

Juan Carlos Fierro Responses

Question 1 -Strategic Planning for Growth and Development

Since 2018, Arlington County has:

- changed zoning in multifamily areas so the Board can permit unlimited density for affordable housing complexes;
 - added automatic bonus density into the Zoning Code for senior housing;
 - added automatic bonus density into the Zoning Code for LEED silver and platinum construction in new buildings;
 - awarded Amazon 1.6 million square feet of bonus density and undervalued the community benefits by up to \$400 million;
 - dramatically increased the use of special GLUPs, which were supposed to be rare tools to increase density in areas without sector plans;
 - approved the Missing Middle upzoning that allowed a nearly six-fold increase in density (R5, R6, R8, R10, R20 zones, essentially eliminating single-family zoning countywide;
- At no point before making these changes to add density did the County define the capacity of CURRENT zoning (i.e. how many units can be built under by-right zoning.)

Would you agree as a new board member to publish -- before approving any new sector plans, land use or zoning amendments:

- **The projected 10-year Arlington operating budget with CURRENT zoning and land use?**
- **The demographics and median incomes that can be accommodated with maximum buildout under current land use and zoning? Would you agree to use this baseline to measure against all future zoning and land use changes before they are approved?**

Response:

Yes, I would agree on the need to publish the projected 10-year operating budget with CURRENT zoning and land use before approving any sector plans, land use or zoning amendments. The problem is that the current board has not determined a proper urban land use policy that considers the long-term development impacts of a proposed project. This occurs because the County staff has become the de facto policy makers of land use policy promoting densification without addressing the long-term impacts of proposed projects.

If elected I would:

- Propose a moratorium on projects that are not accompanied without long term impact analysis.
- Re-evaluate how bonus density incentives are used.
- Establish a baseline to measure all future zoning and land use changes before they are approved.
- Encourage a land use policy that protects existing affordable housing in Arlington (preserving existing post war modest single-family housing and garden apartments), and

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development projects which truly increase the supply of affordable housing especially along transit corridors. Ironically Since 2000 the number of affordable housing units in Arlington has decreased notwithstanding policies, like Bonus Density, that are supposed to increase the number of affordable housing units in Arlington.

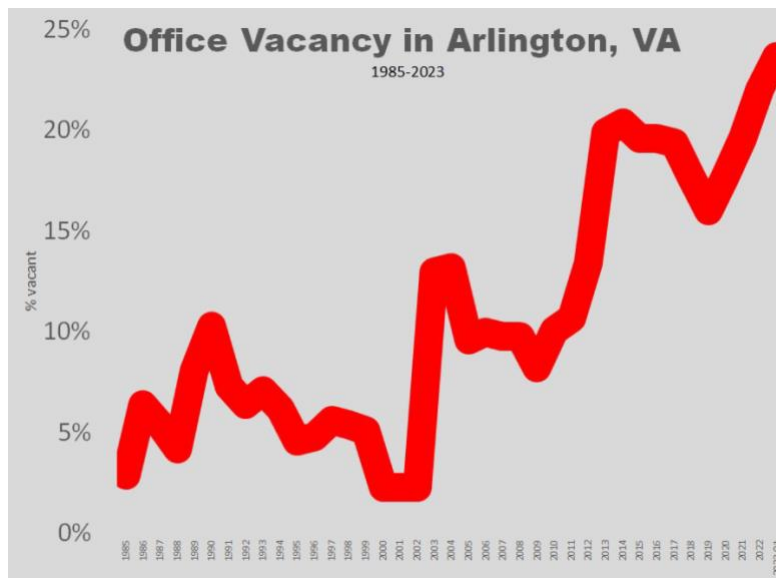
- Encourage my colleagues on the Board to retake the policy setting role concerning land use policies instead of letting the County staff become the de facto policy makers.

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Question 2 - Commercial Property Vacancy

Arlington County's office vacancy rate hit 23.7% ([link](#)) this year, the highest we've ever seen. This reflects a 20-year trend; notably, the amount of vacant office space today is equal to every single square foot built here since 1999.

How would you address this problem as more leases are coming due and the work from home trend continues? Given Arlington had fewer affordable housing units in 2022 than in 2000, despite a 24% population increase, why isn't the County keeping up with other jurisdictions (Washington DC, New York City, Alexandria) that are doing more on Office-to-Residential conversions? As a Board Member, would you require County workers to come back into the office?



Response:

Arlington's high vacancy rate is troubling, but it is also an opportunity. The biggest opportunity is the conversion of former office buildings into residential units. While in some cases it may be too costly to convert, we should consider promoting new technologies in plumbing, electrical and HVAC to find new technologies that are cost effective to convert office buildings more easily to residential units. This could include working with research institutions such as Virginia Tech to promote such innovations.

Given the excess of office space the County presently has, the County Board should consider a moratorium on non-residential high rise building construction. This also gives the Board time to reconsider establishing long term urban planning policies which include looking at the long-term development impacts of new projects.

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Given our need to fill office buildings with workers I would encourage the County to set an example for all businesses by requiring Arlington County employees to return to the office as soon as possible.

Concerning the impact on affordable housing, these efforts should be complemented with efforts to preserve existing affordable housing, primarily post-war bungalow single family residences and garden apartments. We need to realize that as the County has promoted density, the County has inflated land prices, which is the primary reason we have so many teardowns that destroy our affordable housing stock. Inflated land prices. We need to provide incentives to preserve our existing affordable housing inventory.

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Question 3 - Plan Langston Boulevard

Plan Langston Boulevard was launched in 2015; it may go to a Board vote in 2023. What was originally a plan for low-to medium density along 5 mixed use nodes has morphed into a nonsensical phased "Vision" that will lock in much higher density but leave critical gaps in the plan. (Cherrydale and East Falls Church as two of the 5 nodes are now removed!) Massing and density have escalated from early drafts, with the current vision showing 5-6 stories along most of the boulevard and leaping to 10-15 stories at the three remaining nodes, with site plans potentially increasing this even further). PLB will add 15,000 residents beyond the 23,000 who lived here in 2017, a precipitous increase that would necessitate extensive infrastructure that the plan does not satisfy.

Community engagement was complicated by Covid and engagement on other development issues (Missing Middle, VHC, Firehouse 8, Donaldson Run, etc.) And while there was strong interest in better traffic management and open space by residents, both are deferred or omitted from the current vision. The county has not explained key requirements by VDOT, which administers Langston Blvd as a major commuter and evacuation route. Nor has the County explained why the percentage of affordable housing units will *decrease* as a percent of total units, even while it uses affordable housing to justify the Rossly-level of density it is introducing outside the Metro corridors. Most important, the County has failed to square the PLB plans with the tectonic shifts in the regional and county circumstances, to wit:

- Decline in Arlington's population from 2019-2022;
- Fiscal and land constraints on ability to construct public facilities such as community centers, parks, rec, libraries, public safety facilities, and schools;
- The impact of sorely-needed office-to-residential conversions (see question 2);
- Increasing impacts of climate change;
- Decline in use of existing mass transit (see Question 5 below);
- A 5.1% apartment vacancy rate; , primarily unwanted small apartments, which PLB will add to this market;
- Missing Middle approval and potential ability to deliver the "new housing types" that PLB also promises inside the same planning area, and MM impact on existing housing stock for those earning 30-120% of area median households

Do you agree that PLB should take these planning parameters into consideration? Would you approve the plan in its current form, with current heights and densities, and the omission of Cherrydale and East Falls Church?

Response:

I do agree that the PLB has morphed from low to medium density (supported by residents), to a higher density (almost imposed by staff) giving little consideration for the feedback from the affected residents. As proposed today, I would not support PLB until:

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- **A long-range development and fiscal impact assessment is made concerning the public facilities required for the increased population. These would include community centers, parks, libraries, public safety facilities (such as firehouses) and schools.**
- **Identification of possible buildings for commercial-residential conversion to increase the supply of affordable housing units.**
- **Impact of climate change variables, such as protecting existing tree canopy of mature trees.**
- **Impact on improvements to transportation along the corridor and in particular VDOT's requirements since they manage Langston Blvd.**
- **Impact of Missing Middle and how it will impact the corridor.**

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Question 4 - Missing Middle of Enhanced Housing Options

Arlington residents are challenging the County's EHO/ Missing Middle upzoning in court.

If the court overturns or stays EHO programs, what would you do? What specific changes in process or substance would you promote? Do you believe the current county tracking system is adequate to judge whether stated goals are achieved? How will you define "success" of EHO if it continues in current form?

Response:

If the court overturns Missing Middle – Enhanced Housing Options, I would support a moratorium on all development projects unless accompanied with an objective development impact assessment study.

Likewise, I would support efforts to preserve existing affordable housing units in Arlington – Post-war bungalow style single family housing plus garden style apartments.

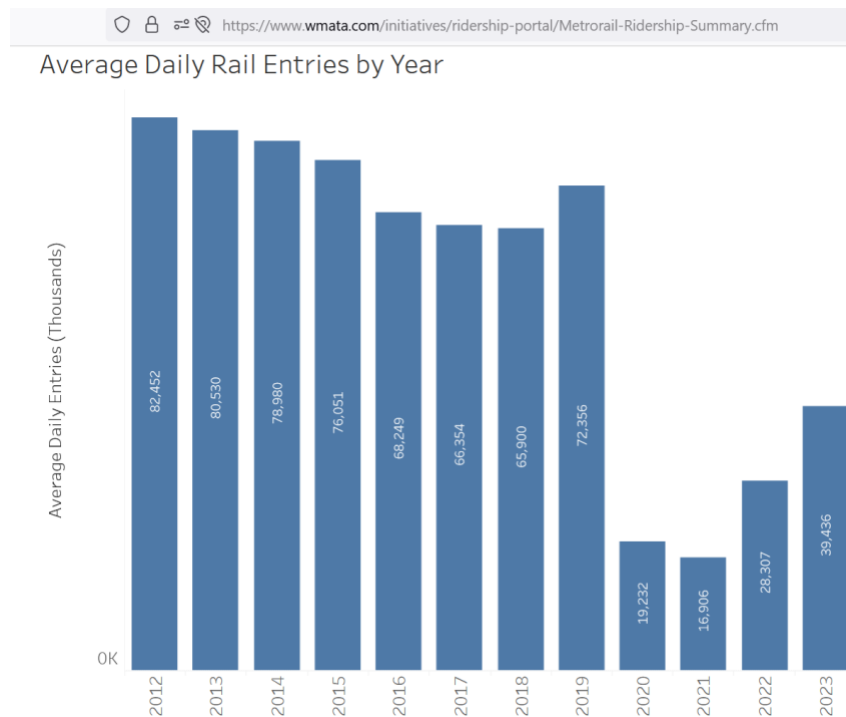
If the court stays the Missing Middle – EHO program, I would encourage the Board to reconsider some of its parameters, especially parking. As a minimum each housing unit should have one on-site parking space. (84 words).

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Question 5 - Metro Funding Crisis

Much of Arlington's growth and development paradigm has rested on our two Metro corridors. Pre-COVID, ridership at Arlington's Metro stations declined 20% from 2012-2018 (chart below), even as County population rose 7% (mainly near Metro). Since 2019, daily ridership is down 45%. Metro now faces a \$750 million deficit.

What steps must Arlington take -- with other jurisdictions or alone -- to help fix this funding gap? How does your vision for Arlington take into account the long-term decline of Metro ridership in the County?



Response:

The new reality is that WMATA ridership is down because of transformational changes that occurred because of the pandemic – folks could now work from home requiring only an internet connection. There was no need to go to the office. As we emerged into a post COVID world, we now find that many do not want to go back to the office, thus reducing ridership on public transportation.

We need to incentivize firms to encourage folks to return to the office, not only to use office space (as mentioned in answer to question 2), but to also use our public transportation network. We should also encourage firms that require research and development areas to use existing vacant office space for their R&D to not only address the office vacancy problem but also increase ridership in our public transportation network.

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The County Board also needs to set parameters on Metro subsidies so that Arlington and neighboring jurisdictions are not viewed as “cash cows” to patch over Metro’s budget shortfalls. Our budget subsidies to Metro should be based on key accountability metrics to ensure funds are being properly used, which has not been done adequately in the past.