

August 6, 2021

Members of the Arlington County Board, (CountyBoard@arlingtonva.us)

On behalf of our members, these are joint comments from the Ashton Heights Civic Association, Lyon Park Citizens Association and Lyon Village Citizens Association regarding the LRPC review of possible amendments to the west sector of the Clarendon Sector Plan, and in response to staff presentations of June 15, and June 30, 2021. Together, we represent the three Clarendon area civic associations that border this part of Clarendon.

These are submitted in the hope that we can resolve the outstanding issues and advance the process to the point where staff and the Commissions can recommend adoption of any changes to the County Board.

Below are our recommendations in six areas: (1) the process; (2) the fire station; (3) active and passive recreation space in west Clarendon; (4) a possible change in use to hotel on a portion of the west Clarendon sector plan area; (5) building height, step backs and taper; and (6) "bonus density" and consideration of extraordinary public benefits.

(1) The Process

We recommend that the process be extended by another one or two meetings to consider our joint proposals, obtain some further feedback, and see whether we can reach a consensus that will provide the basis for a staff and committee recommendations to the County Board.

We believe that a deferral is appropriate given the complications that COVID-19 posed for notification of meetings, the inability to hold in-person meetings, and the difficulties posed in participating in virtual meetings, particularly for citizens not familiar with Teams, Zoom, and other meeting technology.

(2) The Fire Station

We understand that the County needs to upgrade the existing Clarendon fire and rescue station to bring it up to date and meet current needs. We are comfortable with the current location, but also willing to consider other nearby options. For instance, there are other privately-owned sites nearby --including undeveloped segments of 10th Street -- that may be suitable. We are unaware of what consideration has been given to other locations -- beyond the County-owned property around Triangle Park.

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Regarding options for redeveloping on site, it is unclear to us whether the land area that a new fire station will require includes some part of the former “Clarendon House” just to the west of the current station. Some draft building footprints suggest that it will. This is important – especially with its implications for our ability to preserve remaining green space that had been planned for use as an active park.

(3) 10th Street Park and Open Space

We recommend that the County reaffirm the plan in the 2006 Clarendon Sector Plan for a 50,000 sq. foot, active park on the Tenth Street Park site. We recommend that the park include space for active recreation for different ages, including a tot lot for small children and a basketball court, and if room allows, other active uses such as pickle ball courts, a running track, and a climbing wall. These facilities would meet the needs of several groups of likely users, ranging from adult office workers and residents to parents and small children, as well as nearby daycare facilities. Minimally, this recreation site would include the current at grade area to the west of the fire station (where the former Clarendon House is situated). Additionally, we propose that the top of the firehouse be either indoor or outdoor active recreation space, to complete the 50,000 sq. feet of active urban park proposed in the 2006 sector plan and the County’s open space plan.

The County Board Public Spaces Master Plan adopted the nationwide campaign to have a great park within a 10-minute walk of every person. This site would put most of Clarendon west of the Market Common within a 10-minute walk. Similar facilities in parks in Lyon Park and Lyon Village are substantially farther for most residents and workers in Clarendon. Good active park space here would further support Arlington’s ranking as the #1 Fitness “city” in the country.

We also strongly support the development of the passive park opportunities under discussion, including the site just west of Clarendon Circle next to Northside Social; the street parking area along Fairfax Drive over the Metro tunnel; and at the corner of N. 10th Street and Fairfax Drive next to the Dominion Energy substation, assuming that the substation does not pose a health risk to users of the space.

(4) Possible change in land use to accommodate hotel use

One of the prospective developers in west Clarendon has proposed a use change to allow a hotel. We do not oppose such a use change, and we agree that a hotel use could augment the customer base for retail, restaurants, and entertainment venues, further helping businesses in Clarendon recover from the disruptions from COVID-19. At that location, it will be especially important to address fully traffic, parking, and other infrastructural considerations.

(5) Building height, step backs and taper

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We recommend against changing the Clarendon Sector Plan building step back and tapering requirements for sites in west Clarendon. In our view, the proponents of such step back reductions have offered no compelling reasons for the changes other than to gain more density, which is not a compelling reason. Studies show that that the “feel” of a sidewalk and street changes at some point about 40 to 50 feet above street level when the façade of building extends beyond that level without a step back. These façade breaks are sometimes referred to as the “shout line,” the height to which a human voice can reach. The requirement for such step backs was included in the Clarendon Sector Plan after careful consideration and are vital to ensuring a positive pedestrian experience at ground level that can help activate retail and other business uses.

The required step backs also complement the lower (2 to 3 story) street front building heights in central Clarendon opposite the Metro Park, as well as existing development along 10th Street. They no doubt contribute to the success of Clarendon restaurants and other first floor retail. Rosslyn, in sharp contrast, with its much taller buildings, without step backs, has a much different feel.

Our recommendation to retain existing step back requirements also applies to buildings that might be proposed on the St. Charles site, particularly across from the Bromptons townhouses at the intersection of Kirkwood Road and Washington Blvd. Such step backs in this location are particularly important as they will likely be five or more feet higher than the nominal measure (because this is the lowest point of the St. Charles site, and building heights are normally based on the average perimeter elevation of a site).

(6) “Bonus density” and consideration of “extraordinary benefits”

“FAR” -- by definition the square footage of buildable space by a developer -- is largely controlled by height, step backs, and tapering. These are an essential part of the decision process because increasing FAR means increased density, demand for parking, number of vehicles on the street, and greater service needs including trash, water, sewer, fire protection and parks.

The June County Staff presentation indicates that fully “1/3 of new development in Proposed Private Development Scenario” exceeds the existing 3.0 FAR ceiling, and thereby constitutes “bonus” density. Further raising height frontage limits on Washington Boulevard, Fairfax, or 10th Street (per County Staff June 30, 2021 proposals) would allow for additional density well beyond even these levels, which is unnecessary and, in some cases, has not even been requested in the Developers’ proposals (e.g., along the north side of 10th Street).

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Finally, as cited above, such developer requests to be granted significant “bonus” density need to “be earned by providing extraordinary community benefits, e.g., affordable housing, building preservation, open space, and green building” (June 2021 County Staff “Clarendon Sector Plan Update – Online Updated Materials,” page 15, and the tabulations on pp. 13-14).

Developer requirements to provide extraordinary benefits have not been discussed or incorporated yet in the LRPC’s Clarendon Sector Update review process. We believe this omission needs to be addressed. Further, to accommodate these benefits and to mitigate their impact on County infrastructure, including sewer, water, roads and schools, these benefits should be incorporated into the zoning code, and required for the most part, as a prerequisite to reach the maximum allowed density. Without discussion and a full consideration of what extraordinary benefits will be called for, it seems inappropriate for us, and the County for that matter, to sign off on additional height and density requested by the developers.

Conclusions:

Preserving and enhancing Clarendon’s unique character as a vital, active, accessible urban village has been the principal objective that distinguishes its planning process. The 2006 Sector Plan remains the guiding framework for realizing that vision.

The county has had considerable success in developing key areas of Clarendon consistent with that vision, notably the properties surrounding its central Metro Park, and there is no evidence that standards should be relaxed as the last few large sites are being addressed.

We are deeply concerned that developer requests to waive key strictures limiting height and density, including step back requirements, not be greenlighted without adequate deliberation, including enumeration of the public benefits expected to be included within the base density and the additional “extraordinary” benefits that might be provided for granting bonus density and additional height. As active partners in formulating the 2006 Plan, our civic associations request and fully expect that we should have input into consideration of these “extraordinary” benefits, as they will determine to a significant degree the outcomes and degree of success achieved in the planning and development process.

Similarly, we request that any recommendations to update the 2006 Plan reaffirm the commitment to realizing open space needs, including the active park planned on the Tenth Street Park site, in keeping with the County’s 2019 Public Spaces Master Plan. We only have one chance to redevelop the remainder of Clarendon, and once lost, public spaces are very unlikely to be regained.

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In consideration of the above, we strongly urge that the LRPC Clarendon Sector Plan Update be extended to consider our joint proposals, obtain further feedback from stakeholders, and develop a consensus for staff and committee recommendations to the County Board.

We thank you for your attention to these positions during the Clarendon Sector Plan update process. We would be pleased to discuss these positions further with the County Board, staff, and other interested parties.

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