

Susan Cunningham Responses to ASF Questionnaire.

Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable Future County Board candidate questionnaire - 9/22/23

Please see the attached questions to which Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable requests your responses. Please reply in no more than 300 words for each of the 4 answers, inserting answers directly below each question in the Word document. Please also label your responses with your name on the document to help us in formatting the information for publishing to the web.

Please send your replies to asf.virginia@gmail.com by COB on Friday, Sept 22. All candidate answers will be posted to the ASF website (asf-virginia.org) and shared with ASF subscribers via email.

If you have questions or need clarification, simply reply to this email.

Thank you in advance for your timely response,

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:

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

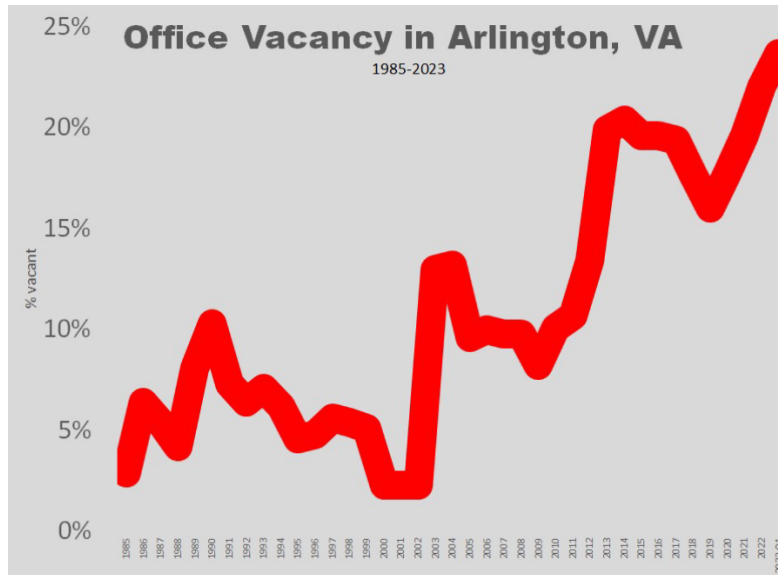
The Missing Middle process was a mess because it skipped over common sense steps like long-term budget and environmental impacts. When considering zoning and land use changes, we must clearly articulate goals, anticipate both potential upsides and unintended consequences, and then monitor closely and refine as needed as reality unfolds. Possible changes, including the recently adopted the Missing Middle/Expanded Housing Options policy, should be evaluated with an upfront scenario analysis (e.g., long-term costs, environmental impact, income and family size diversity impacts) and ideally followed by a phased pilot to test those assumptions.

Trained as an engineer, I support systematic and transparent planning that includes reasonable assumptions and cost estimates. As a board member, I will advocate for multi-year financial planning, including clear assumptions or ranges of assumptions that are bounding the estimated impacts. This is important to understand, both for already approved zoning and land use, and for proposed changes. For instance, I would support an initial fiscal impact analysis to identify what unfunded mandates we have already committed to. Likewise, each sector plan or zoning amendment should have a reasonable estimate of possible impact and mitigation strategies, including related infrastructure investment.

While a hypothetical maximum buildout is an interesting analysis, it is not the best baseline to evaluate future zoning and land use changes. First, private landowners decide when and how much development to propose, with many decision criteria. Second, demographics and median incomes vary depending on not just the density or type of housing, but the phasing, ownership structure, financing and other factors. Instead, I would support a fiscal impact analysis to identify what unfunded mandates we have already committed to, and evaluate future sector plans or zoning amendments with a similar analysis of estimated impact and mitigation strategies, including related infrastructure investment.

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.



- A. How would you address this problem as more leases are coming due and the work from home trend continues?

The vacancy rate will increase as pre-COVID leases expire, yielding a larger tax bill for residents, both renters and owners. For every 1% of commercial vacancy rate, that's a \$3M revenue reduction: ~25 teachers or our entire eviction prevention budget. While this reflects a national shift, Arlington's office vacancy rate is higher than other area jurisdictions. I support incentivizing and easing adaptive reuse of buildings for schools, recreation, and live-work spaces. We can encourage subleasing, loosen regulations around temporary occupancy, and invite creativity through national innovation competitions to redesign and reuse space.

Even with these changes, to mitigate the tax burden, we need to continuously examine our spending to ensure top value for each dollar spent and improved customer experience. We need to be constantly pushing to learn what we can do better and what we no longer need to be responsible for, so that we keep Arlington County government services highly efficient, effective, and fine tuned for the needs of the community.

- B. 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?

To meet Arlington's goal of 17.7% of rental housing being affordable by the year 2040 we need to invest in committed affordable homes (CAFs) and preservation of aging market-rate affordable (MARKs) rentals and condos. Since 2000, we are down 13,000 privately owned, affordable units. The recent investment at Barcroft Apartments preserved over 1,300 homes as CAFs for 99 years.

Office-to-residential conversion is just one tool. As a former affordable housing CEO, I know housing development, whether new build, conversion, or preservation, requires careful study and financing tradeoffs. Circumstances in other jurisdictions (e.g., building vintage in Alexandria, underwater financing in Washington, DC) may make office-to-residential more attractive. While crucial to allow these conversions, the viability will depend on specific details and financing.

C. As a Board Member, would you require County workers to come back into the office?

No. A one-size-fits-all approach does not make sense. Instead, I will hold the County Manager accountable for clear expectations, performance measurement, and responsiveness to County residents and businesses. I will encourage more in-the-community (beyond 2100 Clarendon Boulevard) delivery of face-to-face services. While changing work patterns is a challenge, there are upsides as well; finding the right balance of hybrid work schedules can help us deliver services efficiently while meeting our climate goals. (See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2023/09/18/work-from-home-carbon-footprint/>)

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

A. Do you agree that PLB should take these planning parameters into consideration?

Yes. It is crucial to plan now for the prioritization of community amenities, preserving more market-rate affordable homes, placemaking and siting green space, environmental transformation (stormwater, cooling, carbon intensity), pedestrian safety, transit and parking, and retail. Also infrastructure investments like pedestrian enhancements, climate mitigation, and schools need to be funded in conjunction.

Since PLB is an up-GLUP, not by-right zoning, future public facilities, climate change mitigation, and transportation should be considered, but the details should be refined over time as individual redevelopment projects are proposed and negotiated.

Over indexing on housing units along Langston specifically, rather than the right sized units across the whole county (including some north of Langston). Instead of the 2500 units, focus on 10% of new and preserving old, to get to 17% of total, including as that total increases!

B. Would you approve the plan in its current form, with current heights and densities, and the omission of Cherrydale and East Falls Church?

Maybe. I would have preferred that Cherrydale and East Falls Church be included in the study. However, after more than a decade of community effort, I would be in favor of moving forward with the plan adoption, provided we also commit to accelerating (and resourcing) work on East Falls Church. EFC is a major development opportunity, given the large parcel sizes and compelling mixed-use transit-oriented development opportunities.

The most recent proposed plan increases heights significantly in some areas and is still receiving public input. I would hear that input and consider a few further modifications. In addition, I would push for much more forward-leaning environmental investments and long-overdue transportation safety improvements along this corridor.

Question 4 - Missing Middle of Enhanced Housing Options

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

A. If the court overturns or stays EHO programs, what would you do?

Regardless of the court's action, I will press for greater transparency in EHO applications, continuation of caps until impacts are better understood, and detailed study of environmental impacts. In addition, the community's experience of the EHO/Missing Middle process will help refine our community engagement efforts going forward. While ongoing review and revision is needed in any case, court action could accelerate both.

B. What specific changes in process or substance would you promote?

The Missing Middle process was a mess, with unclear goals and mixed messages. I would not have voted for the policy that was adopted 5-0 in March. Moving forward, we need monitoring and refinement, while bringing the community together to get housing right in the region.

Likely changes:

- *Add permit fee, expiration date, more public data*
- *Expand permit caps*
- *Incent reuse of existing structures*
- *Reduce allowed lot coverage and/or expand stormwater requirements*
- *Expand tree cover requirement (requires state law change)*

Additional housing tools:

- *Beyond by-right: prioritizing larger projects (e.g, EFC, PLB)*
- *New homeownership tools: land trusts, historic preservation, financing.*
- *New tax tools: expanded property tax deferrals.*
- *Preserve and expand affordable housing, both committed and market rate.*
- *Revisit the Affordable Dwelling Unit rules and outcomes.*
- *Support for adaptive reuse and preservation.*

C. Do you believe the current county tracking system is adequate to judge whether stated goals are achieved?

No. More detail is needed on home size, construction cost, infrastructure and fiscal impact, and eventually the demographics of who is displaced and who benefits.

D. How will you define "success" of EHO if it continues in current form?

We will need substantial modifications over time. Success would include:

- *Minimal displacement of elderly, disabled, lower-income, and historically-underrepresented groups.*
- *Net increase in family-sized affordable homes and in geographic distribution.*
- *Improved climate resilience, including stormwater management, tree cover, heat island impact, and carbon reduction.*
- *Adaptive reuse of existing buildings, including rental to condo conversions.*

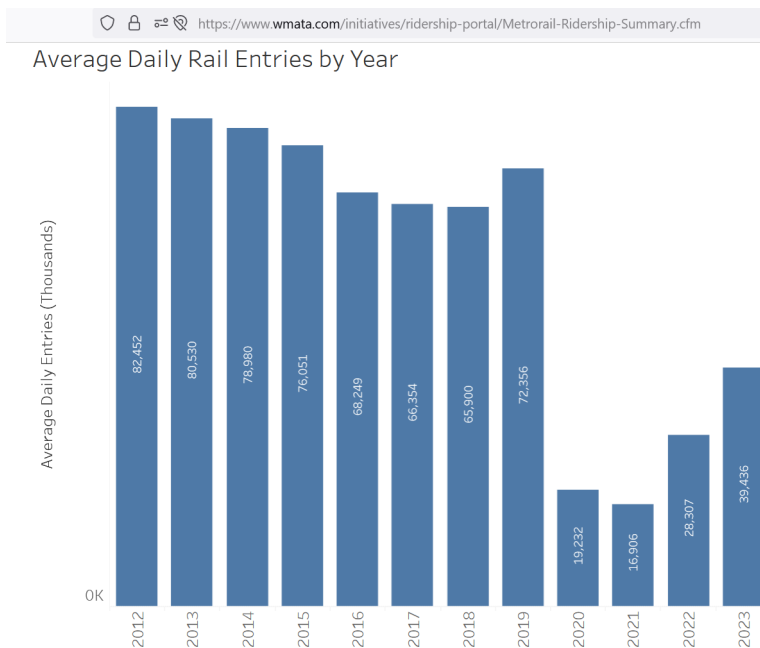
- Acceleration of innovative ownership models: land trusts, co-housing, ADUs.
- Clear path for lifelong residency in Arlington, across different incomes and ages.

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?

The DMV public transit system, like others across the world, suffered a major blow as a result of the pandemic. Unlike several other regional transit systems, Metro lacks an independent regional funding mechanism like sales tax. While we are seeing very promising growth in transit ridership, including record-breaking ridership several days this week, the changing work patterns have shifted from a commuter-focused system to travel that is more dispersed across days and times of day. That is a challenge, but also an opportunity to make even better use of the infrastructure investments we’ve made in the past. Metro will remain a crucial backbone of our transit system, while bus service, bike networks, sustainable mobility, and pedestrian safety provide the connective tissue beyond Metro.



The funding shortfall for Metro was exacerbated by ridership changes and local funding changes during the pandemic. We must find new sources of funding to ensure that public transit is efficient, safe, and available to everyone in our region as a public good. Local, state and federal leaders must work together to deliver this, through budget reallocations and dedicated tax revenues. More regional financing and better service are essential for our current system and the expansion that is needed to meet the challenge of climate change and support our businesses and economy. The economic value of Metro far outweighs the cost - the value to Virginia alone is estimated at \$1.5B/year.

