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To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments on Arlington County's Public Land for Public Good process. I presently serve as chair of the Arlington Public Schools Advisory Council on School Facilities and Capital Improvements, commonly known as the FAC. Previously I served Arlington County as a member of the Transportation Commission, the Parks and Recreation Commission, and as a member of the Master Transportation Planning Task Force. Although I will be discussing the work of the FAC, I write in my personal capacity as a citizen of Arlington.

The FAC is comprised of citizens appointed by the School Board. Its purpose is to advise the School Board on matters related to school capacity, capital needs, and minor construction and major maintenance. The FAC and its individual members have played significant roles in recent years assisting APS with community outreach, evaluating potential boundary changes, reviewing options for capacity development, and serving on multiple Building Level Planning Committees, Public Facilities Review Committees (PFRCs) and other community processes. Members of the FAC currently serve on both the Western Rosslyn Area Planning Study (WRAPS) and the Jefferson Working Group.

Over the past several years, the FAC has offered advice and support to APS and the School Board on how to ensure that APS is achieving its goal of providing an optimal learning environment for all students. With the guidance and direction of the School Board, the FAC has focused on how best to:

- Manage resources efficiently and effectively;
- Provide safe and healthy spaces that engage students in active and meaningful ways;
- Manage the effects of growth to ensure that all students, teachers, and staff have access to quality facilities, resources, and instructional programs; and
- Include environmental stewardship by designing or redesigning facilities to be energy-efficient and sustainable.
- Provide facilities that allow APS to offer a range of programs and services

Most FAC members have invested a significant amount of time over the past few years in support of APS, particularly as it relates to the More Seats for More Students initiative.

The FAC has shared with Superintendent Murphy and members of the School Board various analyses and observations regarding the need for APS and Arlington County to engage in comprehensive planning to address present and future school facilities needs. I summarize some of these recommendations below and add my own comments.

## **Projected Capacity Needs**

APS is growing. This is a testament to the quality of our schools and teachers, but it is also a result of rapid growth in the county at large during the past few decades. Currently, we can expect approximately 1,400 12th grade students to graduate over the next several years. As these students graduate, however, they will be replaced with larger and larger cohorts – more than 2,100 new students in kindergarten each year – for an increase of 700 to 800 – students annually. Put another way, Arlington is adding the equivalent of an entire elementary school every year.

This year, the numbers climbed even higher. According to the September 30th count, APS grew 5.2 percent over the 2013-14 enrollment, an increase of 1,213 more students. If these trends continue, APS will grow to an all-time high of over 30,000 students by 2023, an increase of more than 6,000 students over today's enrollment. That is in addition to the 2,600 students that APS already added between 2006 and 2013.

Based on these numbers, APS expect to be short at least 1,900 elementary seats, 1,600 middle school seats, and 2,800 high school seats by 2023. These numbers are based on known children and predictable capture rates. Even if enrollment levels off or declines in the future, APS will face major capacity challenges for at least the next decade and likely beyond.

## **The Need for Comprehensive Planning**

In a letter to Superintendent Murphy in February 2013, the FAC urged increased dialogue between APS and the County and called for a master planning process to address critical capacity needs in a more strategic manner. Specifically, the FAC said:

APS is in need of an interdisciplinary review of its present facilities and future construction to ensure that we are offering programs and services that meet our vision and can provide them in locations that best serve our community. A facilities master plan that takes into account APS educational goals and County planning priorities would inform and guide both the County and the School Board.

*See Letter from Janine Velasco, Chair of FAC to Superintendent Patrick Murphy (Feb. 15, 2013). In that letter the FAC noted, in pertinent part, that*

- Currently Arlington lacks a master plan for facilities that takes into account overarching goals for the educational needs of the County's children in light of projected growth.
- The FAC has seen a continuing tension between the schools and the county government, related to facilities planning. County officials have lamented that the APS planning process is often independent of the general county planning process. School officials have requested broader review of county properties for future

facilities needs. Increased collaboration will be required to meet current and future enrollment challenges.

- APS and the County should improve efforts to coordinate the use of buildings, fields, and open spaces. Residents do not differentiate between whether buildings and play areas are managed by the County or by APS.
- Planning for future enrollment increases across Arlington Schools will require us to be proactive but also innovative and flexible in how we design spaces.
- Facilities planning must go beyond mere infrastructure to consider how best to offer a range of innovative programs and services.

*Id.* At the time, the FAC urged formation of a multi-disciplinary working group comprised of citizen commission leaders and staff representing both APS and the County to begin the longer-term process of envisioning where we might locate schools and programs to maximize benefits to Arlington residents. Unfortunately, adequate long-term planning for schools is not being done.

In January of this year the FAC wrote to the School Board about the County's Public Land for Public Good process which had just been announced, stating:

On behalf of the FAC, we urge the School Board to encourage the County Board to include schools in their evaluation of public lands for affordable housing and other uses, and where possible, consider whether co-location of schools and housing is feasible. We hope that such a study will lead to better housing and school planning in general, so that all neighborhoods are adequately served by new and expanded school facilities and programs.

Letter from Janine Velasco and Jason Rylander, FAC Chair and Vice-Chair to the Hon. Abigail Raphael, Chair, Arlington School Board (Jan. 27, 2014). The FAC further stated that: "we are aware of no comprehensive analysis of public lands that could potentially accommodate new school facilities. We believe such an analysis is overdue." *Id.* The FAC also expressed its interest in the possible co-location of schools, housing, and open space, noting that "there may be win-win solutions that provide needed space for school as well as housing, but we will not find them if we approach these goals in isolation." *Id.*

To that end, I am pleased that Arlington County has undertaken this Public Land for Public Good process, and that the County Board acknowledges its "responsibility to assure that land decisions consider how best to provide what the community needs—schools, parks, recreational opportunities, and facilities." ACB Resolution (Dec. 13, 2013). Although the School Board ultimately is responsible for managing school capacity and programs, new school planning cannot solely be the job of the School Board.

To the extent that new schools are required, APS simply does not own property sufficient to house our growing student population. Were APS to attempt to add capacity solely through additions to existing schools, it would likely lack the resources to manage the necessary public processes and finance so many projects. Moreover, not every APS site is amenable to an addition due to various site constraints. Most existing buildings were not

designed to allow for additions above the existing structure, which means that expansion necessarily encroaches on green space. Additionally, where additional stories could be added it is often not possible to vacate the building or complete a project while classes are not in session. Addressing Arlington's school capacity needs in a manner that improves our community and respects our public spaces requires a closer partnership between APS and Arlington County.

## **Recommendations**

Arlington County as a whole must do a better job planning for long-term community needs, particularly the siting of new school facilities. Over the past few years, many citizens have participated in APS's More Seats for More Students process. Time and again, community members have raised questions about potential sites for schools. Some of the sites that have been frequently mentioned are not APS-owned.

I have found that the average citizen does not differentiate between APS-owned property and County-owned property and does not understand why this distinction matters. This is especially true where county parkland and school sites abut each other. Consequently, many citizens are frustrated that sites they believe could play a role in addressing our capacity needs are not being discussed openly in recent school planning processes. Adding to the confusion, discussions between school and county staff regarding site options are far from transparent. Parents and other citizens are often left with more questions than answers and do not understand why what they believe may be more optimal solutions are not considered.

While I commend the County for beginning to evaluate potential uses of public land for schools, housing, and other needs, to date the Public Land for Public Good review process has shortchanged our schools. So far only three county properties are being considered for further study for schools as compared with eight sites for housing. The three sites that emerged this spring, most notably Wilson and Jefferson, came out of closed-door negotiations late in an ongoing public process, upheaving the expectations of citizens already engaged in evaluation of then-available options. Unfortunately this has only served to decrease public confidence in the selection process. These and potentially other sites could have been part of a broader community discussion much earlier.

I believe we can and must do better. I recommend the County and APS take the following steps: 1) Expand the evaluation criteria for new school sites; 2) Develop a long-term vision for school facilities; 3) Preserve green space through longer-term planning and innovative design; 4) Improve working relationships between APS and Arlington County; and 5) Improve public communication and outreach on potential sites.

### **1. Expand Evaluation Criteria for New Schools**

Out of 678 publicly owned properties, school and county staff to date have managed to identify only three sites for further consideration for public schools in the Public Land for Public Good process. Each of these is already an APS-owned site but would require use

of adjacent county land to add capacity: Wilson School, Thomas Jefferson Middle School, and the Career Center/Fenwick.

Why only three sites? It seems to me that the evaluation criteria outlined in the May 13, 2014 memorandum to the Arlington County Board are overly restrictive and lack a rational basis. This has unnecessarily limited the conversation on future school siting.

First, the criteria were developed without any meaningful public involvement. Second, consequently, the criteria do not appear to reflect the public's priorities. Third, the criteria themselves were presented with no explanation or rationale that might shed light on their inclusion.

For example, why should sites be limited to "an existing school site adjacent to more than one acre of County Board-owned property?" While there may be some operational efficiencies to co-locating schools on the same property, there are also challenges, including increased traffic and congestion. We need to be looking instead at areas with the most critical need, and areas where future development may lead to further growth in enrollment.

Similarly, why the restriction on sites smaller than 3.5 acres? We are urbanizing and will increasingly need to explore urban model schools. Not every program necessarily requires the field space such a restriction implies. Without further explanation 3.5 acres appears to be an arbitrary limitation.

Notwithstanding the County's innovative and successful smart growth efforts, why should we be limiting consideration of new school sites to those within 1 mile of a Metro station or ¼ mile of the Primary Transit Network? Is this a logical restriction for, say, the siting of a neighborhood elementary school? Restricting options to sites located centrally within the County may make sense for some programs but it may also unduly limit options and fail to address crowding in areas of most critical need.

Finally, APS and the County should consider sites it does not own for possible acquisition from willing sellers or if need be by eminent domain. To the extent that intact parcels of undeveloped or underdeveloped land remain in the county, the County Board should consider strategic acquisition of these properties to meet community needs and do so in as efficient a manner as possible.

*The County and APS should expand the criteria and consider additional locations for both current and future needs.*

## **2. Develop a long-term vision for school facilities**

APS lacks a long-term plan for managing its anticipated growth. In the rush to meet immediate needs, APS has not taken the time to develop a comprehensive vision for growth. In part, this is because of the pressing need to accommodate incoming students. We must be prepared to meet the influx of kids as they arrive and it takes time to plan

even one new school or addition. But APS's ability to engage in long-term planning has also been constrained by the County in that it has not been able to fully evaluate non-APS sites and include them in a broader community discussion about how and where to grow. To the extent that sites have been on the table, APS staff have expressed concerns that working with the County in joint planning exercises will take years more than we have to build needed seats for incoming students.

Rather than cast blame across the political divide, we should admit that Arlington *as a community* lacks a comprehensive vision for where our schools and public facilities should be located and how they should be used. If we are now planning for a 30,000-student system, which we should acknowledge we are, what would be the best allocation of buildings and programs around the county? What are the optimum locations for neighborhood and choice schools, middle schools, and high schools? The School Board has taken some steps to address these questions but it has not answered them comprehensively.

What are the optimum sizes for elementary and secondary schools? The School Board has expressed a preference that elementary schools not exceed 700-750 students, middle schools 1,300 students, and high schools 2,200 students. While these numbers in part reflect pedagogical concerns, they also must take into account that Arlington County has limited space for growth.

These targets are important because if the goal is to maintain middle schools at roughly 800 students (their present building capacity) and a total middle school population of 6,000 students is projected, then seven schools are needed to house them. If instead you build middle schools to accommodate 1,300 students, then you need five larger buildings. School size is thus a factor of available land and resources. In other words, to maintain current sized middle schools, APS would need to build middle schools at both Wilson and Stratford (if those are the available choices) and move H-B Woodlawn somewhere else. Or APS can build instead one 1,300-seat school at one location (i.e. Wilson or Stratford if those are the available options), and if needed, add on to the other schools, recognizing that in this scenario not all middle schools in the county will be equally sized.

Why is comprehensive planning so important? Let us consider, using the last CIP and More Seats for More Students process as examples, how difficult it can be to make decisions in a vacuum.

Two years ago, when APS was considering its recommendations for the 2012 CIP, it included Kenmore/Carlin Springs and Williamsburg as the "preferred" sites for new elementary schools and it recommended additions at McKinley, Ashlawn, and Arlington Traditional School. These sites were chosen after APS undertook a multi-year process to evaluate every site it owned to determine where additions or new buildings might be feasible.

Had other properties been part of the discussion at that time, APS might have made different choices. Indeed, two years later, when the County identified Jefferson as a possible location for a new school, APS abandoned its plan to build at Kenmore/Carlin Springs (which was a problematic site to begin with due to the number of schools already on or near the site) and proposed siting its second new elementary school at Jefferson. Now a public process is underway to further evaluate the Jefferson site after which the County will presumably decide whether and to what extent APS can use portions of the site. If Jefferson is not chosen, APS will be forced to negotiate for some additional yet unnamed site or build additions at multiple elementary schools.

Similarly, in the 2012 CIP process, the Wilson site often came up in public debate. At the time the School Board and County Board were considering selling the property and APS would not consider it for an elementary school. It might have been a good location for an elementary school, but having now moved forward with Williamsburg, the need for an elementary school in that location is no longer as acute as it might have been. And, now that selling the site is no longer attractive, Wilson is itself being considered for a middle school or as a site for a relocated H-B Woodlawn middle and high school.

During that process much debate also centered on the Reed School which some believed was ideally situated to address elementary school capacity as it is located in a community that has experiencing the greatest degree of crowding in its neighborhood schools. At the same time, the combination of Reed's recent construction and public expectations resulting from prior community processes raised concerns. The Reed site was rebuilt in 2009 to LEED standards, in partnership with the County and the broader community, to house a new Westover Library and special programs that generate minimal capacity for APS.

Now as APS has moved forward with a new school at Williamsburg and additions at McKinley and Ashlawn, the result is that Reed may no longer be geographically attractive for addressing elementary school crowding when one considers appropriate neighborhood boundaries in that part of the county. Nonetheless, Reed remains an APS site that is underutilized with programs that do not help address capacity. That is why it has come up again in this year's process as a potential site for a relocated H-B Woodlawn middle and high school. That, in turn, would free up the Stratford building for up to a 1,300 seat middle school.

Many of APS's decisions could be viewed as the most logical of limited options. But each decision potentially forecloses other decisions that might have made for a better longer-term allocation of resources. In the absence of a broader vision, we are making short-term decisions that may or may not stand the test of time. It is essential that we develop a long-term plan for location of schools so that the decisions we make today do not unduly constrain us tomorrow.

*APS and the County must coordinate on a long-term vision for the siting and use of school facilities to address our capacity needs and provide critical amenities for the community.*

### **3) Preserve green space through longer-term planning and innovative design**

Unless APS or Arlington County acquire or make available sites that are already developed, it will not be possible to meet our capacity needs without impacting open space. New schools require land for buildings, play space, and parking. Additions to existing schools necessarily will devour open space. No matter how carefully one plans to minimize impact on core fields and amenities, there will be some, and often significant, loss of open play space.

That said, with long-term planning and adequate resources, we can recapture open space over time by demolishing sprawling one or two-story buildings and reconstructing them as multi-story urban campus. Arlington is urbanizing rapidly. Many of our school and county facilities could be rebuilt in a more compact, environmentally friendly manner. Co-location of school and housing could also be an option, in more dense locations housing could even be constructed on top of a school facility.

A broader open space master plan or public facilities master plan could identify sites where, over time, we could regain and expand parks and open space. I believe having such a plan in place would help to address some of the concerns that open space will be lost forever in the process of constructing schools, housing, and other amenities.

*APS and the County should develop a master plan that considers replacement and reconstruction of existing buildings to regain open space in the future.*

### **5. Improve public communication and outreach on potential sites**

The FAC has advised the School Board and APS staff to develop more robust public processes for evaluating school sites and making decisions. The More Seats for More Students process, with its website, surveys, and community meetings, has helped to inform APS families and the broader community of the challenges we face and options we have to address them.

Nonetheless, as APS moves forward with multiple projects its future options will grow more limited and more controversial. None of the options for addressing middle school crowding have met with unqualified support. The coming debate over high school expansion at the Career Center or other locations is also likely to be robust.

Transparency is important. The public wants to know what sites are under consideration and they want to understand the criteria that will be used to make decisions. When a decision is made they expect a rational explanation of the decision. Throughout the process the public wants to be involved and they want their voices heard.

A critical first step is to lift the shroud of secrecy that often hangs over negotiations between APS and the County. It is imperative that APS and County staff work together collaboratively to identify locations for schools, plan their construction, and address the

use of these community facilities. But the public cannot be completely shut out while these discussions are underway. Repeatedly, citizens have been told that certain sites are not “on the table” or “cannot be discussed publicly” due to ongoing negotiations between our county and school governments. With due respect for the occasional need for circumspection, the lack of openness is, from a citizen group perspective, remarkably frustrating. To the maximum extent possible, community planning must be an open exercise.

If Arlington can develop a facilities master plan that identifies as best as possible future locations for development, we can better involve the public, which will have notice and a better understanding of what choices are likely to be made. Most importantly, a greater sense of the whole should help our elected officials make better decisions.

### **Conclusion**

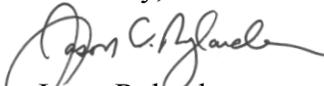
Schools are among our greatest community resources. Not only do they provide safe learning environments for our youth, the buildings and fields are widely used by the community as a whole. The construction of a new school or addition necessarily concerns students, parents, neighbors, civic associations and the county as a whole. It involves a tremendous commitment of capital and, if done right, will last for fifty years or more. By building our schools we are shaping the future of Arlington.

If we are going to meet the needs of our children, preserve and enhance our public land, and provide services to all our residents, Arlington County and APS need to plan together. Currently, Arlington County does not adequately consider the schools impacts of its development plans. To that end, site plans could include a schools impact statement and conditions or proffers that could address that impact. Likewise, APS needs to better articulate its vision for managing a 30,000-student system and develop public planning processes that lead to optimal facilities outcomes.

Effective planning cannot be left to chance. As APS works to house its growing enrollment today, together we must also identify the options of the future and retain the flexibility to meet tomorrow’s needs and secure the long-term health of our community.

Thank you for consideration of my views.

Sincerely,



Jason Rylander