, developers, and County staff to work together to resolve issues collaboratively. Electronic comments outside of meetings are a viable complement, but they cannot replace the valuable discussion that occurs at these meetings."

UFC sums up perfectly: "We are in the midst of an inflection point that will transform Arlington for at least a generation. To permit development projects to go forward without adequate public input would fundamentally erode principles upon which this community is built."

As you may recall, [ASF wrote the board on April 24](#) asking you to suspend specific development projects and any zoning changes until "normal processes can resume to ensure transparency and full community review post-Covid." The board replied on May 6, noting that it was not able to honor our request. ASF notes the irony that the board sees Covid as a reason to decrease, rather than strengthen, resident trust that is the foundation of a successful pandemic response. It also perplexing that the board would seek to preclude full commission and public involvement in issues relating to development, as that very development plays a role in concentrating populations more densely, with less access to nature, both policies that seem to affect one's physical and mental health in a pandemic. These processes would surely be impacted -- in our view negatively -- by county processes to expedite or make more opaque development, planning, and zoning decisions.

ASF respectfully reiterates its request of April 24, that the county "formally postpone all County decisions and processes on specific development projects and potential zoning changes until all residents, staff and Board Members can once again work together transparently to make land use decisions on which the sustainable future of our County depends." ASF strongly opposes the proposed changes to SPRC and LRPC processes, and reminds the board that many residents lack access to reliable internet and that restrictions on public gatherings also limit residents' ability to plan and provide organized feedback to these development processes.

Sincerely,

Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable Future