



URBAN FORESTRY COMMISSION

2700 South Taylor Street, Arlington, Virginia 22206
TEL 703-228-6525 FAX 703-228-6507 www.arlingtonva.us

Honorable Libby Garvey, Chair
Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

May 15, 2020

RE: Permanent Continuity of Government Ordinance

Dear Chair Garvey:

I am writing to convey the sentiments of the Urban Forestry Commission (UFC) regarding the proposed Permanent Continuity of Government Ordinance that would authorize the County Manager to “temporarily suspend enforcement of existing provisions of County ordinances” to meet county needs during the current crisis. Due to these extraordinary circumstances, the UFC has not met to discuss the proposed ordinance, but I have shared my letter with the commissioners and incorporated their comments to ensure that it represents the strong consensus of the Commission.

Arlington has long stood by the commitment to a public engagement and decision-making process that includes a strong and broad-based citizen, neighborhood, and advisory board participation. This approach to planning and development results in better overall outcomes and broader public support than a review process that is exclusively staff-driven or that confines public involvement to the board meetings. We are very concerned, however, that item 24 on your May agenda (“Permanent Continuity of Government Ordinance”) risks a dramatic step back from Arlington’s historical commitment to the role of the community in smart growth.

The ordinance would remove the public from actively participating in and providing feedback to help shape key decisions by authorizing the County Manager to “temporarily suspend enforcement of existing provisions of County ordinances” to meet county needs during the current crisis. The ordinance would further authorize the County Manager to suspend Site Plan Review Committee (SPRC) meetings for the indefinite future in favor of seeking comment from individual “members of the Planning Commission and other boards and commissions, applicants, and the public electronically without convening a meeting.”

These changes, without precedent in Arlington, will significantly change the process through which development of major projects in the county is conducted by removing involvement by the effected communities. The SPRC and Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC) processes have long proven to be a critical tool for gathering public input in development and planning activities in Arlington. They benefit the board

itself, in its approval deliberations, and the community as a whole. Public input into development plans needs to continue as well.

The SPRC and LRPC processes can adapt to physical distancing, but the county cannot expect the same robust and deliberative feedback without real-time SPRC meetings. The discussions at these meetings have allowed the public, developers, and County staff to work together to resolve issues collaboratively. Electronic comments outside of meetings are a viable complement, but they cannot replace the valuable discussion that occurs at these meetings.

Importantly, resolving issues at the SPRC and LRPC level means that fewer issues come to the attention of the County Board. At a time when the Board has so many competing priorities, we should maximize tools that allow for an efficient use of Board time.

We are in the midst of an inflection point that will transform Arlington for at least a generation. To permit development projects to go forward without adequate public input would fundamentally erode principles upon which this community is built.

We ask that you consider an alternative to provision 4.d that could read:

d. Long Range Planning Committee and Site Plan Review Committee meeting processes, provided that the County Manager would be required to institute processes to obtain comments from members of the Planning Commission and other boards and commissions, applicants, and the public electronically; that all efforts be undertaken to continue the current SPRC and LRPC process electronically; and that each SPRC and LRPC process include at least one real-time and interactive meeting.

We understand that the implementation of a process to allow for public participation in electronic SPRC and LRPC meetings may be complicated and difficult, but it is crucial to ensure that we maintain the commitment to our community-focused growth decision process.

Given that electronic and real-time (i.e. virtual) meetings are becoming increasingly mainstream in a wide variety of contexts, we should be moving rapidly to embrace the technology for virtual meetings and utilize it for all commission and other public meetings. Without question, it should be used for SPRC and LRPC hearings.

Thank you for your service and leadership during these unprecedented times, and thank you for this opportunity to share our views.

Sincerely,



Phil Klingelhofer
Chair, Urban Forestry Commission

Cc: Members, Arlington County Board
Mark Schwartz, Arlington County Manager