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Is Arlington Doing Its Fair Share to Accommodate Regional Population Growth?

Many advocates of greater density and accelerated housing supply in Arlington fail to address the regional context. ASF believes such comparisons will show that Arlington is not lagging its regional peers in terms of new housing supply.

In October 2018, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOCG) published its [regional population growth projections from 2015-2045](#), a planning tool that local jurisdictions are following and which mapped out population projections for the larger DC, Maryland, and Northern Virginia region (DMV).¹ This allocation and projection process, known as the 9.0 process, showed Arlington slated to grow to 301,000 residents by 2045, which represents 5.9% of the regional population growth over this timeframe (see p. 10 of the report.)

Using Jobs to Dictate Housing Markets

The Council of Governments subsequently issued a September 2019 paper "[The Future of Housing in Greater Washington: A Regional Initiative to Create Housing Opportunities, Improve Transportation, and Support Economic Growth](#)." This report concludes the region needs 115,000 more homes by 2045 than had been predicted to keep up with expected job creation. This report posited that homes needed to be built in the same jurisdictions where jobs were being added to reduce commuting, a concept that may reduce the burden on current transportation resources, but one which had never been used to measure housing production needs. MWCOCG used a target ratio of 1.54 jobs per housing unit and noted "In seeking a better balance between growth in jobs and housing, a [COG] task force determined a jobs-to-housing ratio of 1.54 could optimize economic competitiveness and improve future transportation system performance." ASF notes that this formula likely discounts the need to focus planners on adding transit as much as housing, thus shifting the focus of governments on ramping up housing vice transport, which they likely deem politically a tougher sell.

However, a [June 8, 2021 report from Apartment List](#) uses Census Bureau data and a ratio of one new housing unit for every 1-2 net new jobs, and concludes that our region is among the metro areas nationally "that have achieved a healthy jobs-to-homes ratio." The [Sun-Gazette summarizes:](#)

New data from a national Apartment List analysis suggest that the Washington area is adding enough housing stock to accommodate demand. From 2010-20, the Washington metropolitan area added 181,000 new housing units, increasing the housing stock by 8%, according to the report, released June 8. During the same period, the region added 310,000 new jobs, up 11%. "A healthy housing market should add a new housing unit for every 1-2 new jobs as the local economy grows," the analysts noted. "In D.C., 1.7 jobs have been added for every new housing unit, indicating that the area is building sufficient new housing to keep pace with demand."

Comparing Density Inside the Beltway

Regardless of which jobs-to-homes ratio you prefer, it is clear from population data that Arlington is doing its share to house the regional population. Arlingtonⁱⁱ is by far the most densely populated county in the inner urban core, where we tend to view density as more acceptable given mass transit availability.

	Population	Land area	Population density per square mile
Arlington	207,410	24.23	8,560
Maryland (Montgomery + Prince George's) inside the Beltway	703,034	147.24	4,775
Fairfax inside the Beltway	301,401	67.74	4,449

Arlington Lags Only Loudoun in Adding New Housing 2000-2018

Arlington also added 11,896 housing units between 2010 and 2020, an 11% increase.ⁱⁱⁱ Housing production in Arlington over this timeframe also outpaced that of its neighbors. Between 2000 and 2018, Arlington, added 28% to its housing stock, compared to its fellow members of the MWCOG, meaning Arlington had a head start compared to its neighbors. Over that same period Alexandria added 18.7% to its stock and the District added 16.3%. Fairfax County added 15.6%)^{iv}. Only Loudoun County added a larger percentage of new housing stock than Arlington.

Rental Vacancy Rate

[Housing analysts generally peg a housing market in equilibrium at around 3-4%.](#) Vacancy rates much lower can portend a shortage.

Minneapolis, when it enacted a Missing Middle ordinance in 2019, had a [vacancy rate near 3.84%](#). [The rental vacancy rate today for Arlington is 7.5%](#) (data accessed August 16, 2021). Further indicating our lack of a serious shortage, [as of July 29, 2021, Arlington had over 6000 vacant rental units](#).

It is clear that Arlington has done and is doing more than its fair share to meet the region's housing needs and does not need rezoning for more density. Planners might look instead at undeveloped areas nearby, even inside the Beltway. The case can be made that the region should focus as much on new mass transit, if not more so, than on new housing; that other jurisdictions can catch up to Arlington's high rate of construction from the past two years; that the rental market provides significant breathing space for policymakers; and that Arlington should not be paved to save trees and green spaces in other inner-core counties.

ⁱ NOTE: MWCOG is not a regional government and neither NOVA nor DMV has a comprehensive regional government. There is no single elected body in NOVA or DMV that can mandate that any individual local jurisdiction like Arlington must do more to create housing--affordable or otherwise. The Arlington local government, i.e., the Arlington County Board, can unilaterally adopt policies that will accelerate or retard housing production. It is up to the community to define its "fair share" as part of the larger region.

ⁱⁱ Data from <https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://arlingtonva.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Arlington-County-Profile-2020.pdf>, page 5.

^{iv} 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 derive from U.S. Census.