

Donaldson Run Civic Association

January 22, 2020

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

Dear Chair Garvey:

I am writing to address the serious concerns expressed by residents of the Donaldson Run Civic Association concerning the application of lot coverage, height, setback, and other restrictions to the construction of single-family homes in our neighborhood. The inadequacy of these restrictions as currently enforced has led to deterioration in the quality of life expected from longtime residents in neighboring homes, destruction of our diminishing tree canopy, and substantial increases in impervious surfaces and associated stormwater management problems. We cite only four recent examples below, with pictures attached.

We understand that other civic associations have similar concerns. Because these are not isolated examples, we are asking that the County review its administration of the provisions of the Zoning Ordinance applicable to single family homes to determine whether (1) such construction in fact complies with these restrictions (*i.e.*, not just as designed but as actually built) and (2) whether the restrictions warrant strengthening in the current environment pursuant to the County's well established police powers over zoning. We believe a first step would be to direct the County Auditor to examine these questions and issue a public report on his findings and recommendations.

The County has not reexamined these Zoning Ordinance provisions since 2005. As DRCA noted in our letter last month to the Board in support of adequate funding for the County's Stormwater Action Plan (copy attached), that Plan teed up this problem over five years ago. It noted that from FY 2010 to FY 2013 alone, "the impervious footprint of single-family parcels increased by an average of 50 percent," and that "the issue of single family home redevelopment and lot coverage deserves a more comprehensive look."

2513 North Vernon Street. The County issued a permit for construction of a single-family home at this R-8 site in April 2017. We believe the site was excavated sometime that year, leaving a huge "pit" between the houses on each side, and below the lot on the steep slope behind the site. The way the structure has been crammed amidst these three surrounding properties has led to substantial questions from residents about whether it complies with the Zoning Ordinance, or if so whether those restrictions remain adequate in light of the foregoing concerns about tree canopy, quiet enjoyment, impact on surrounding homes, and stormwater runoff. According to the permit application, the main building footprint was 2,147 square feet, and the total lot coverage was 35.5%, approaching the 38% maximum. Moreover, because the Zoning Ordinance's current height restriction is based on the average height at

all four corners, and the property has a very steep slope from back down to front, the new structure presents as well above the 35-foot height limit.

We also have serious concerns about the County's monitoring of construction on this site. DRCA residents were forced to put up for well over a year with delays and inadequate protections associated with the builder's virtual abandonment of the site, which served as a continuous blight on our neighborhood after being shut down for violating state occupational safety laws due to structural instability. Based on our discussions with the Commonwealth Attorney's office, which in 2019 brought a criminal misdemeanor action against the builder (sentencing for which has been repeatedly postponed), we also recommend that the County take prompt steps to ensure more effective deterrence of such conduct by home builders in Arlington County.

2370 North Taylor Street. This lot is also zoned R-8. The home previously on the lot was a modest brick colonial with no garage. That structure was torn down and replaced by one with a total lot coverage specified in the application of 2,658 square feet, or 32.38% of the total lot area. Despite appearing to take up almost all of the lot, that figure is below the 38% lot coverage maximum for R-8 lots.

4514 N. 25th Road. The house that was built on this R-8 lot in 1960 was a two-story brick rambler with total footage of 2,034 square feet. It has been replaced with a four-story 6,104 square foot home that appears to fill most of the lot. The building permit application states that the main building footprint is 2,056 square feet (25%) which is within the 28% maximum, and that the lot coverage of 31% is within the 38% maximum. Most notably, the proposed height of 34 feet to the roof midpoint is below the 35-foot maximum. It is difficult to believe that this house complies with the current lot and height coverage limits.

4210 N. 25th Street. This enormous new residence towers over the other properties on both sides of the street. In 2018, several DRCA residents raised with the Board their concerns about the "extreme loss of tree canopy, the size & scale of the proposed structure in the midst of an enclave of older more modest-sized homes, as well as the potential damage to root zones of trees on our adjacent properties." Later that same year, the then Chair of the County Board responded that "you are raising broader, policy-level concerns about lot coverage" and other issues and that "your points regarding preservation of the existing housing stock in single family neighborhoods are well-taken. Tools and strategies to address the challenge you describe are an active and ongoing conversation among Board members and staff, and we appreciate having your expert perspective to consider."

We would appreciate an opportunity to meet with Board Members to discuss this problem further, and a proposed course of action for addressing it expeditiously, before further irreparable damage to our neighborhood.

Sincerely yours,



William R. Richardson, Jr.
President, DRCA