

November 11, 2023

Comments to County Board on Langston Blvd. Area Plan

Mr. Chair, members of the Board,

I am Anne Bodine with Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable Future. This is a 40-year plan, and so it hits at the heart of ensuring sustainability over the long term. When it is built out, I will be long gone, but our planet will likely have exceeded recommend global levels for CO2. 40-year plans must be assessed against new global benchmarks – environmental, social and financial -- and ask if they offer the best mix of growth and sustainability? We think the Langston Plan comes up short on the latter.

Partly because this plan sees our county's land and its public uses as assets best leveraged by private owners. The plan adds 6 net acres of public land, all controlled by profit seekers, not by our Parks and Rec as the proper place to hold land in public trust. And on stormwater, the plan only manages partial runoff, again through private owners, and leaves substantial portions to future county funding, inappropriately punting core elements of the Comp plan that should be addressed here today. How does transferring public land and or functions make Arlington more sustainable?

On the strategic level, and in a break with longstanding tradition of smart growth, this new plan delivers transit-oriented density without mass transit. Ms. Alfonso Ahmed noted this morning that the transportation element will depend on sufficient ridership among new resident, implying that "if you build it, they will come." But with metro let's remember we did build it, and they did come, and then covid and ride share turned them off.

The Board Manager and staff have not even mentioned that a policy to pack in 10,000-16,000 new residential units is self-defeating. Residential development on average, results in more spending to provide expensive

services and infrastructure than residential development contributes in revenue. Counties need to build schools, libraries, ballparks for residents that are not required for office or hotel occupants. In short, commercial properties pose less fiscal burden. Yet advocates of this plan have said against all evidence that newcomers will pay for the added infrastructure. Past practice here, i.e., adding substantial density in the Metro corridors guaranteed a net increase in revenues [over expenditures/spending]—BUT THAT WAS PREDICATED ON SUCCESSFUL COMMERCIAL OFFICE, RETAIL AND HOTEL DENSITY. But this plan offers no magic formula to address the regional crisis, no national crisis, of post covid drop-offs commercial tenancy We saw just this week JBG Smith taking a write off on commercial space in the county, and more is sure to come. So let me repeat, residential development results in more spending to provide expensive services and infrastructure than residential development contributes in revenue and also note that Arlington's own budget consistently demonstrates this near-universal dynamic.

Let's have some constructive discussion about other ways to move forward. If the costs of serving thousands of additional residents strains the county budget let's see if it's not cheaper to fund vouchers for affordable housing than just plussing up density.

On substance, the county is adding up to 16,000 new housing units that will simply add to existing problems of gentrification, particularly serious with regard to historic African American presence in Halls Hill and Highview park. Pla advocates and the Board has told us the taller building heights were added to obtain more affordable units. But you go silent when we reveal the simple math that Plan Langston Blvd is reducing BY 40% the percentage of affordable housing units on the Blvd from today's ratio. Yes, I said 40% reduction in the proportion of low or low-moderate income residents we imagine living here in 40 or 50 years. I wish we had the same concerns about legacy residents we've heard today about legacy businesses.

Now let's talk about height and density. What should be clear and easy is instead very complex. Residents have presented many concerns about heights and densities, and most relented when told it's the only way to meet affordable housing goals. How ironic given what I just said about

those goals. Not to mention that we have learned those building heights and density from the models are not real. The board's acknowledged public desire for caps on height and density, but its discussion October 14 added more confusion. Since then, staff told ASF "We are not setting numeric caps and the only constraint on density is building form" so if you meet setbacks and stepbacks and get a big enough lot, you can put up very large buildings. Building form is the only real constraint on the outcome.

Do residents understand this? No. Do they know what might be built in their areas? No. ASF has been subjected to tortuously slow process, and even today – after weeks of FOIA's --we don't have the key to staff's spreadsheet, to see the projections for each site. We can tell you and residents however that staff's spreadsheet shows floor area ratios well above the maximum levels projected in the final plan – going up to 7, 8, or 11 floor area ratios. That's massive. The former USA Today towers in Rosslyn have an apparent FAR of 7. And most residents do not understand that the 16-story cap on building in the "higher density areas" can be busted by penthouses or bonus heights earned under section 15 of the code.

So, we ask you to defer this plan until a new board is seated – at a minimum until you have completed the new RTA period identified for Cherrydale – until you set height and density (FAR) caps that can't be busted, and until you address our concerns on the environment, gentrification and the budget

Thank you