

Comprehensive Minutes: General Members Meeting
Donaldson Run Civic Association
June 8, 2022

The agenda was disseminated for the Donaldson Run Civic Association – General Membership meeting held at Taylor Elementary School on June 8, 2022 at 7:30pm.

An update on the closure of one of the Zachary Taylor Park trails was provided. The County said that the trail should be opened within about a week.

The Association expressed gratitude and well wishes for Anne Wilson and Deirdre Dessingue as they head off to a well-deserved retirement.

The Association elected the following nominees:

President: Bill Richardson
First Vice President: John Seggerman
Second Vice President: Amanda Weaver
Secretary: Jennifer Mehmood
Treasurer: Kathy Rehill
Director: Charlie Henkin
Director: Susan Cunningham
Director: John Fisher
Director: Alisa Cowen

Rachel Doody, Park Manager, of Potomac Overlook Regional Park provided information about current programs at the Park and discussed some challenges such as deer and invasive plants.

The remainder of the meeting was dedicated to discussing two different perspectives about Arlington's Missing Middle (MM).

A bit of background before delving into both perspectives:

On April 28, [Housing Arlington released the Missing Middle Phase Two report](#) including plans to allow duplexes up to 8-plexes in all areas where only single-family homes are now allowed. It aims to add housing stock and diverse types of housing.

Learn more about MM clicking by clicking the link below:

<https://www.asf-virginia.org/missing-middle-housing>

The first perspective was presented by Wells Harrell, an East Falls Church resident who supports the county staff's proposed framework on MM

https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/housing/documents/missing-middle/mmhs-phase-2-public-presentation_05.02.pdf).

Wells explained that he supports allowing more missing middle homes because he loves his neighborhood and wants to share it with new neighbors, including families who can't afford single-family homes in Arlington. He noted that under our current zoning laws, nearly all of the 170 single-family homes that are torn down every year are replaced with new, expensive single-family homes, which add no capacity while worsening our affordability challenges. He noted five concerns about MM and offered his reactions to them:

- 1) Neighborhood character – MM-style housing can be consistent with neighborhood aesthetics, because the same lot coverage, height, and setback requirements that apply to single-family homes will apply to new MM homes too. Any new MM dwelling won't be any bigger than a single-family house on a given lot. Many of them will look similar to brand-new single-family houses.
- 2) Affordability – Under our current single-family-only zoning, older homes will still get torn down; they'll just get replaced only with giant, expensive single-family homes. MM means that at least some of those teardowns result in homes that add capacity, are more varied in style, and are less expensive compared to new single-family homes that would get built on those lots otherwise.
- 3) Parking – Generally having more neighbors means having more cars parked on the street in a car-dependent neighborhood. Developers may not be interested in adding MM housing on blocks where street parking is already maxed out, although it's still a possibility. To make higher density MM housing marketable, they may choose to increase the number of onsite parking spaces beyond what's required. They may even add underground parking, which uses less at grade-level square footage making it a more environmentally friendly option than traditional ground level parking. The County may also consider ways of addressing parking impacts, like lowering density caps, increasing parking minimums, and instituting parking passes for blocks where street parking is at or near capacity already.
- 4) Tree canopy – The tree canopy issue is complicated. It is possible that the county's MM framework would reduce the legal tree canopy requirement from 20% to 10% coverage in 20 years at the time that an occupancy permit is issued. Especially since owners have the right to rip out every tree on their lot thereafter, any difference in coverage percentages doesn't matter practically, as the local Sierra Club noted in their recent letter (<https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/sce/potomac-river-group/SierraClubArlingtonMissingMiddleHousingLetter-6-8-22-final.pdf>). State law severely limits what Arlington can do to protect the tree canopy, so meaningful protection requires convincing our elected leaders in Richmond to give localities like Arlington more power to do so.
- 5) Managing change – Having a greater number of MM type housing will ensure more people will have access to affordable housing and neighborhood resources. Economic

growth will continue to spur job creation thereby adding more workers, who will need to live somewhere. Under our current zoning laws, as big expensive houses take up a larger and larger share of our housing stock over time, and as insufficient housing supply puts upward pressure on already sky-high prices, our neighborhoods will become even more unaffordable than they already are.

Wells noted that MM proponents and critics seem to have different views on what counts as the “status quo.” For critics, the baseline is their neighborhood as it is, right now, so they tend to see any older home being replaced with MM homes as a loss on balance. For many proponents, though, the baseline is our neighborhoods as they'll change over time, under our current laws. Wells sees our neighborhoods as destined to keep changing. Older homes will continue to be torn down; it's just a matter of what gets built to replace them. By addressing the lack of MM housing types, we can at least allow for some of those teardowns to be replaced with new homes that are more varied in style, add housing capacity to meet the needs of the DC area's growing workforce, and are much less expensive than the big expensive houses that would get built otherwise.

Wells also believes that there are upsides to welcoming more neighbors to our neighborhoods. First, allowing more people to live in Arlington instead of farther out in Fairfax or Loudoun reduces pressure to make more sprawling developments while also reducing the number of miles driven, which in turn reduces congestion. Second, higher density lets the neighborhood make a stronger case to the County for better transit connections. Third, more neighbors means a larger pool of potential friends for adults and kids alike.

A second perspective was then presented by Anne Bodine, a representative of Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable Future (ASF). Anne presented The Latest ASF Analysis of Missing Middle Phase Two Report The link to the full presentation appears below:

https://www.asf-virginia.org/files/ugd/a48bae_c75566fa88b642f1a1c2af80c4f358bc.pdf

In sum, ASF contends that the County's report glosses over major impacts and projects only minimal population increase (1500 over ten years although the market will determine the outcome and the scope of growth continues permanently with new zoning). ASF argues that the County is ruling out new spending or any plans for more infrastructure, including schools or stormwater projects, and -- by raising the potential yield on most single-family lots -- will stimulate even more teardowns, lot consolidations, and purely speculative investment that makes Arlington increasingly unaffordable. In ASF's new, the County also implies affordability of new MM units to "diverse" populations and omits serious implications for current Arlingtonians who fall below annual incomes of \$108,000, where socioeconomic and demographic diversity is greatest NOW.

Issues Raised by DRCA members in follow-up discussions:

The pace of change will be slow. DRCA answers – says who? It is entirely up to developers and how they adjust to the MM provisions. The County analysis not transparent, and County's record such as school projections without MM have been historically fraught. Bottom line- if the 20 lot per year projection is accurate, the benefits for MM advocates will be trivial compared to a 340,000 County population in 10 years. If the County projections are incorrect, the consequences for a range of services and lifestyles need to be understood before a sweeping county-wide irreversible zoning change is adopted, since County APS projections often have been wrong. The County does not have the ability to make valid studies of population growth.

In the Donaldson Run neighborhood we have \$1.3 million tear downs.

The County staff didn't even know the tree canopy/coverage provisions in state law when asked. The likely effects are 10% sapling coverage (not 15%) vs 20% for SFH development. County projections cannot be relied upon.

The County has more authority than it is willing to use to protect trees — building permits, Chesapeake Bay ordinance (RPA), zoning authority; inadequate/ineffective tree protection plans.

The County is not functioning well to enforce existing limits — left hand/right hand problem — blaming Richmond.

Leaders need to be held accountable and properly plan for the general values regarding access to housing diversity.

The County needs to be more creative/committed to examine all aspects of the housing issues — lack of coordination.

Need incentives to maintain current (more affordable) housing stock.

This is not a goals problem; we all share goals of promoting diversity, tree canopy, good schools, but from a policy standpoint MM as proposed carries incredible risks for the community, e.g., 8-plexes in areas with virtually no transit.

Lack of enforcement of lot coverage due to variances.

Who will/should bear the risk of things going bad with MM projections?

Did the County consider market forces in developing its MM proposal?

The County's assumptions are questionable.

(Greedy) developers disrespect downhill neighbors causing flooding from runoff in new development.

How has/will drainage easements be considered?

There has been an abdication of planning by County staff.

Developers will flock first to lower priced lots.

Effects of lot consolidations that will permit larger structures.

Density can go anywhere? Why? In other words, the County should not be allowed to create density wherever they want; it should be planned and agreed upon by residents.

Challenging false economic assumptions that there will only be a few of these MM structures each year.

Even the greediest builder can't make some things work.

MM will drive land prices up. Where will we get land for schools, etc. that will be needed? It will be too late.

Can MM forms be accomplished without wholesale elimination of SF zoning? Response: Yes, but it will be difficult.

The County needs to hire more qualified code enforcers.

The County keeps adding but they have not planned for the accommodation of the growth.

The County should not be allowed to give variances because the problem of excessively large houses (outside the County guidelines) is imminent.

False assumption that houses with smaller square footage (i.e. multi-plexes) will be considered affordable for homeowners. Instead, these houses may entice investors thereby increasing rentals and decreasing owner-occupied housing.

Parking may well be an issue in some neighborhoods. Well's response is to tell the County Board to ensure your area is not affected.

The County is adding jobs so good to allow even a few more residents to live here and have less expensive housing than excessively large single family homes.

Wells agreed that clamping down on excessively large single family housing provisions (to help preserve trees, neighborhood character and such) would be desirable, while allowing MM options under less restrictive provisions in comparison). Seattle is an example.

Developers have exploited unanticipated zone rules. They'll find a way to push more than the County study's 20 per year projection.

There is a need to adopt a plan whereby targeted MM upzoning (e.g. near transit, as in CA MM law) and/or a ceiling on MM units are adopted rather than a county-wide change.

We need more people where transit is struggling on metro lines. Focus additional residents on those corridors, not in areas currently lacking in adequate bus transport, where the cheaper lots exist and the most lucrative developer opportunities will exist under MM.

Leaving MM choices up to developers is yet another example of lack of the County's desire to do plan. Just as with salt dome, stormwater management, and so forth.

After the County publishes the poll, the conversation should continue.