

June 2, 2024

Dear Chair Garvey, Chair Diaz-Torres and members of the Arlington County Board and School Board,

We are writing on behalf of the Joint Facilities Advisory Commission (JFAC) to share recommendations for your respective proposed Capital Improvement Plans (CIPs) for fiscal years 2025–34. These recommendations were adopted unanimously by members present at our May 29, 2024 meeting.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The overall mission of JFAC is to provide input to both Boards on collaborative long-range facility planning with a special emphasis on considering alignment between the two CIPs. That mission, guided by principles of land-use and broad context planning, was foundational to JFAC’s discussions and feedback about the proposed CIPs at our recent meetings.

Demographic forecasts have shifted significantly in the past few years. Arlington’s overall population is forecast to continue to grow creating increased new demands relating to parks, libraries, fire stations and other public facilities. However, birthrates in Arlington have dropped 25% since 2016, and other factors have contributed to notable population declines in the 0-9 and 30-39 age cohorts (see Charts 1 and 2 in the “Additional Demographic Information” section).

There is now (something we never would have believed 6 years ago) a projected surplus of seats at every school level for the next ten years. Data from this year’s student enrollment projections shows that in the next five years, in SY2028-29, that APS will have a total **PreK-12 surplus of 2,492 seats** with a notable **1,316 surplus seats at the elementary school (ES) level**<sup>1</sup> (see Charts 3,4 and 5).

The drop in birthrates, a negative Kindergarten to 12th grade replacement ratio and other demographic factors suggest that this surplus will continue and creates a new reality with new challenges that require different kinds of solutions and planning compared to the rapid student enrollment growth that APS faced from 2010-2019. (see Chart 6)

A successful CIP process makes careful consideration of how needs defined by new demographic data, enrollment projections, reports such as the APS Facilities Condition Assessment Report (FCA Report) and the upcoming joint Trades Center Optimization Study are prioritized under the parameters of budget constraints and timing. It should create a plan that transparently demonstrates affordable and timely solutions for all priorities and considers each capital outlay and decision in the broader context of all of APS and Arlington needs and priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2024/03/Capacity-Utilization-Tables-2023-to-2033-for-website.pdf>, p.4

*Context matters.* A single project or proposal shouldn't be considered out of context of other needs, timing, available funding, enrollment and population projections, or planning for long range site and facility use. We're now in an environment where there are significant opportunity costs, such that committing to one project prevents moving forward on a future project, deferring needed maintenance or upgrades to existing facilities and adding to future costs with escalation.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

We offer below recommendations in four main categories with an overview, details and supporting data to follow in the letter below:

- 1. Maintaining existing assets should be a priority.**
- 2. Take a measured fiscal approach that is mindful of impacts of debt service on operating budget, maintains financial flexibility and is responsive to new developments, realities and/or changes.**
- 3. Include considerations for environmental resiliency, climate change impacts and goals for carbon neutrality in capital and facilities planning.**
- 4. Consider each project or proposal in context of other APS and ACG defined needs, timing, available funding, enrollment projections and demographic forecasts, and planning for long range site and facility use. CIP decisions should not be made without understanding and acknowledging forthcoming information and new needs.**

## **CIP OVERVIEW**

The CIP is one of the most significant planning processes in Arlington County; encompassing not only long-range financial planning but also long-range planning for site use in a 26-square-mile county where land for public uses is our scarcest resource. This planning serves a critical role in maintaining Arlington's highly rated school system and status as a highly desirable place to live, work, and raise a family.

While the CIP process plans for new and continuing projects for a 10-year period, each biannual CIP requires that planning respond to new information such as new revenue projections, newly identified needs and demographic changes.

Every CIP is a new opportunity to look at the "big picture" in the broader context of new information. The CIP process allows APS and the County to consider needs of all Arlington residents and all APS students and ensure that plans address the needs of the entire community, balancing priorities and considering the limited sites, especially in areas of forecast growth, and making the best use (or reuse) of our existing facilities.

APS and County facility assets need to be maintained in order best to respond to these changes while being mindful of impacts of debt service on operating budgets. We are experiencing continued inflation, high interest rates, rising construction costs, structural operating budget structural deficiencies, and climate changes.

While there are many factors that change from year to year, what remains constant is that Arlington’s scarcest resource is land. We must make the most efficient use of the land and facilities we have. Your decisions should consider long-term consequences and not just short-term fixes. Facilities must be flexible and adaptable, and joint uses must be carefully considered and prioritized.

JFAC noted and appreciated the following from the County “Manager’s Message”:

*“... I urge each resident to consider that we have thousands of assets, a sprawling infrastructure under our streets and out of sight, and essential investments in the equipment that allow our water, sewer, and street workers; firefighters; police officers; librarians; park rangers; and hundreds of County and Schools staff do their work to make this community livable, safe, and vibrant. These assets must be nourished, refurbished, and kept strong. The desire for new facilities and better and more efficient use of these assets is real, intense, and welcome. However, we cannot and should not lose sight of investing smartly to ensure that what we have is secure and what we want is affordable.”<sup>2</sup>*

## **1. MAINTAINING EXISTING ASSETS SHOULD BE A PRIORITY**

JFAC supports the County Manager’s goal and guiding CIP principle to prioritize maintaining existing assets. It is important to preserve and maintain Arlington’s existing facilities to optimize the quality of the services provided by every school, every library, every fire station, every community center and trades center operation. Maintenance and upgrades should not be deferred, and identified needs such as new roofs, HVAC system improvements and educational space and other facility inadequacies should be prioritized so that available resources are used to the community’s best advantage.

JFAC also commends the level of detail provided within the County’s CIP regarding projected costs for individual projects, timing, and source of funding. We recommend that APS commit to a similar level of detail identifying timing, funding availability and prioritization for all planned projects.

### **A. APS has identified that there is a reduced need for new construction and an increased need to address deferred renovation, maintenance and modernization needs on existing buildings.**

- Last fall, APS released a Facilities Condition Assessment (“FCA”) as part of a Long-Range Plan to Renovate Existing School Facilities, which identified significant facility needs across the system. The Executive Summary of the “APS Long-Range Plan to Renovate Existing School Facilities: Project Report” states:
  - *“Arlington Public Schools (APS) is in a transition period regarding its current portfolio of facilities across the county. Recent new construction projects have*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/budget/documents/fy-25-fy-34-cip/proposed-fy-25-fy-24-cip/fy-2025-proposed-cip-managers-message.pdf> p.1

*provided additional student capacity to catch up to growing population demands, so there is a reduced need for new construction to increase seats and an increased need to address deferred renovation, maintenance, and modernization needs on existing buildings. In response, the School Board charged the Department of Facilities and Operations to develop a long-range plan to renovate existing school facilities and shape current and future Capital Improvement Plans. While the initial need was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic with a need to evaluate mechanical ventilation rates across the school system to prioritize renovations, the School Board has a broad range of needs to balance in meeting current standards. Therefore, all existing APS facilities need to be evaluated across a full range of criteria and ranked in order of greatest need for renovation.”<sup>3</sup>*

- The leveling of enrollment growth in projections and surplus of design capacity seats provide an opportunity to invest in updating existing schools that have needed attention but had to wait during the era when APS was facing rapid enrollment growth and had to spend available funds and time bringing new seats online to accommodate that growth.
- When making capital decisions it is important to look at design capacity compared to enrollment projections. The Pre-CIP Report states, “This data helps APS to assess capacity need and the type of solution (capital or non-capital) to deploy to accommodate students.”<sup>4</sup>
- With current enrollment projections, APS is projecting to have a surplus of seats at every school level within the next ten years with a notable surplus of 1,316 seats at the ES level in SY2028-2029. While a net surplus of seats provides flexibility for boundary changes, it also implies that at least some schools will be under-enrolled, which risks inefficiencies and costs that put pressure on operating budgets that are already projected to run at deficits. In these ways, under-enrollment can affect all APS students, teachers and staff and must be considered through a county-wide lens. (Please see charts in the “Additional Demographic Information” section).

**B. The FCA Report identifies critical facility needs that include timing, estimated costs and an objective way to compare facility and educational space adequacy. This, along with adopted methodology for prioritizing projects, should be transparently utilized in CIP planning to realize a holistic long-range plan to meet all needs identified in the FCA.**

- The APS FCA Report identified many needs for each APS facility and quantified those needs in raw costs and identified approximate years the needs will need to be accomplished. The CCPTA shared with JFAC their analysis showing that these needs

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2023/11/20231026-APS-Long-Range-Renovation-Study-Project-Report-w-atchs-20231113.pdf>, Page 3

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2023/06/Pre-CIP-Report-2024-2033-Finalv2.pdf>, p 7

would require hundreds of millions of dollars in capital expenses. JFAC understands these needs must be prioritized and that some are more urgent than others.

- The proposed FY25 CIP allocates almost \$124.75 million for major infrastructure projects and \$302.4M for “Long Range Plan Development.” While these allocations imply that there is significant funding for needed repairs, improvements, major renovations or rebuilds it does not demonstrate timing or prioritization of projects to be completed making it difficult to objectively determine whether proposed spending is affordable or not.
- Construction escalation costs should be considered for all deferred projects.
- JFAC recommends that APS conduct 2-3 deep dive feasibility studies. It is important to consider that the estimated schedule for completing a major renovation project following a deep dive study is 3-5 years (COW Presentation, Slide 4). If those projects are staggered such that each one begins only after the last one ends, it would take 5-25 years to get to address 5 identified schools, over which time there could be shifts in available funding, enrollment or other notable changes that could make the deep dive studies done now less relevant. While more information will be available with more studies, it is the *need* of a facility defined by FCA Report inadequacies and urgency of infrastructure needs that should define a priority renovation, regardless of available funds.

**C. As part of an effort to prioritize capital spending on addressing existing facility needs, JFAC recommends exploring “non-capital” options for relocating Montessori Public School of Arlington (MPSA) and for the reuse of the legacy Arlington Career Center (ACC) building.**

- JFAC recognizes the value of the MPSA program to the APS system and believes that it should be given equal and full consideration for a facility that serves its programmatic needs. While option programs are more easily moved to assist with balancing neighborhood capacity needs, that does not mean this option program is not entitled to have a long-term home
- APS staff have proposed three design options for renovating the legacy Arlington Career Center building to make it suitable for MPSA. These range in estimated cost from \$31 million for the low option to almost \$45 million for the high option.
- Not spending ~\$45-\$50M will allow for that amount of bond to be available for existing facility needs.
- The MPSA options currently considered create a notable number of classrooms without natural light and an elementary school facility that does not have a cafeteria.
  - Under FCA Report criteria these classrooms without natural light would be given an “inadequate” or red rating.

- The absence of a cafeteria would also be given an “inadequate” or red rating.
- There are neighborhood schools on the list for feasibility studies to receive a major renovation or rebuild that have these SAME notable inadequacies of classrooms without natural light (all schools on the list) and inadequate cafeteria (Barrett).
- This design with these inadequacies would not offer future flexibility or adaptability which is notable in a part of the county where there is expected growth (Please see charts in the “Additional Information” section).
- A decision to make a substantial capital investment and programming changes for a site in a part of the county where growth is expected should not be made without considering other options and joint uses (see Charts 7 and 8).
- APS should explore the option of MPSA’s relocation to a repurposed ES. The specific location should be determined as part of planned ES boundary changes. This location would be chosen based upon an optimal location for MPSA, considering size and programming needs, balancing the surplus of ES capacity, and provision for operational efficiencies.
  - This alternative option would relocate MPSA from the existing MPSA facility with noted FCA poor air quality 2-3 years sooner than a capital construction project that could not begin until the new ACC building is complete in 2026.
  - This alternative option could also provide for an earlier demolition of the existing MPSA building which could finish the entire site with green space in 2026 or 2027. This is years sooner than under existing options, such that students on the site and neighbors would not have to live with additional years with the site under construction and would offer savings in cost escalation
  - \$22M has been spent on the legacy ACC facility improving secondary seats in the past 10 years and, as a building, it is in good condition.
  - APS could reuse the legacy ACC building in a way that does not require large capital investments or major changes to the building, while maintaining flexibility for future uses and needs. For example, APS could consider moving Arlington Community High School back to the site, using existing childcare spaces for subsidized childcare, or repurposing the site for other needs that may be illuminated with the County’s planning for the Columbia Pike Library.
  - In short, the decision not to locate MPSA at the legacy ACC site would allow better allocation of scarce resources for other facilities while reducing excess capacity that creates operational inefficiencies impacting every school across the county.
- There should be a public process to prioritize current and future needs for the ACC site based on new information and known forthcoming information and



acknowledgment of past studies. This should also consider the County's plans for the Columbia Pike Library and long-range plans for reuse of those spaces within the legacy ACC.

**D. There is a significant, urgent need for a major renovation or rebuild of Thomas Jefferson Middle School (TJMS), whose dual-use site would make it a joint project between APS and the County.**

- JFAC notes that Thomas Jefferson Middle School, which ranked as the first school on the APS staff created list of schools with space inadequacies at the October 24, 2023 Committee of the Whole (COW) Meeting, has an Arlington County community center collocated within the facility and is surrounded by County land (the land the TJMS building sits on is owned by APS). Planning for capital solutions will require collaboration between APS and the County.
- We recommend that planning to identify potential funding and timing for the renovation or rebuild of TJMS be a priority in this CIP. We recognize notable educational space inadequacies such as 43 out of 65 of classrooms do not have an operable window or natural light. We also note that there is just 6 years of remaining use of life on the roof.

**2. TAKE A MEASURED FISCAL APPROACH THAT IS MINDFUL OF IMPACTS OF DEBT SERVICE ON THE OPERATING BUDGET, MAINTAINS FINANCIAL FLEXIBILITY AND IS RESPONSIVE TO NEW DEVELOPMENTS, REALITIES AND/OR CHANGES.**

- JFAC supports the County Manager's CIP approach to focus on the metric of debt service increase rather than relying only on the metric of the 10% debt service limit.
- Projected debt service for APS is expected to exceed \$84M by FY2033. This is especially concerning given the acknowledgment that APS has ongoing operational budget deficiencies.
- JFAC supports the flexibility offered with a measured approach ensuring that our existing facilities are in the best possible condition and that all solutions are affordable and need driven.
- JFAC commends the CM's CIP for acknowledging impacts to the operating budget that coincide with new capital projects and facilities operations. We recommend that APS take a similar approach.

**3. INCLUDE CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCY, CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS AND GOALS FOR CARBON NEUTRALITY IN CAPITAL AND FACILITIES PLANNING**

- JFAC supports and commends the alignment between the Boards on goals for carbon neutrality and environmental sustainability and recommends consideration for the goals in facilities planning and execution.
- To the maximum extent possible facility renovations and upgrades should aim to phase out fossil fuels, provide roofs ready for solar installation and ensure that all existing facilities are operating in an energy efficient manner.
- Plan for upfront costs that will realize later savings in utility costs.
- JFAC supports the joint plan for the Trades Center Optimization study and the plan to electrify the APS school bus fleet. We also support the installation of more EV chargers at public facilities.

**4. CONSIDER EACH PROJECT OR PROPOSAL IN CONTEXT OF OTHER APS AND ACG DEFINED NEEDS, TIMING, AVAILABLE FUNDING, ENROLLMENT PROJECTIONS AND DEMOGRAPHIC FORECASTS, AND PLANNING FOR LONG-RANGE SITE AND FACILITY USE. CIP DECISION SHOULD NOT BE MADE WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING AND ACKNOWLEDGING FORTHCOMING INFORMATION AND NEW NEEDS**

- JFAC fundamentally believes that CIP decisions need to be made with a full and transparent consideration in the context of all County and APS needs. This includes a need to acknowledge that timing and funding for forthcoming information needs to be identified and weighed against all options.
- The APS feasibility studies for major renovation/rebuilds are still forthcoming. Potential costs for the projects and how those projects will be prioritized in terms of timing should be considered now even if the exact costs and scope of projects is TBD.
  - The need for swing space should be considered for planning purposes if some sites have constraints.
- Funding and timing for the execution of the Trades Center Optimization Study should be identified and accounted for in both the APS and ACG CIP
- JFAC recognizes the connection that planning at the Trades Center site has to other sites and planning such as the Quincy Site and the Virginia Hospital Center site and that projects must be examined collectively ensuring that the aggregate whole is optimized and that key gaps don't exist.
  - JFAC requests participation on any community working group for Trades Center Optimization execution.
- JFAC members expressed concerns over the safety, health, and environmental/climate impacts of synthetic turf. JFAC members suggest that further investment in synthetic



turf be paused, and that staff be asked to provide publicly available documentation that supports synthetic turf replacements.

In closing, we appreciate you taking the time to consider these recommendations. We take our role as a joint advisory commission tasked with providing input on long-range planning and site use seriously. We cannot overstate the importance of making broad context decisions when spending hundreds of millions of dollars and the need to give careful consideration for long term site use in a county where land is our scarcest resource.

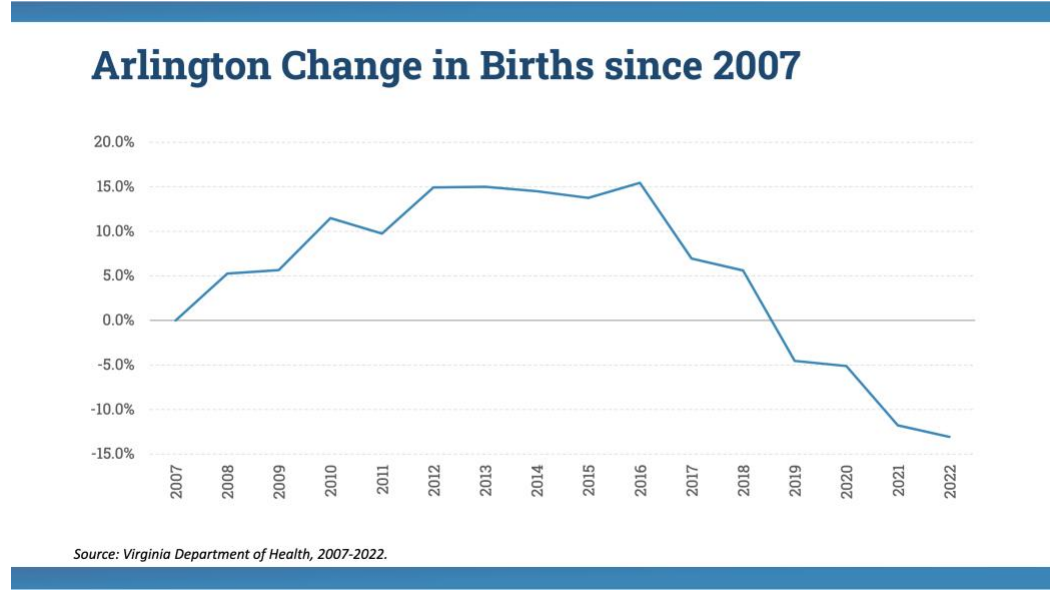
Thank you,

Stacy Snyder, JFAC Chair

Wells Harrell, JFAC Vice-Chair

## ADDITIONAL DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

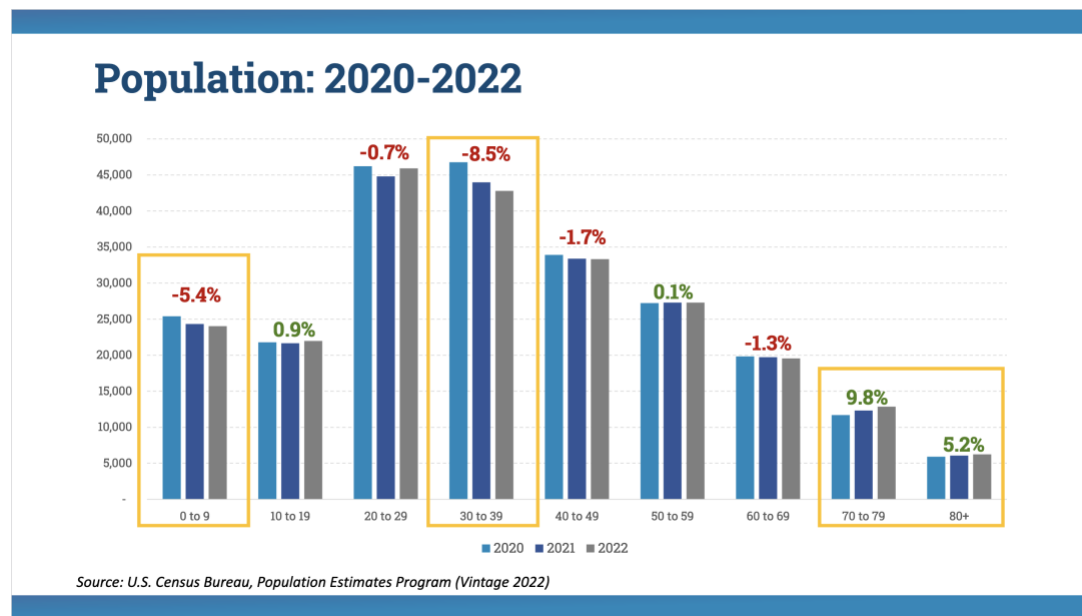
### CHART 1



Source:

[https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/commissions/documents/jfac/jfac\\_acg\\_demographic\\_update\\_2024-02-28.pdf](https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/commissions/documents/jfac/jfac_acg_demographic_update_2024-02-28.pdf), Slide 22

### CHART 2

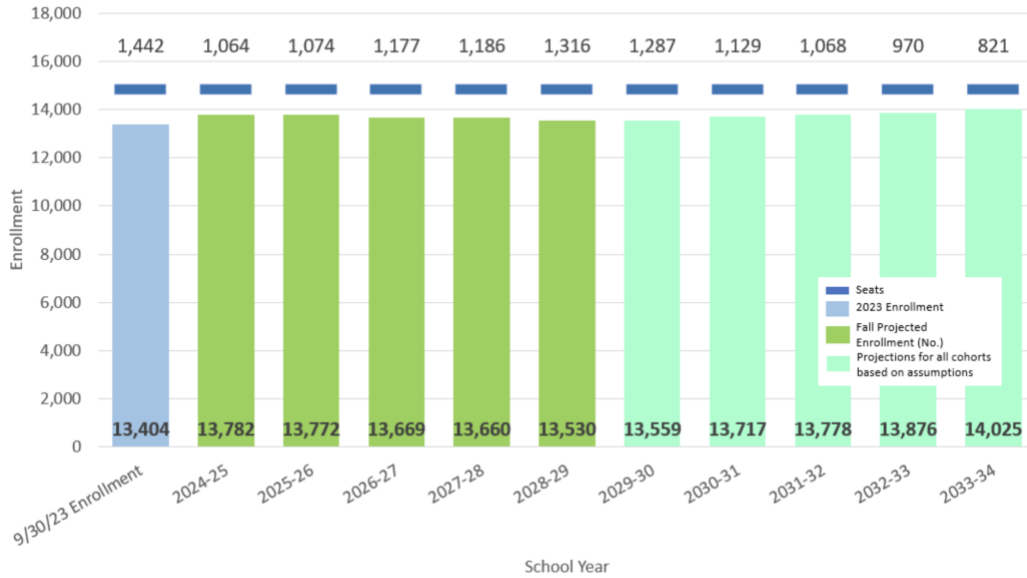


Source:

[https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/commissions/documents/jfac/jfac\\_acg\\_demographic\\_update\\_2024-02-28.pdf](https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/commissions/documents/jfac/jfac_acg_demographic_update_2024-02-28.pdf), Slide 13

### CHART 3

**DRAFT - Projected Difference Between Elementary (PreK-5) Students and Building Design Seat Capacity Over the Next Decade**

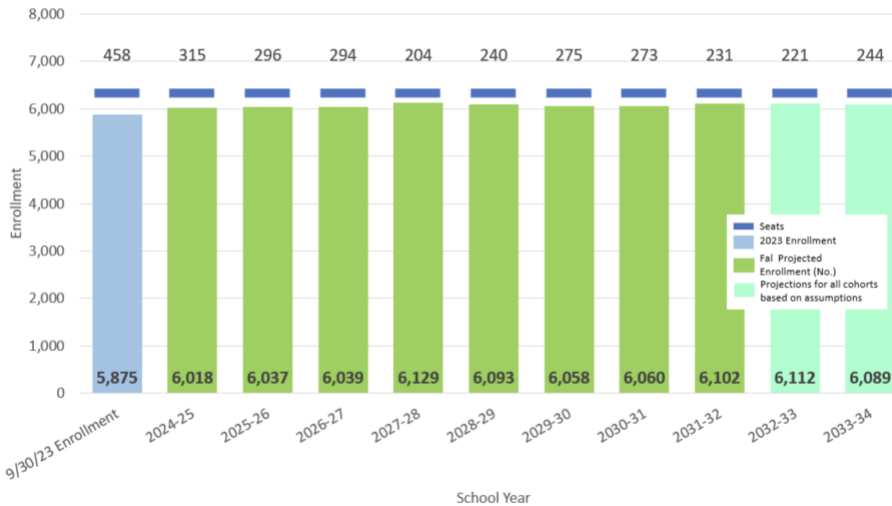


Note: Elementary enrollment for all projection years (2024 to 2033) includes maximum PreK allocations for FY 2025 and excludes PreK Dual Enroll students.

Source: "JFAC Response 5.15.24" p 6

### CHART 4

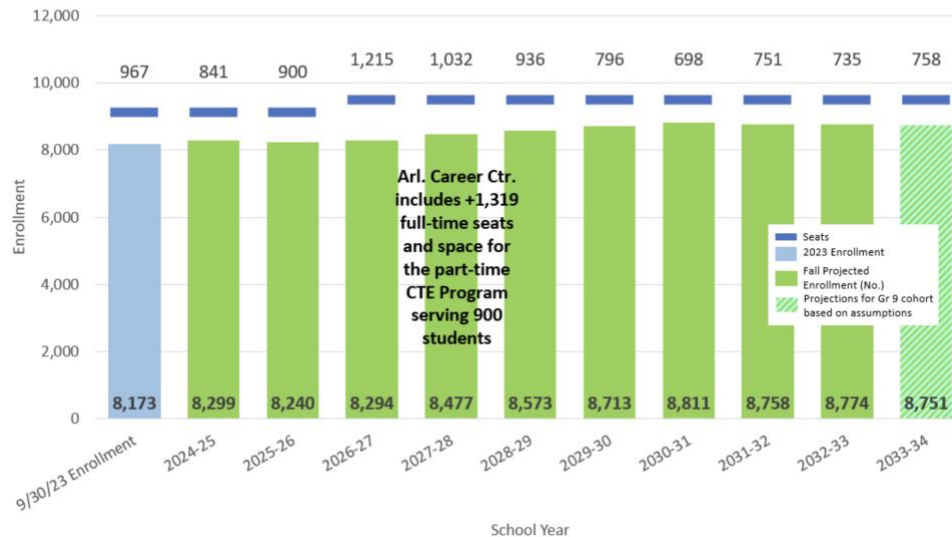
**DRAFT - Projected Difference Between Middle School Students and Building Design Seat Capacity Over the Next Decade**



Source: "JFAC Response 5.15.24" p 6

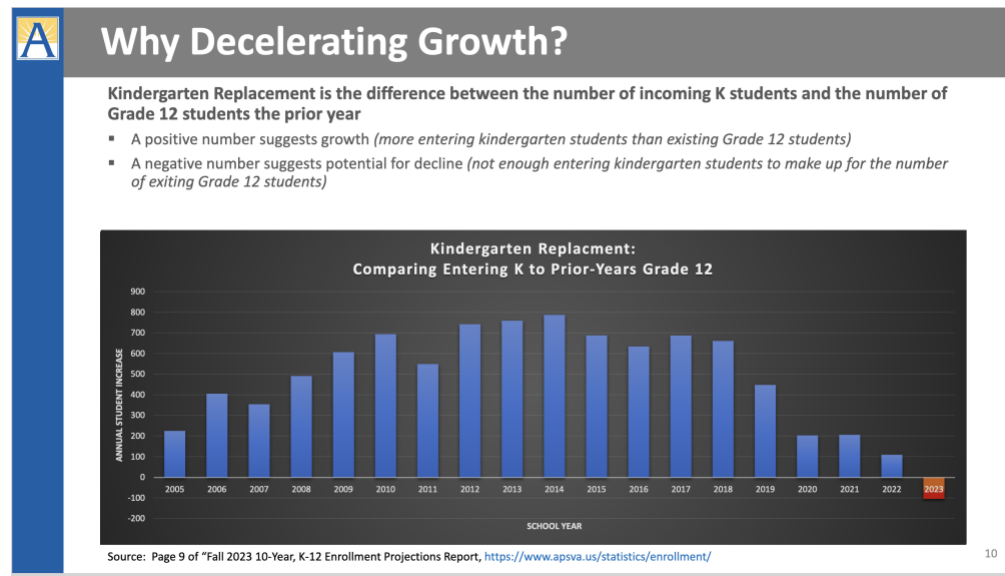
## CHART 5

**DRAFT - Projected Difference Between High School Students and Building Design Seat Capacity Over the Next Decade**



Source: "JFAC Response 5.15.24", p 7

## CHART 6

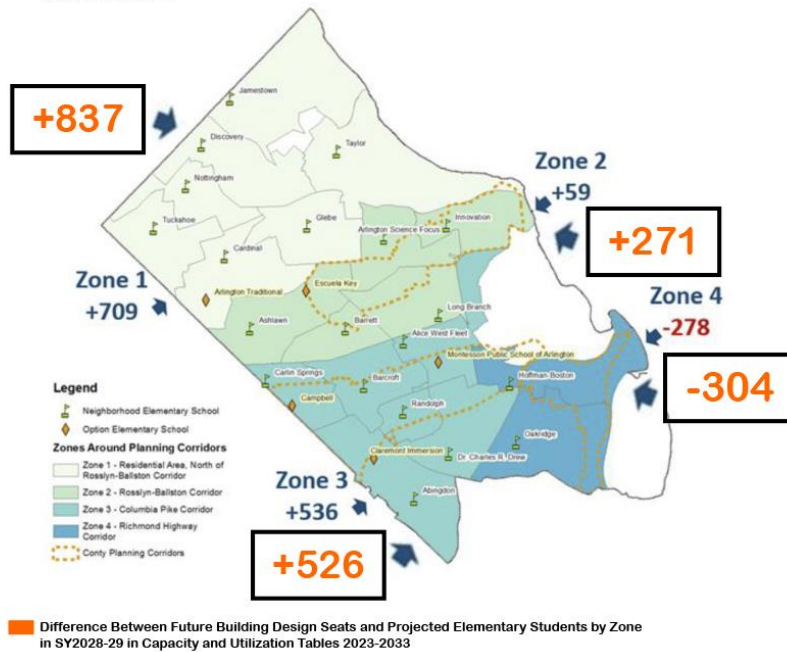


Source:

[https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/2/commissions/documents/jfac/jfac\\_aps\\_projections\\_2024-02-28.pdf](https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/2/commissions/documents/jfac/jfac_aps_projections_2024-02-28.pdf), slide 10

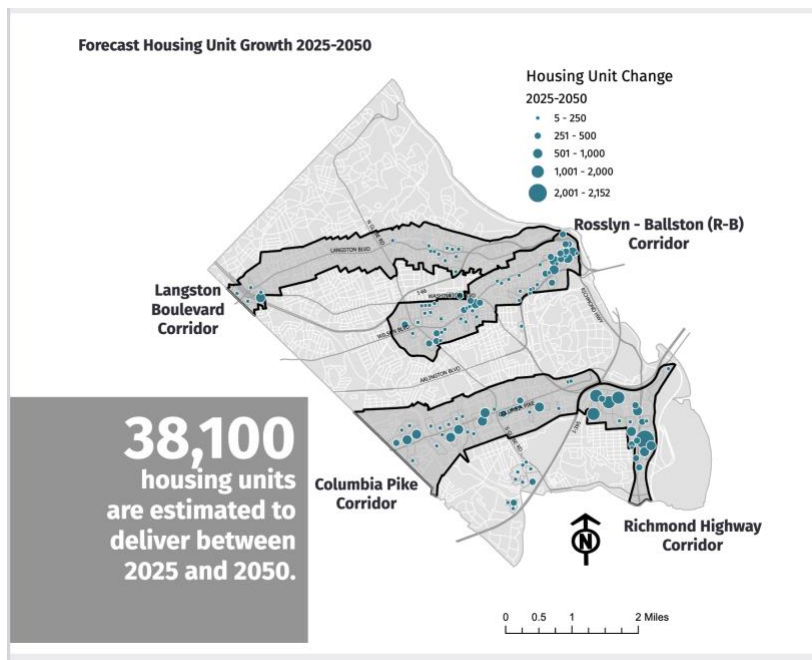
## CHART 7

Figure 2. Difference Between Future Building Design Seats and Projected Elementary Students by Zone in School Year 2027-28



Original Map: <https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2023/06/Pre-CIP-Report-2024-2033-Finalv2.pdf>, p. 15; Difference Numbers: <https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2024/03/Capacity-Utilization-Tables-2023-to-2033-for-website.pdf>, p 4

## CHART 8



Source: [https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/3/projects/documents/data-and-research/profile/profile\\_report\\_2024\\_final\\_4\\_3\\_24.pdf](https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/3/projects/documents/data-and-research/profile/profile_report_2024_final_4_3_24.pdf), Slide 19