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## **Analysis of Arlington's Phase Two Report on Missing Middle Housing**

The County on April 28 released a [Missing Middle Housing Phase Two Analysis and Draft Framework Report](#), along with a [consultant analysis showing what types of new construction they foresee here](#). Staff hosted [a community forum](#) and will brief a County Board July work session. You may comment via [online public feedback through May 27](#), and direct feedback through July (email to [countyboard@arlingtonva.us](mailto:countyboard@arlingtonva.us) or public comments at the June 18 Board meeting). The Board could vote as soon as October to abolish single-family zoning forever, with new ordinances effective by late 2022. This change in density rivals Metro corridor development launched in 1979; but decisions taken then to accommodate high growth are "missing" from today's plan.

### **Is There a Crisis?**

Arlington's MM initiative aims at a crisis that's not there. Let's compare to jurisdictions that have adopted some form of Missing Middle recently. Minneapolis had a 2% rental vacancy rate, a real crunch, and [had built virtually no multifamily mid-rises in its transit corridors](#), unlike Arlington. (Of interest, Arlington analyst [Jon Huntley](#) notes that "a

greater diversity of land prices across neighborhoods," makes duplex affordability more likely" in cities like Minneapolis.) San Jose and Portland have large homeless populations, unlike Arlington, and have constructed little new housing stock. And if Arlington's growth is tech dependent, it seems folly to push new density when [tech centers were among those that lost the greatest populations during Covid](#). From [April 2020 to July 2021 Arlington in fact lost 2.4% of its population](#), and [47,874 Arlington residents work in remote-eligible jobs](#); meaning there is great scope for more departures.

**Yet Missing Middle is on a fast track -- now's the time to join ASF and speak up (email [countyboard@arlingtonva.us](mailto:countyboard@arlingtonva.us))!**

## **MMHS Report**

Below are the main points and claims of the county's/analysts' studies:

1. New Missing Middle types will be allowed in all residential areas across the county. (It will affect areas that don't now permit multifamily homes and supplement zoning in areas that already permit such units);
2. The zoning will allow new duplexes up to 8-plexes, with townhome development limited to three per lot -- on all lots that previously allowed only single-family homes;
3. The "plexes" and townhomes will be limited to fit within the setbacks and heights for single family home development now; lot coverage would also be the same;
4. Missing Middle units likely will prompt only 19-20 new teardowns annually, and single-family homes (still allowed throughout all zones) will probably still dominate;
5. The county could require special exception approvals for Missing Middle, lowering unit projections from 19-20 per year to 70-75;
6. MM units will be affordable to households earning from \$108,000-244,000 a year (and to a large portion of the minority population in the DMV);
7. MM units will add only 109 net residents a year, requiring no new parks, roads, schools, stormwater projects, community centers, etc.;
8. Builders must provide parking for a minimum of 1/2 car per unit; no maximum is specified. Models show 6 cars at 6-plexes. Additional cars will park on-street.

## **ASF Concerns - 8-Plexes Countywide - But We Don't Need Schools or Parks!**

Superficially, this MM proposal is a "simple" zoning change, but other laws, ordinances, and budgets will affect and be affected by MM. ASF has sought and will keep seeking county analyses of demographic, environmental and fiscal impacts PRIOR TO ANY UP-ZONING, but the Phase Two report spurs additional concerns that make those demands more relevant:

**Lot Consolidation and "Existing Middle" Teardowns.** The financial incentive to pursue new construction projects will be strong. [In 2021, 26 homes that sold for over \\$1](#)

[million were torn down to build even larger homes.](#) Builders also are targeting or creating [larger lots in R-5 and R-6 zones to exploit existing lot coverage loopholes,](#) loopholes that may be exploited for larger MM units. ASF accept some constraints on new builds contained in the [analysts' report](#) (p.8-11), but ultimately the market will drive this and by-right zoning means there is no bar to full-speed ahead transformation in all areas. The pledge that new units must fit within zoning setbacks and height limits for new single-family homes likewise is not the full story. If two adjacent lots are combined, the total buildable area expands, and so setbacks suddenly create a much larger buildable area. As do the lot coverage and square footage standards now set for R5-R20. The MMHS and consultant analysis is silent or ignores these important questions.

The most environmentally-friendly structure is the one already built, and emissions from the building sector are a leading factor in global warming. In fact, ["it takes between 10 and 80 years for a new building that is 30 per cent more efficient than an average-performing existing building to overcome, through efficient operations, the negative climate change impacts related to the construction."](#) Promoting teardowns of "existing middle" homes, as well as new and older single-family homes, is ill-advised in this context. Arlington already has 90,480 "existing middle" units, or 7.8% of its total 116,000 2019 housing units (page 2-5 of the [Missing Middle Research Bulletin 3](#). Some portion of these units is in areas that already allow Missing Middle zoning.) The county also notes that **"within [single-family] residential neighborhoods, nearly 50% of the housing stock is single-family detached housing, 30% is low-rise multifamily, and 13% is mid- and high-rise multifamily."** Why would we spend millions to enact a policy that sacrifices the majority of 90,480 lower-cost "middle" homes, only to build 19-20 new "middle" projects per year? (NOTE: ASF questions the 19-20 figure but poses this question as per the county's own predictions.)

**Cashout/Displacement Stimulus.** The tech boom in Silicon Valley and Seattle has brought in new workers and has driven up home prices, causing major displacements. Seattle has approved Accessory and Detached Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU's and DADU's). Some argue that the problem can be abated with larger MM units, but experts -- such as [UCLA's Michael Storper](#) who says "the trickle-down effect to middle-class and lower-income people "will be small and could even be negative in highly desirable areas," and Seattle architect Christopher Kirk -- disagree. Per Kirk:

"Increasing density beyond ADUs and DADUs is a leap to the common "four pack" and "six pack" projects. These generally level whole sites, eliminating most trees, open space and privacy. They completely change the nature of neighborhoods while creating housing that doesn't work well for families with children, or most older people, and they are not particularly affordable."

Such is the case in Seattle's Ballard suburb, pictured above and [at this link](#), where up-zoning for larger MM in ten years transformed single-family areas into 4-story condo canyons with tech workers who stray not outdoors. Those directly displaced (by choice)

were white middle-class homeowners. But displacement in Arlington -- due to inflated land values that will induce more infill -- will occur at all income levels below those required for new MM units, and impact minorities disproportionately. Such effects have already occurred where larger MM units are permitted: Green Valley, Halls Hill, Foxcroft Heights. Arlington will need to face the displacement with resources well beyond Amazon's \$2 billion housing initiative in its three HQ areas. **Arlington will have to work even harder (with more public funds infused) to retain those who earn 60% or below of area median income or recognize that they will be forced out. This will require hard choices the county should be making as part of this study and is the antithesis of diversity promotion.**

The county's pitch that Missing Middle is a vehicle for racial and ethnic housing equality misleads in two respects. **These new MM units will NOT BE AFFORDABLE TO households earning below \$108,000.** This includes the majority of [African-American \(average income of \\$66,781\)](#) and [Latinx \(average income of 86,513\)](#) households in Arlington. These residents, and not the minority populations of the DMV, are the proper targets for our housing policy, but they are left out. Also, minority, senior, disabled -- and other households who tend to fall below the Arlington median wealth and income levels - - are less likely to leverage resources to reap the biggest profits and their displacement is a major loss to our diversity. Many of these residents own homes but are not able to "flip" their properties to the highest yield. **We will see increased displacement as they "cash out" and we will see areas with significant ownership percentages become tracts of non-owner-occupied rentals, disrupting the established sense of community across all areas.**

**Fiscal Policy.** Missing Middle won't add as many people as quickly as dense condo infill along Metro, but it is MUCH more likely to add school-age, park-hungry, and library-using families. Yet the county is dismissing such considerations -- [one of ASF's main concerns about density countywide](#). ASF believes that -- now that the county has opened the door to the higher density that allows builders to maximize profit even on very small lots (an 8-plex on a 5,000 square foot lot) -- MM teardowns will proceed quickly, especially if lot consolidation is allowed. Despite the much larger homes and major infill development along the Metro corridor over the past 20 years, it has not yielded the tax relief promised by the BUILD BUILD BUILD coalition on our County Board. So the MM proposal at best is offering a Pollyanna view that we either don't need new infrastructure or a cowardly view that the budgeting for new populations can be delayed to avoid accountability now.

Finally, upzoning is not only forever, it is immediate. Perhaps your neighbor's bungalow, or even large home, won't be torn down tomorrow, but the county will soon begin assessing all lots for their maximum potential yield. If that is an 8-plex, assessments likely will rise substantially. This will help create wealth for homeowners but many lower to middle-class homeowners will face higher taxes soon. Thus far, the county has refused ASF requests to map out consequences of these higher densities being approved.

**Tree Canopy, Heat Islands, Runoff.** The plans allow extensive parking areas onsite, ensuring tree loss and covering pervious surface that adds to runoff and heat islands. [Virginia code](#) sets standards for tree canopy coverage for residential construction projects; the county has already documented severe loss of canopy with single-family projects up through 2016. The code mandates 20% canopy cover for new single-family projects, 15% for multifamily by-right residential projects and 10% for site-plan projects. **Because trees for site-plan projects can be planted offsite, if developers use site planning for new MM projects, the lot could be redeveloped with zero canopy cover. Our single-family neighborhoods are home to 61% of Arlington's tree canopy; the pace of teardowns and the replacement canopy standards here will accelerate and expand this loss of trees, adding to heat islands, greater carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, and stormwater runoff if this MM plan goes forward.**

### **Act Now!**

Weigh in, speak out, talk to neighbors. Let us know if you would like ASF to speak to your civic association. Remember to fill out the [Online Feedback Form](#) **before** May 27. You can also register for Open Door Mondays with individual Board Members, or speak at public comments at the June 18 County Board meeting. Information on both can be found on the [County Board's webpage](#).

Please contact the Arlington County Board at:  
[countyboard@arlingtonva.us](mailto:countyboard@arlingtonva.us)

or write to individual board members:

- Chair, Katie Cristol: [kcristol@arlingtonva.us](mailto:kcristol@arlingtonva.us)
- Vice Chair, Christian Dorsey: [cdorsey@arlingtonva.us](mailto:cdorsey@arlingtonva.us)
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