

March 29, 2024

Libby Garvey, Chair
Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Dear Chair Garvey and Board Members:

On behalf of the below-listed civic associations, we urge the Board to ensure that the FY 2025 budget includes at least one full-time equivalent planner position in the Department of Community Planning, Housing and Development (CPHD) devoted to the conduct of a comprehensive study of possible reforms to the lot coverage, height, and setback provisions of the current Zoning Ordinance.

We also believe this planner position should be reinforced with additional resources, by ensuring that the budget also includes adequate support for CPHD from the Department of Parks and Recreation, which is charged with conducting such a study in the Forestry and Natural Resources Plan (FNRP) approved by the Board at its December 2023 meeting, and from the Department of Environmental Services, which can bring its expertise to bear on the stormwater management issues that should be an important aspect of such a study. Indeed, as we have repeatedly noted to the Board, staff noted **ten years ago** in its Stormwater Management Plan that the increased pace of residential construction and associated expansion of impervious surfaces warranted a review of the lot coverage provisions of the ordinance. We would also support, if necessary, ensuring adequate funding for retention of a qualified expert consultant to supplement County staff in working on this study.

As a number of Board members pointed out at the March 14 budget work session with CPHD, it is long past time for this study. We very much appreciate the Board's recognition that this is an issue of growing concern to many residents throughout the County. Indeed, a majority of the Board requested such a study from staff two years ago. The rapid pace of teardowns, in the face of an increased frequency and severity of storms, has made the need to address it even more urgent. And the continuing destruction of mature trees from these teardowns, whatever limited impact the County's provision for tree canopy replacement may have over 20 years, has already resulted in irreparable damage to our neighborhoods and their environment. These increased concerns are well documented in the Online Engagement Summary that supported the FNRP, and by others as well.

We will not repeat here our August 2023 summary of this problem and its urgency, or the issues we have suggested therein should be included within the scope of such a study, or our November 2023 list of representative examples of the problem. We would note, however, the following considerations that we believe should govern the study:

1. Given the lack of priority staff has accorded to repeated requests for such a study over many years, and to concerns by Board members (past and present), the Board should ensure that the study should be completed without further delay, with recommendations for Board action made

public no later than a year from now. There is no reason why staff needs to wait until FY 2025 to start scoping the study.

2. As noted by the Planning Director at the recent Long Range Planning Committee meeting, such a study should include review of height and setback provisions of the Zoning Ordinance together with lot coverage. Staff's report accompanying the 2005 amendment of lot coverage provisions noted, as long as almost 20 years ago, that staff had not had the opportunity to review the height provisions of the ordinance. As noted in our August 2023 summary, many have recognized that the calculation of the 35-foot height limit governing residential development warrants revisiting, particularly its reliance on taking a four corner average of height, and its crediting of only half the height of gables. We have also provided you with examples of the problem of inadequate setbacks, which can have the effect of both limiting adequate space for trees and "walling in" the adjacent homes built with far more accommodating setbacks.
3. While the FNRP as well as our August 2023 summary provide a list of topics that we believe should be included in the study, others may identify additional topics. Given the community's widespread concern about ensuring that staff adequately address this problem and potential solutions, our summary requested that staff meet with the public to discuss the scope of the study. We also believe the Board should instruct staff to ensure transparency in the study process, including adequate opportunities for public participation.
4. The problems of mature tree loss, stormwater management, and loss of quiet enjoyment to surrounding neighbors apply equally to all "low density" residential zoning – including both single-family and Expanded Housing Option (EHO) homes. The County Board made that point clear in assuring residents, when first proposing to modify single-family districts to permit EHO developments, that the latter would be subject to the same lot coverage provisions applicable to the former. And it did so at a time when many of us -- long before any EHO proposals -- had been urging reform of these provisions as they apply to single-family homes. The Board has emphasized this assurance of parity in defending the EHO revisions to the ordinance in pending litigation. ***If the Board were to reverse course and determine that any such reform should be confined to single-family home construction, it would simply replace one problem set of teardowns with another.***

Once again, we very much appreciate your attention to this growing problem of concern to many residents of Arlington, and look forward to working with staff on the scoping of this needed study and its completion on a timely basis.

Sincerely yours,

Esther Bowring, President
Arlington Forest Citizens Association

Scott Sklar, President
Ashton Heights Civic Association

Henry McFarland, President
Bluemont Civic Association

Bill Richardson, President
Donaldson Run Civic Association

Julie Lee, President
Glencarlyn Civic Association

Jean Henceroth, President
Leeway Overlee Civic Association

Mike Iger, President
Old Dominion Citizens Association

Howard Solodky, President
Old Glebe Civic Association

Mona Steffen, Former President
Rivercrest Civic Association

Jason Harrier, President
Lyon Village Citizens Association

Michael Bruce, President
Waycroft-Woodlawn Civic Association

Ruth Shearer, President
Williamsburg Civic Association

Mike Cantwell, President
Yorktown Civic Association

cc: County Board Members