

Letter from Arlington Civic Federation to County Board regarding the Updating of Arlington's Comprehensive Plan:

June 12, 2026

Matt de Ferranti, Chair
Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22201

Dear Chair de Ferranti and Members of the Arlington County Board:

The Arlington County Civic Federation has been closely following the county's process over the past year to update Arlington's Comprehensive Plan Introduction, including the Guiding Principles. We would like to take this opportunity to reinforce our previous comments on the Draft Guiding Principles released in May 2026.

Today, we write to urge you to close this phase of developing and refining abstract principles and start a new discussion that addresses:

the current, seven concrete principles^[i] in Arlington's existing Comprehensive Plan, which are well understood and are the actual topic of the community discussion about Arlington's future, starting with the first principle of "Retention of the predominantly residential character of the county, and limitation of intense development to limited and defined areas" and the five existing "Development and Growth Goals"^[ii] in Arlington's General Land Use Plan (GLUP).

We ask the County Board and staff to directly engage the community in a discussion of what is working and what needs to be changed to support our shared vision of Arlington's future.

The Draft Guiding Principles, based on the American Planning Association (APA) general values, could serve as background for evaluating proposed Comp Plan changes and facilitate a direct discussion to answer these questions raised by the board and staff:

Is there value in continuing Arlington's highly acclaimed transit-oriented development approach?

And if Metrorail and major transit corridors are no longer the sole focus for significant future growth and increasing density, how does this change the Comp Plan's Introduction and elements like the Development and Growth Goals in the GLUP?

Engaging in public discussion regarding Arlington's future, using the Draft Guiding Principles as a discussion framework would help to significantly improve the principles and would help to address citizen concerns about the real meaning and purpose of the abstract Guiding Principles (as currently drafted) and their application in actual practice.

Over the past year, the Civic Federation has participated actively in the county's engagement process. It has repeatedly conveyed member organizations' concerns over the lack of plain language and absence of public discussion to explain the Board's and staff's intent with respect to

changes in the current and proposed guidance that control development and the amount of density by location/area.

In the sections below, we document examples of the Civic Federation's and the community's many attempts to ask for a course correction -- one that offers more tangible, plain English explanations - so that the county and community can work together to meet the challenges of updating the Comprehensive Plan's Introduction, its Guiding Principles as well as the individual component plans.

Clearly, these examples send a message: The community wants to have a deeper conversation about Arlington's future and how to meaningfully update our plans and policies to meet that future. Residents want a process that goes beyond platitudes and generalities of the abstract draft Guiding Principles.

Below is a brief review of the Civic Federation's participation in county events and engagement with its own member organizations and the public, when the Comprehensive Plan Update was discussed over the past year.

May 12, 2025, Focus Group of Community, Business and Development Organizations -- A year ago, the Civic Federation and other attendees in this group spoke to the need for greater transparency in this process and a clearer explanation from the county to clarify the purpose of the proposed changes to the Guiding Principles, specifying how each proposed principle would be implemented in actual changes to the Comp Plan. Comments from Focus Group attendees include:

I understand these are written by the APA but it's kind of hard to figure out what that means. It's not really clear in concrete terms what we're trying to achieve.

We have an identity crisis in our planning – are we urban or suburban? We need to explore that strategically.

Neighborhoods can be both urban and low – and high-density residential. If we start by saying things have to go, we risk tearing apart the community.

The 1960s plan built urban corridors to drive the economy. Now those areas are built out. What's the next generational cycle of planning?

We need to clarify: what is the purpose of this work? What problem are we trying to solve?

Affordability is our greatest challenge, but we have to make sure we can still build projects and balance that with other community benefits like open space and transportation improvements.

This process is a chance to build trust and ensure transparency. We need to get the word out early, so people know it's happening and have a chance to react rather than seeing the end product.

The County should be upfront – if there's already a plan in place, be honest about it instead of collecting buzzwords to fit a pre-written document.

This is a chance for a true comprehensive plan, not a five-year update. Let's do it right this time....

June 10, 2025, Civic Federation Resolution to Improve Planning and Zoning Policy and Processes^[iv] — adopted with specific comments on the Comprehensive Plan and GLUP updates. The following resolution components remain relevant to input on the Draft Guiding Principles:

Clarify, no later than July 15 [2025], the substantive changes being considered as part of the revised introduction to the Comprehensive Plan, as well as how phase 1 of the Comp Plan update will “scope” or control the work to update the GLUP in phase 2. At a minimum:
Indicate in plain English the concrete actions related to concepts such as “people-centric guiding principles,” “interwoven equity,” and “responsible regionalism.”
Explain how “land use and placemaking goals” would be “update[d]” in reference to “Arlington’s vision for growth and development,” and what updating the “range of land uses,” including “establish[ing] new or broader land uses in focused areas,” means for actual development precepts and prospective land use countywide.
Explain how these relate to the County’s plans to revise existing Comp Plan and GLUP principles.

Adhere to the currently adopted Comp Plan and GLUP policy until such time as it may be changed by new County Board policy, after conducting meaningful two-way public engagement that includes Civic Associations and other public stakeholders. Some key examples include the principle of preserving low-density neighborhoods and the longstanding policy of transit-oriented development that focuses growth and density near Metro corridors.

Require that any increased density outside of transit corridors is supported by safe public transportation that provides an adequate level of service.

October 2025 Civic Federation General Membership Meeting -- an overview and update on the new guiding principles process, with an energetic discussion amongst members asking for explanations of terms and what was the intended direction of the discussion.

November 11, 2025, Civic Federation panel with members of the business community and Marc McCauley from the Arlington County Department of Economic Development[\[v\]](#) -- the discussion focused on planning processes in Arlington, how to energize our economic future, and how citizens can engage proactively and constructively in broader discussions of development issues and project reviews. The panel discussion was wide-ranging and constructive, with a consensus among Civic Federation members and the business community about the challenges Arlington faces and a shared dedication to work together to face these. The Civic Federation asks for similar openness and collaboration in Arlington County’s discussion with citizens about the Comprehensive Plan Update.

Committee Meetings -- Civic Federation committees have discussed the Comp Plan draft Guiding Principles in numerous meetings. Participants have expressed confusion and concern about the actual meaning and application of the proposed Guiding Principles, their purpose, and how they would be used to change or modify the Introduction and individual elements of the existing Comprehensive Plan.

June 3, 2026, Forestry and Natural Resources Commission Letter -- the Civic Federation has closely tracked comments by the county commissions, including those presented to the Planning Commission at the May 13, 2026, Long Range Planning Committee meeting. Many of those comments have echoed others requesting more concrete language. A good example is found in the letter from the chair of the Arlington Forestry and Natural Resources Commission to the Planning Commission that discusses the Comp Plan Draft Guiding Principles. Comments below indicate the request for a direct discussion:

“4. The introductory chapter should clearly articulate that the existing (and award winning) TOD model for Arlington is still the county’s strategic approach to achieve its 2050 vision. The chapter should identify elements of the current GLUP that support and affirm a 2050 vision that enables Arlington to continue to grow while maintaining a suburban mix of urban and residential density, with high-density growth focused on Metro corridors as called for in the TOD strategy” and ...
“6. The county should solicit input from major public groups like the Civic Federation, the Arlington Neighborhoods Advisory Committee, and individual civic associations before drafting the introductory chapter. Build trust by expanding public feedback in this way.”^[vi]

Summary

The many concerns about the Guiding Principles expressed by our members and members of the community over the past year have not been allayed by the county’s publication of the Draft Guiding Principles. Additionally, the promised draft of the Comprehensive Plan’s Introduction has not yet been shared with the public. Instead, the draft Guiding Principles were restated and elaborated upon with further “supporting statements,” which do not answer the fundamental questions the community has been asking, nor do they address the community’s concerns. While the county’s engagement process continues, the important conversation about Arlington’s future as a whole remains unexplored.

Before the Arlington County Board adopts new Guiding Principles -- whose meaning remains unknown and whose ramifications upon implementation remain unclear -- we urge the Board to ask the County Manager to instruct staff to revise the county’s Comprehensive Plan Update process for drafting the Guiding Principles and Introduction/introductory chapter.

We further ask the County Board to work with the County Manager and staff to make adjustments to the public engagement discussions going forward so as to ensure that the many repeated questions and concerns raised by the community are fully answered/resolved before proceeding to the next step in the process.

Sincerely,

NJ Giacobbe, Jr.

Nicholas J. Giacobbe, Jr.
President

^[i] Comprehensive Plan Goals and Objectives, accessed 6-10-26,
<https://www.arlingtonva.us/Government/Projects/Plans-Studies/Comprehensive-Plan/Goals-Objectives>

^[ii] General Land Use Plan Booklet, 4.0 DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH GOALS, page 6, accessed 6-10-26
https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/projects/documents/glup/glup_booklet_dec_2025.pdf

^[iii] Comprehensive Plan Business, Development and Community Focus Group Summary
https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/2/projects/documents/comprehensive-plan/update/comp-plan_focus-group-summary_business.developmentcommunity.pdf

^[iv] Arlington County Civic Federation resolution <https://www.civfed.org/newContent/2025-06/2025->

[06%20ACCF%20P%26ZComm%20Res%20Improve%20PZ%20Planning%20and%20Processes%20APPROVED%2020250610.pdf](#)

[v] Arlington County Civic Federation General Membership Meeting Nov 11, 2026, presentation <https://www.civfed.org/newContent/2025-11/2025-11%20ACCF%20AED%20Slides.pdf> and meeting video <https://vimeo.com/1136142962>

[vi] Forestry and Natural Resources Commission letter to Planning Commission, June 3, 2026