

**“Missing Middle” Housing  
Anne Bodine  
Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable Future**

Arlington County has been pursuing "Missing Middle" (MM) densification initiatives for the past few years. In May 2019, the County Board approved by-right construction of detached accessory dwelling units (ADUs) on single-family lots. In December 2019, the board announced that it was exploring a new Missing Middle tool — to allow construction most likely of new duplexes, triplexes (and possibly quadruplexes) in residential areas now restricted to single, one-family dwellings (also known as up-zoning.) This summer, the county published [detailed bulletins](#) that further crystallize this up-zoning intent. [Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable Future](#) (ASF) believes the MM theory is unproven. We are seeking data to illustrate both costs and benefits of an irrevocable land-use tool and we challenge the county's stated justifications.

**The Growth Argument.** The county says that Arlington must help absorb [regional population growth predicted by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments](#) (MWCOG). The study projects that from 2015 to 2045 Arlington's population will surge by 41%.<sup>1</sup> But did MWCOG factor in Arlington's head start, with growth outpacing neighboring jurisdictions from 2000-2015,<sup>2</sup> or that Arlington is one of the smallest U.S. counties? With chronically overcrowded schools, stormwater systems strained to the brink, we cannot sustain ballooning growth. Furthermore, a 2018 George Mason University study shows that each additional resident increases county costs for services by an average of \$850.<sup>3</sup> How will the county pay for a new population boom?

**The Affordability Argument.** County officials initially said MM would "promote affordability and diversity" by producing homes for "middle income" households (area median income is of [\\$117,200 annually](#)<sup>4</sup>.) By mid-February, they began saying affordability would rely on each UNIT of a multiplex costing *less than a new single-family home (SFH)*. Based on the inflation of Arlington land values from prior densification efforts, ASF has good reason to believe that

---

<sup>1</sup> MWCOG, "Round 9.1 Growth Trends To 2045," October 2018, Table 6, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Between 2000 and 2018, Arlington, at 28%, has built more housing units as a percentage of existing stock than Alexandria (18.7%), the District (16.3%) and Fairfax County (15.6%). Arlington Statistics from U.S. Census 2000 <https://www.infoplease.com/us/comprehensive-census-data-state/housing-statistics-133> (2000 figure) and U.S. Census 2019, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/arlingtoncountyvirginia/PST045219>. Other cities' data also from U.S. Census.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen S. Fuller and Jeannette Chapman "The Economic and Fiscal Impacts of Locating Amazon's HQ2 in Arlington County, Virginia," November 8, 2018, p. 11, [https://fullerinstitute.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/SFI\\_Economic\\_Fiscal\\_Impacts\\_of\\_Amazon-HQ2\\_110818.pdf](https://fullerinstitute.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/SFI_Economic_Fiscal_Impacts_of_Amazon-HQ2_110818.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> HUD median income for FY 2020, accessed via Virginia Housing Development Authority

MM will drive up land prices and that higher assessments and bills will displace current homeowners who are likely more diverse than those who replace them.

The ASF view on affordability is supported by a [new study of our market by Arlington Analytics](#).<sup>5</sup> It is also supported by [Dr. Michael Storper at UCLA](#) who notes land prices in other hot job markets rise due to high incomes and in-migration<sup>6</sup>. In Arlington, we see builders spending \$800,000 to buy and tear down old homes. Up-zoning without corresponding down-zoning or other market constraints could push teardown sales to \$1.2 million AND ironically ensure swifter bulldozing of existing market-rate affordable homes. Real-world Missing Middle -- new duplexes on N. Dinwiddie St. -- sold for \$1.1 million each in 2019 and early 2020.

The irony continues as the county itself has promoted land-use plans that harm diversity and affordability. From 2000 to 2018, [Arlington lost a net 14,000 market-rate affordable units \(MARKS\)](#).<sup>7</sup> We have a 5-year (minimum) waiting list for federal housing vouchers. Waitlists for buildings with committed affordable housing units (CAFs) vary, but typically applicants far outnumber subsidized units. For 20 years, developers have been replacing older housing stock with luxury condos, apartments, and homes. While board members claimed at their July meeting that adding supply lowers costs, the facts say otherwise: Arlington built 2,900 housing units on average per year from 2000-2019.<sup>8</sup> Prices did not fall, and the number of affordable units declined precipitously. Why would Missing Middle density prove any different?

**The Housing Types Argument.** Somewhat backtracking on the affordability angle, the county is stressing the need for new "types" of homes that are "walkable to transit/shopping." Yet the county continues to approve — mostly with "bonus density" — large projects for transit-walkable housing in the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor; more units are on tap for Crystal City/Pentagon City. Residents should demand that the county map out the costs of that infill before it seeks to densify further.

Replacing modestly dense neighborhoods with denser "multiplex" clusters will increase overall housing costs, reduce racial/economic diversity, decimate our mature tree canopy, increase stormwater runoff, expand our urban heat island, deplete biodiversity, add to school enrollment and traffic congestion, and drain the county's budget. Now is not the time and Arlington is not the place for Missing Middle experiments. Please send questions to [ASF.Virginia@gmail.com](mailto:ASF.Virginia@gmail.com).

---

<sup>5</sup> "Arlington Duplexes and the Missing Middle," Arlington Analytics, July 2020

<sup>6</sup> "Storper Challenges Blanket Upzoning as Solution to Housing Crisis," UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, March 19, 2019

<sup>7</sup> "Arlington County Virginia Housing Conservation District Update," May 2019

<sup>8</sup> 2000 Census Data: <https://www.infoplease.com/us/comprehensive-census-data-state/housing-statistics-133>;

2019 Census Data: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/arlingtoncountyvirginia/PST045219>

Average Rent Data: <https://www.deptofnumbers.com/rent/virginia/arlington-county/>