

Donaldson Run Civic Association

December 5, 2025

Takis Karantonis, Chair
Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Dear Chair Karantonis and Board Members:

On behalf of the executive committee of the Donaldson Run Civic Association (DRCA), this letter responds to the current proposal for drafting a new introduction to the County's comprehensive plan.

As noted below, we are concerned about the lack of transparency in the public engagement process for this proposal. We are particularly concerned about any major revisions to the social compact reflected in the current General Land Use Plan, which could well fundamentally transform many Arlington neighborhoods were these to amount to substantial additional densification beyond the four established transit corridors, all of which still have extensive unbuilt capacity. We also ask that you also clarify the intent noted by staff to make the plan more "people centric," including how the current plan falls short in this regard.

To convey these concerns effectively, we urge the Board to add DRCA and other civic associations (individually or in regional groups) as additional focus groups, before attempting to draft any new introduction to the plan. Many civic associations (like DRCA) have neighborhood plans, which encompass their community's vision for the neighborhood's future. These plans reflect considerable time and effort, and they have been formally accepted by the County Board. We cannot understand why the County has declined our requests to consult with civic associations.

Real Public Engagement on the Densification Question Must Precede Any Rewrite of the Plan.

In Board meetings approving recent site plans such as Melwood, it became clear that some Board members do not want to confine housing densification to transit corridors, notwithstanding the approach that California and other jurisdictions continue to emphasize (e.g., in SB 79). DRCA suggested then that if we want to have that debate, we should do so in a transparent manner.

The current public engagement campaign has not proceeded this way. To most of our residents, the campaign hides the ball. It asks about six American Planning Association principles. While well intentioned, these are so overly broad and opaque (even with definitions) that they lack the specificity needed to provide clear guidance. Into the mold of those principles, one can pour any revision to the General Land Use Plan one intends.

There are occasionally hints about the goal. As CivFed's June resolution points out, there are vague references to "people-centric guiding principles," to "replac[ing] . . . existing goals/objectives," and to a

“vision for growth and development.” But most of our residents have no clue about what is intended by these suggestions.

In fact, it is a telltale sign that we are essentially proceeding backwards here. Before looking at how best to accommodate the many elements of a comprehensive plan, the Board is charging the staff with writing what amounts to an executive summary of the Board’s conclusions about such accommodations. The staff will be providing the answers before even asking the questions. These include, for example, whether County residents want to abandon the long recognized smart growth strategy for a density everywhere strategy. And how best to achieve the 40% tree canopy goal in the Forestry & Natural Resource Plan, while ensuring adequate housing for those earning no more than 60% of area median income as per the Affordable Housing Master Plan.

This process bears no resemblance to rational decisionmaking about such difficult accommodations. As the painful EHO experience shows, that is essential to establishing credibility with the many residents of Arlington.

As noted above, we believe the minimum need is to extend your public engagement campaign beyond the small and very targeted focus groups relied on so far. In particular, the County should meet with civic associations (or groups of civic associations) as the areas – and citizens -- likely to experience the most change with any new overview of the comprehensive plan. As Lyon Park Civic Association has put it, “Neighborhood civic associations deserve a full seat at the table.” We think such meetings should include staff as well as members of the Long Range Planning Committee of the Planning Commission, who play a key role.

Any Introduction to the Plan Must Address Hard Choices.

Staff have already identified significant differences in views, which underscore the need to go beyond vague APA principles. The online engagement form, which drew almost five times more participants as the initial focus groups, reflected concerns about “development at the expense of green space” and “changing neighborhood character,” with opportunities to “preserve/enhance Arlington’s sense of community.” In contrast, the smaller focus groups highlighted very different concerns about safety and equity.

We believe a further round of public engagement -- prior to any further drafting by staff -- should follow these key guideposts:

1. The Board should adopt the principle known as “concurrency,” by adopting an “adequate public facilities ordinance.” Since 1998, Virginia law has specifically provided authority for such a principle in developing comprehensive plans. Va. Code § 15.2-2230.1. It would require that any future growth must address concurrently, so that it does not later overwhelm, the other key infrastructure elements of the plan. This would mean up-front consideration of such plan elements as water and sewer facilities, school capacity, and transportation challenges, together with a detailed explanation of how the plan accommodates them.
2. The Board should ignore the remarkable suggestion it has received from those advocating much more intensive redevelopment, to the effect that a comprehensive plan that paves the way for high and medium density rezoning will “place people closer to nature,” correlate with “tree canopy growth,” and provide “much needed shade” from high-rises. The County needs to be honest with itself in maintaining

the balance that the comprehensive plan has ensured for decades, and acknowledge the flexibility that incentive zoning provides already to ensure "people centric" planning.

3. Consistent with CivFed's December 2024 resolution ("Residential Housing Tracker"), the Board should carefully examine our present and potential future housing stock already permitted by the Zoning Ordinance to "clarify housing production potential with current zoning and land use." The Board should also (a) study the effects of upzoning in similar markets with high-paying jobs and high demand for housing, (b) more clearly articulate needs and then plan for truly affordable housing as well as housing for those earning over 120% of area median income, and (c) identify ways to promote units of two bedrooms and more.

4. The Board should explore additional tools beyond zoning and land use, but also look at preserving less expensive housing by reducing building footprints and lot coverage in residential zones for single-family homes, as 25 civic associations and others have been urging for years.

Thank you very much for your consideration of these comments.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bill Richardson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Bill Richardson
President
Donaldson Run Civic Association