

Arlington County Board Meeting

December 12, 2020

Agenda Item #34

Green Building Bonus Density Amendment

Comments from Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable Future (ASF)

Chairperson Garvey & County Board Members,

I am Jim Schulman, a registered Architect, previously LEED accredited. I am heavily invested in the fight against climate catastrophe, and I speak today on behalf of Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable Future.

ASF generally supports Arlington's Clean Energy Plan. ASF also supports County infill and sector plans approved for areas already approved for high density. We oppose, however, this proposed amendment as it represents the continued accretion of complex density programs to achieve objectives that should be pursued through broader and more transparent policy tools.

We do not support the county shaping its green building policy primarily around bonus density. We cannot keep sacrificing Arlington's land and air space in the interests of even worthy social or environmental goals because we cannot recapture land or access to light and air once it has been given away. Not even for the extremely important goal of inhibiting climate change should bonus density be cavalierly awarded. Climate impact, like many environmental harms, can be quantified by the formula:

Impact = Population x Consumption

Increasing density as proposed not only encourages increasing Arlington's population, it also increases the consumption of resources in Arlington County, and in most cases where new construction replaces existing, it does so by enhancing gentrification.

Likewise, ASF rejects staff's continued assertions that the added Green Building bonus density would be "cost-free." Those costs are instead being made invisible because the County chooses to purchase this extra population growth on credit. The long-term fiscal consequences begin today if the board indeed gives approval, and would be felt through the years. The bonus density being proposed will deliver a taller and larger footprint and thus deplete greenspace at ground level and in viewsheds. It will reduce livability, fiscal solvency, and our community health.

We therefore ask the board to:

- Explore other, less permanent tools, which can be measured at face value, not buried in complicated formulas that demand significant follow up.
- Withhold any new density benefits under the Green Building program until the county adopts transparent cost-benefit planning tools and produces a long-term operating budget to support already currently zoned development. It is critical to quantify the demand expected from this new Bonus Density program (as well as all the others) on roads, schools, public transit, public safety infrastructure, water/wastewater infrastructure, etc.

- ASF suggests that the county explore environmentally-friendly policies such as promoting healthy competition between building owners and between neighborhoods to bring about energy savings and electrification. This is something DES could implement regardless of the Dillon rule. They may already have such programs, which could be expanded, in lieu of offering bonus density incentives.
- Pursue political opportunities in 2021 in Richmond where there may be political alignment with the Board to adopt Arlington specific amendments to the Dillon Rule to allow for the adoption of more rigorous green building codes, while also exploring green building incentives already offered by other Virginia jurisdictions, including Fairfax County.
- Waive the request for builders to write "narratives" on how they will enforce biophilic design elements. ASF supports biophilic design, but calls for actions, not intentions. Instead, the County should hold builders responsible for better and more publicly-accessible green space at ground level, preserving mature trees during site plan development, and leverage greater tree canopy funds to aggressively plant public spaces to compensate for the steady depletion of our canopy. Additionally, the County should be prioritizing the purchase of land for public purposes of all types to ensure we are not fully paved over. The drawdown of carbon into the soil by living plants is real, and contributes immediate climate benefit, as opposed to the expansion of renewable energy, which may or may not displace fossil fuel consumption.
- ASF calls for the County Board to strip out grid harmonization language from the amendments unless it is qualified so as to require Dominion to match costs. Facilitating grid harmonization without requiring the financial participation of the electric utility will benefit the utility at the expense of ratepayers.
- Reject a Planning Commission request for county staff or the board to review "height and other density restrictions" standing in the way of full building electrification. Our objection is based on our stated concerns about density without long-term planning validating it, but also due to the nature of the building industry. It is not wise to address technological difficulties by relaxing zoning (such as offering extra square-footage for mechanical equipment beyond existing height, FAR, or lot occupancy limitations). As the Planning and C2E2 speakers noted on December 1, green technologies are continually advancing; modifying zoning to favor one building system will inevitably compromise other aspects of design that may emerge in a fluid design construct. We note additionally that the Planning Commission recommendation seemed to be based on staff indications that builders need greater floor space to accommodate heat pump infrastructure. ASF notes that these claims are not fully substantiated.
- Release information on energy savings realized from the 57 buildings that have already been completed and complied with the County Board site plan restrictions under the 2001 program.

ASF believes the county must assess what it is giving up with these bonus density initiatives. Height and lot-coverage, spacing, tapering, unit/acre limits, and setback limits are part of our existing code to ensure Arlington preserves publicly-accessible greenspace, pervious surfaces, trees that absorb carbon, natural viewsheds, and other public goods that offer multiple health and environmental benefits. Easing these density/zoning restrictions for other, valid environmental and social purposes is in many ways like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Creating canyons of unnecessarily tall buildings is NOT environmental, and upzoning that raises land values will end up degrading demographic and socio-economic diversity absent other protections. Furthermore, approving new density in the midst of a pandemic that is still radically changing living patterns is very much flying blind.

In conclusion, I urge the Board to back away from its density promiscuity, and raise a related environmental concern. Carl Elefante, the 2018 President of the American Institute of Architects, regularly explains that, if concrete, as a building material, were a nation, its greenhouse gas emissions

would be third highest in the world, following #1 United States and #2 China. To prevent further climate catastrophe, humanity must stop our addiction to building with concrete, whether that be buildings, bridges, or roadways. Alternatives to concrete for constructing mid- and hi-rise buildings, such as cross-laminated timber construction, recycled steel, and hemp-crete, are becoming more prevalent. We must stop, absolutely stop, building concrete-frame buildings. Arlington County could be a leader in this movement. As my friend Phil Bogdonoff reminds people regularly, “there are no jobs on a dead planet.”

ASF thanks you for this opportunity to share our views.