

Date: January 28, 2021

To: Board of Directors, Arlington County Civic Federation

From: Mary Glass & Eric Ackerman, ACCF Environmental Affairs Committee

Subject: Report on the Public Collaborative on Tree Preservation in Arlington – 11/30/20 to 12/14/20

Purpose. The purpose of this collaborative was to understand the nature of the issues (e.g., economic, legal, policy and environmental) involved in preserving and expanding the tree canopy in Arlington. It was intended as a scoping study to inform further public action. The process was designed and implemented in a manner that encouraged listening to and considering all points of view.

Collaborative Process. A series of three 90-minute virtual meetings were held on the evenings of November 30, December 7, and December 14, 2020. These meetings were facilitated by Eric Ackerman, an ACCF delegate and Environmental Affairs Committee member with experience conducting public collaboratives to build actionable public consensus. Nineteen citizens and subject matter experts participated, representing five key stakeholder sectors:

1. Builders and realtors
2. Conservation/environmental advocates
3. County staff relevant to tree preservation
4. Members of several Civic Associations representing their neighborhoods
5. A Virginia state legislator.

The method was:

1. To identify participants' needs and concerns related to trees,
2. To prioritize the issues identified,
3. To consider potential approaches to solving, addressing, or mitigating top priority issues.

The development of strategies for solution was limited both by the on-line format, and by the limited time for discussion. Moreover, because this was a scoping study the process was designed to focus issues for greater public attention, not develop specific policy recommendations.

The issue priorities identified by the collaborative are reflected in Attachment A. Top priority "needs" were identified as:

- New tools for preservation, erosion, storm water management
- Incentives for developers
- Funding for tree programs, natural areas, land acquisition
- Better maintenance of trees and new plantings
- Planting more trees with an increase in the diversity of species
- The need for more County leadership re. preservation, education
- The need to address diminished canopy in South Arlington.

Summary notes reflecting the discussions, including additional needs and concerns, are included in Attachments B through E.

Results. Discussions that occurred during the collaborative suggest that we are failing to preserve our tree canopy. Due to a lack of consistent tree preservation strategy in the County, and the effects of "by-right" infill

development, the canopy is being reduced inexorably at an increasing rate. While the loss is more pronounced in some neighborhoods, e.g., South Arlington, Lyon Park and others, the impact is felt across the entire County.

Discussions suggest a range of causes as starting points for the development of strategies for solution/mitigation. Strategies should address:

- An observed lack of consistent focus and management by the County,
- Inadequate financial and other resources for tree programs and activities,
- Inadequate developer incentives for tree preservation due to regulatory issues
- Inadequate zoning requirements and enforcement, and
- The need for full recognition and better enforcement of all existing regulatory tools available to preserve and enhance Arlington's tree canopy.

Recommended Next Steps. Participants in this collaborative recommended two essential next steps, as follows:

1. Immediately identify and take action on tree preservation and planting options which the County can pursue without the need for further legislative authority. These might include but are not limited to:
 - Granting more flexibility to builders regarding use permits and zoning exceptions where a good case can be made that such flexibility will save trees.
 - Providing parking fee exemptions for on-street temporary storage of building equipment and materials to protect trees and roots from damage.
 - Expanding education for homeowners regarding the full range of benefits from trees and tree maintenance
 - Developing and using better County-wide data to manage and plan for the urban tree canopy and related stormwater issues, e.g., enhanced, state-of-the-art remote sensing and integration into online data systems available to the public
 - Updating and completing the inventory of individual trees on public land and private land subject to permitting, with tagging and prior public notice required for all trees to be removed from public land.
 - Designating a "Tree Czar" sufficiently senior to traverse organizational lines across departments to coordinate tree policy within the County and advocate for new legislative authorities, as needed.
2. Facilitate a broader public participation in public and private venues to build consensus regarding tree preservation strategies. Such a discussion should consider all viable options which might include some of the following as well as others identified during assessment:
 - Updating and streamlining permitting procedures to a) encourage tree preservation as the starting point for site planning, and b) create incentives for design innovations that save trees.
 - Providing stormwater credits for trees, using methodologies consistent with those being developed by the VA Department of Environmental Quality.
 - Updating zoning requirements to better protect trees.
 - Creating a Special Working Group to determine new legislative authorities that are needed and advocate for them in Richmond.
 - Organizing a Task Force to address neighborhoods most impacted by the loss of trees such as South Arlington to encourage environmental equity.

Leaders' Closing Comments:

As mentioned above this series of workshops was intended as a scoping study to first get ideas on the table and subsequently get a sense of the general priorities for which needs and concerns to address first. While it was not possible to explore solutions to priorities in detail in only 270 minutes, it was possible to get a clear sense of the group expressing their serious concern regarding the current status of the urban tree canopy in Arlington. They also expressed their consensus that there is an urgent need to act immediately on the issues that they have identified.

The participants commented that while they found the discussions educational and productive, there was a strong urge to move forward to further develop real solutions from this preliminary work. They endorsed the benefits of this process hosted by the Environmental Affairs Committee and welcomed follow-on work on the issues identified. We were pleased that the participants were respectful and produced a good roadmap for the many stakeholders in Arlington's trees. This background information is only to inform future investigations. It does not reflect the policy position of individual participants, the ACCF or its members.

Attachments:

A – Priorities identified during first meeting on 11/30/20

B – November 30, 2020 meeting notes

C – December 7, 2020 - Overview of the Meeting

D – December 7, 2020 Detailed Meeting notes

E – December 14, 2020 Meeting Overview

F – Additional Background Materials