

April 1, 2024

Honorable Chair Libby Garvey
Arlington County Board
Ellen M. Bozman Government Center
2100 Clarendon Blvd, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: Funding a Lot Coverage Study in FY-25

Dear Chair Garvey:

The Forestry and Natural Resources Commission (FNRC) is sending this letter to supplement our earlier recommendation to the County Board that Arlington should review its existing lot coverage standards and practices, and do so on a fast timetable. Since sending that letter on February 23rd, FNRC has learned that the Department of Community Planning, Housing and Development (CPHD) has not included a lot coverage study in its FY-25 workplan, primarily due to resource constraints. *We are writing now to recommend that the County's operating budget for FY-25 should include adequate resources for CPHD to fully develop this analysis within calendar year 2024.*

Our earlier letter presented a detailed rationale for a study that would assess how the current lot coverage standards are contributing to the steady decline of Arlington's tree canopy, as the rapid pace of clear-cutting properties to create space for extremely large single- and multi-family dwellings continues unabated. We want to reiterate our belief stated in that letter that it is possible to both increase housing opportunities *and* restore precious tree canopy. However, successful balancing of these priorities requires investment in a thorough analysis of lot coverage options and adoption of reasonable policies to ensure that new construction provides enough space for canopy trees to grow and thrive.

Furthermore, the newly adopted Forestry and Natural Resources Plan specifically calls for the county to "enhance development standards to optimize retention or replacement of tree canopy, natural vegetation, permeable surfaces and biophilic elements" (Action 1,2,3) in support of the plan's overarching goal to restore tree canopy coverage to 40% of Arlington's public and private lands (Action 1.1.1). *The FNRC believes that these priorities provide a strong justification for immediate funding and support for a lot coverage study, because the 40% tree canopy goal cannot be achieved under current lot coverage standards.*

To be clear, our recommendation is that the new lot coverage study be initiated as soon as possible. It should address relevant issues of setbacks, building height, out-buildings, and other 'hard' structures such as swimming pools and impervious surfaces. It should apply to any new residential site development, whether for single-family or multi-family dwellings.

Commission Members

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With regard to CPHD resource constraints, the imperative for a lot coverage study seems comparable to (if not greater than) the importance of other studies called for in the CPHD workplan. The widespread call for this study among advisory commissions and civic groups should prompt a reassessment by CPHD of the relative priority of this study in its workplan. The county staff should also consider how costs to CPHD of a lot coverage study could be mitigated – for example, through collaboration with DPR, through use of contractor services rather than an FTE, and/or through adjustment of developer service fees of cover the costs of this important work.

FNRC believes that the many benefits of assessing this issue justify the allocation of additional resources. Our February letter highlighted the significant environmental, equity, and climate resiliency benefits of restoring healthy tree canopies in all of our neighborhoods. A lot coverage study that addresses impervious surfaces would support greater use of green infrastructure to reduce harmful and costly storm water runoff, consistent with the objectives of the recently adopted Storm Water Utility Fee. The study could identify cost-effective collaboration opportunities to provide better information and services to developers, homeowners, and neighbors, as called for in the Forestry and Natural Resources Plan. In short, the benefit/cost balance clearly favors a study at this time.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our views.

Sincerely,



Phil Klingelhofer, Chair
Forestry and Natural Resources Commission

cc: Members, Arlington County Board
Members, Planning Commission
Mark Schwartz, Arlington County Manager
Samia Byrd, Director, Department of Community Planning, Housing and Development