

# Answers provided by: Adam Theo

## ASF Questions for Candidates to the Arlington County Board August 2022

### PART ONE QUESTIONS: Missing Middle Housing

#### 1. Affordability/Equity

Board Chair Cristol stated on July 13 that affordability was the primary community goal for new housing, explaining why the county wants to allow 8-plexes on every residential lot in zones R-5 through R-20. Rents and prices for new Missing Middle Housing were projected by the county's consultant report of April 28 at:

- Monthly rent of \$2,240-\$2,784 for 700-820 square foot units;
- Monthly rent of \$2,960-\$4,210 for 1,020-1,490 square foot units;
- Price range of \$571,000-\$722,000 for 1,020-1,490 square foot units.

Households must earn 80% of Area Median Income (AMI)<sup>1</sup> or more to afford these units. Meanwhile, the update to the county's 5-Year Affordable Housing Master Plan states: "The private market has provided sufficient rental housing for households with incomes above 80% of AMI" and demand "will . . . be met with the private market without public intervention."

We also see the housing market offering healthy availability, with those at higher ends of the income scale clearly having the largest choice. In mid-August, Arlington had over 5,400 rental units ( <https://www.apartments.com/arlington-county-va/>), and 670 condos for sale for \$450,000 or less. (<https://www.condo.com/Arlington-VA/Condos-Townhomes?sort=featured,priority,score,newest&price=-450000>.) Meanwhile, from 2000-2021, the County *lost* 8,258 housing units affordable to those at the other end of the income spectrum – those earning up to 60% of AMI.

**Question 1A** – Why promote policy to benefit those with healthy incomes, for whom the County says the private market provides adequate supply, ahead of -- and at the expense of -- those who are more cost-burdened and known to need help more urgently?

**Question 1B** – If the majority of residents of color, of residents 65 and over, and of residents with disabilities, earn below 80% of AMI, how does Missing Middle directly promote diversity here?

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<sup>1</sup> Rents and sale prices: Tables A-3, A-4, A-8 and Attach. 1 of Consultant's 4/8/2022 Rpt; 80% AMI: <https://www.arlingtonva.us/Government/Programs/Housing/Income-and-Rent-Limits>; Demand met: page 6, [https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/housing/documents/AHMP\\_5YR-Report.pdf](https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/housing/documents/AHMP_5YR-Report.pdf)

Please answer both Questions 1A and 1B combined in 350 words or less.

Although related, housing for the middle class and for lower income residents are two different things. So is helping current homeowners as well as renters. All of these are different problems under our massive “housing crisis”, and each needs different solutions. That’s why I support an [“All of the Above” approach](#) to our housing crisis: **lowering property tax rates** to help existing homeowners, **Missing Middle** housing to help future homeowners and retirees that are downsizing, massive **increases to our Affordable Housing Investment Fund (AHIF)** to help low-income renters, and **establishing Community Land Trusts (CLT’s)** to help keep preserve affordable ownership opportunities for generations to come.

We need more housing for everyone! Missing Middle is the part to help keep the middle class from being further squeezed out of Arlington, and naturally deals with people of “moderate” incomes. Trying to shoehorn Missing Middle as a solution for low-income residents doesn’t work, and isn’t the point.

To improve diversity for people of color and lower economic means in Arlington, I’ll listen to those people themselves: The [Arlington Branch NAACP](#), [VOICE](#), [Habitat for Humanity](#), [Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance](#), and others have all enthusiastically endorsed the county’s Missing Middle plans. Those are the voices I respect and listen to, don’t you as well?

Finally, I’ll address the list of available condos that ASF has linked to as an absurd justification for opposing Missing Middle. Many of the units for sale on that list are at senior living retirement condominiums such as The Jefferson, or at River Place with an expiring ground lease that will be ending in 30 years taking all equity with it. Lastly, the vast majority (90%) of the available condos on that list are small 1br/1ba units. Now, I’m fine with those, but you can’t oppose Missing Middle on the grounds it wouldn’t provide enough 2 or 3 bedroom units, and then hold up a list that is almost exclusively small 1 bedroom units in an attempt to show the supply already exists. That’s downright disingenuous.

## 2 . Ownership vs. Rental Units

Homeownership is widely recognized as the primary path to generational wealth-building, but the county has indicated it cannot dictate whether Missing Middle units will be ownership or rental units. Today in Arlington, detached homes are 90% owner-occupied, while buildings with 2-9 units are 80% rentals; new construction across Virginia is the same ratio. The County has provided no evidence its Missing Middle plan will produce anything different. Furthermore, investor/developer purchases of detached homes in Arlington are up 30% in the last 18 months compared to the prior 5-year baseline, according to the County’s ROAM database. But the County’s Missing Middle Consultant claimed there would be *no* increase in total teardowns and only 19-21 Missing Middle lot conversions a year.

**Question 2A**

What are the pros and cons you see of having fewer home ownership opportunities countywide, and increased numbers of teardowns of lower-cost starter homes?

**Question 2B:**

Before any vote on Missing Middle, will you push for deeper analysis of the consequences of much greater private equity and investor involvement in our housing market?

Please answer both Questions 2A and 2B combined in 350 words or less.

ASF lumps “investor” and “developer”-purchased properties together in your question. I’ll give ASF the benefit of the doubt and assume this is by lack of understanding, and not an attempt to inflate the number into something scary. They are two different things.

Investor-purchased properties are bought and held by investment firms with the intent of generating profit for shareholders as home prices skyrocket. Developer-purchased is when a small local home-builder company buys a property, redevelops it, then sells off to a new owner - typically a family. Developer-purchased is what frequently happens in any market. I’m willing to bet many readers of this questionnaire currently own homes that were originally developer-purchased.

As for what you’re concerned about - investor-owned properties held by investment firms - the good news is that’s very low and still uncommon in our area. Arlington remains [well under a 10% average \(Washington Post\)](#) of homes going onto the market being purchased by investment firms. Compare that to Atlanta and Charlotte at 25% average, with some of their neighborhoods spiking at 49% of homes being purchased by investors.

But you know what? There’s a great way to really punish investors who are buying up homes for profit. They are doing this because they see numbers on a balance sheet and expect home values to continue skyrocketing for years to come. Our tight housing market gives them this power. You can punish them - and even have them sell off the homes they’ve already purchased - by passing Missing Middle reforms and ending the skyrocketing housing prices for the future. Increasing the supply of homes yanks the rug out from underneath these big investment firms and takes away the profits they are counting on.

**3. Transit-Oriented Development**

Arlington was a pioneer in transit-oriented development and has relied on this paradigm to concentrate density near transit. Missing Middle abandons this philosophy.

**Question 3**

Do you believe rental units will be sought away from transportation corridors? If so, why, based on current occupancy data? If not, how would you enhance and pay for mass transportation options along these corridors to promote accessibility and avoid automobile congestion?

Please answer Question 3A in 350 words or less

Missing Middle housing is not the density of metro corridors. A few townhouses does not result in the Ballston- or Pentagon City-levels of people and traffic that ASF fearmongers about.

Today there are entire single family homes that are rentals in every neighborhood in Arlington. The future with Missing Middle will be no different with townhouses and garden apartments. Besides, what's wrong with renters? I'm a renter. Shouldn't everyone have an opportunity for good, safe homes in wonderful neighborhoods they can cherish and love? They are just as much a part of Arlington as traditional homeowners.

As for how to pay for future mass transit such as expanded bus routes: with property taxes paid by additional residents – same as we do now. Our challenge is to have elected County Board members that care about transit and will push to make that a top priority. Currently we don't.

As I push for in my "[Every Street Designed for Safety](#)" policy, expanded ridership and access for all are top priorities for me in our streets, sidewalks, and transit systems.

#### **4. Community Engagement**

Most residents are unaware of the county's Missing Middle plans, and the county received only 295 positive feedback responses out of 1,694 total forms submitted before the Board's July work session. Direct correspondence to the Board has not been divulged. All 10 of the recently-announced "Community Conversations" in English for September/October filled within 72 hours and will accommodate fewer than 0.1% of residents. They won't be recorded or livestreamed. More serious, we don't believe the new draft zoning ordinances will be published in advance of these sessions, and there are no plans for open community fora after publication.

##### **Question 4**

If you were on the Board now, would you demand a delay of at least 120 days to ensure enhanced public engagement, including a broad, county-wide forum after ordinances are shared publicly?

Please answer Question 4 in 350 words or less.

I want much better engagement processes. A better engagement process doesn't mean a slower engagement process. Public engagement for Missing Middle began in October 2020 – 23 months ago. The more detailed draft framework was released back in March

of this year – 6 months ago, and the consultant’s report just a month later. During this entire time there have been lengthy forums, open door sessions, and website updates. This “broad, county-wide forum” that ASF wants has already been happening and will continue to happen right up until a vote by the County Board.

Changes are needed: the county needs to build better relationships with neighborhood civic associations as partners in outreach and engagement efforts in order to reach residents that are not yet homeowners or do not speak English as their primary language. This is a prime opportunity for neighborhood civic associations to fulfill their duties of connecting all residents with the county.

As I campaign in neighborhoods heavy with renters and multi-family units, I find that many have no idea what their civic association is – never having heard from them or know who to reach out to. Almost all of these people are overwhelmingly supportive of Missing Middle when I take the time to explain it.

Let’s improve county engagement by boosting our neighborhood civic associations.

## **PART TWO QUESTIONS – Arlington Development**

### **Question 5 - Defining Development Population Expansion and Costs:**

If you are elected, will you press for Arlington to adopt a better system to capture and disclose in advance of final approval the long term costs of adding significant new population numbers and to also disclose the expected maximum populations being enabled by all major new land use, zoning, and bonus density approvals, including the Clarendon and Pentagon City Updated Sector Plans, Missing Middle, Plan Langston Boulevard, Crystal City height plan, and the move away from the bullseye concept along the Metro corridor?

Please answer Question 5 in 350 words or less.

Having more data and better plans is always a good thing. But be careful, ASF: your leading question is dangerously close to treating additional people as a burden... as a “bad thing” that needs to be slowed down or prevented. New residents to share our excellent community with is *never* a bad thing. New residents are not “additional costs”, but rather bring greater opportunities and economic prosperity for *everyone*.

Also, do not treat the need for better data and projections as an excuse to stop growth and plans you do not like. Projections and plans are needed to make sure every person – current or new – has full access to amenities, public safety, schools, and high quality of life. But they can easily be developed alongside - even after - changes in zoning and land use. Especially in the case of Missing Middle, which will take decades to roll out across the county.

Where we need improvement in our planning is to break down communication silos between our various departments, commissions, and consultants. Right now there are

too many big projects developed in piecemeal because (for example) Department of Environmental Services doesn't share with Department of Parks and Recreation in order to help create new bike trails - something county residents consistently rank high in our priorities but the county never delivers in large part due to problems in shared custody between those two agencies.

On the public school side, we are also seeing this with the potential train wreck of the Career Center redevelopment - with no overarching plan for the site and contradictory budgets coming from different sides of county government.

Both of those examples are oversimplifications of complex, ongoing issues, but they highlight that communications within the county government itself are the root cause of many of our planning failures.