RESOLUTION: STUDY OF LOT COVERAGE /HEIGHT/SETBACK PROVISIONS OF ZONING ORDINANCE

APPROVED: 9 JUN 2026; 42 'YEA', 0 'NAY', 1 ABSTENTION

Resolution by the Planning and Zoning Committee of the Arlington County Civic Federation (ACCF), Brian Harner, Chair, plan.zone.chair@civfed.org; Bill Richardson POC, lotcov.sc.chair@civfed.org. Introduced for consideration by the General Membership at the 12 May 2026 General Membership Meeting and approved by the General Membership at the 9 June 2026 Annual General Membership Meeting.

1. **WHEREAS,** in 2004, Arlington's Urban Forest Master Plan recognized that most of the County's urban forest lies on private property, "in low density residential neighborhoods," and that tree "[p]reservation needs to be a higher priority";[1]
2. **WHEREAS,** in November 2005 the Arlington County Board (Board) amended the Arlington County Zoning Ordinance (ACZO) to "address the issues of unusually large and out of character one-family houses in the County";[2] and in considering that 2005 amendment, County staff also recognized that concerns about the height of such houses "merit further study,"[3] but the County has never since initiated that study;
3. **WHEREAS,** in the 2014 Stormwater Master Plan, Arlington County staff recognized that notwithstanding the 2005 ACZO amendment "the issue of single family home redevelopment and lot coverage deserves a more comprehensive look," given that such redevelopment represented nearly 60% of the impervious cover increases associated with all County regulated development activity from FY 2010 to FY 2013, with "the impervious footprint of single-family parcels increased by an average of 50 percent";[4]
4. **WHEREAS,** the staff's Online Engagement Summary of comments in 2020 on the prospective Forestry & Natural Resources Plan (FNRP) identified as major themes the need to "[f]ind ways to discourage or limit development and impervious surfaces," to "[d]iscourage development of large homes on small lots," to "[i]ncrease or strengthen requirements for tree protection," and to "[p]lace restrictions on single-family home sizes";[5]
5. **WHEREAS,** a majority of the Board requested a study of lot coverage limits at a February 2022 work session but no study was initiated;
6. **WHEREAS,** in November 2023, the Forestry and Natural Resources Commission cited "a worrisome recent decline in the County's precious tree canopy," and urged the Board to "immediately" begin "the process of re-examining rules for lot coverage and setbacks"[6]. The FNRP adopted by the Board in December 2023 specifically required staff to conduct a study of lot coverage limits, including but not limited to (a) "[w]hat does and does not count as lot coverage", (b) "[w]hether to set a square footage cap on lot coverage in addition to the percentage cap," and (c) "[w]hether to tie lot coverage regulations to a lot size rather than its zoning district";[7]
7. **WHEREAS,** in April 2024, following the request of numerous civic organizations[8], the Board directed staff to initiate a study and devoted FY 2025 budget funding to it;
8. **WHEREAS,** ACCF's October 2024 Resolution on Climate Adaptation expressly "supports the Forestry and Natural Resources Plan and a specific implementation plan and metrics to track its priorities," which included such a lot coverage study;[9]
9. **WHEREAS,** from FY 2009 to FY 2019, 1,245 single-family detached homes in Arlington were torn down and replaced with homes averaging 4,750 square feet, or more than three times the average size of the existing homes;[10]

10. **WHEREAS,** the accelerating loss of mature trees poses a significant obstacle to the County's priority goal of reestablishing and maintaining an overall 40% tree canopy,[11] since most tree canopy lies on private property in low density residential neighborhoods;
11. **WHEREAS,** ongoing and irreparable damage also extends to additional concerns, including (a) reducing the County's diminishing inventory of more affordable homes; (b) disproportionately impacting much smaller adjacent homes, particularly on oversized lots;[12] and (c) impeding residents' access to solar energy sources;
12. **WHEREAS,** at the November 2024 work session with the Board, County staff acknowledged that the significant increases in impervious surfaces in single-family home redevelopment have been primarily due to the expanding size of building footprints, rather than increases in other impervious surfaces;[13]
13. **WHEREAS,** County staff have recognized in April 2026 that for 99% of single-family home lots, the footprint of the buildings is almost twice the combined area of the other impervious surfaces;[14]
14. **WHEREAS,** in 2025 the Board reversed course and abandoned the commitments it made in the FNRP for a comprehensive lot coverage study,[15] and, instead, directed staff to conduct a study of impervious surface limits only, and not to study the size or height calculation for single-family building structures,[16] providing no way to address the market incentives for builders to continue with such large redevelopment projects;

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Arlington County Civic Federation requests that the Board promptly take the following actions to address this longstanding problem, and to forestall continuing irreparable damage from it, as follows:

1. Return to the Board's prior commitment to undertake a comprehensive study of lot coverage for single-family homes, as it directed in the December 2023 FNRP;
2. Revise the Board's charge to the staff to mandate such a study and include the following additional questions:
   a. whether to reduce the building footprint limits in the lot coverage provisions of the Zoning Ordinance,
   b. how to address oversized lots,
   c. whether to eliminate or modify the 3% and 5% extra lot coverage now permitted for front porches and detached rear garages,
   d. whether to exclude for lot coverage purposes steeper unbuildable portions of the lot, where applicable,
   e. whether to revise the height calculation for single-family homes, and
   f. whether to amend the setback provisions of the Zoning Ordinance applicable to single-family homes to preserve and protect tree canopy and the viewsheds of adjacent homes;
3. Direct staff and their consultants to engage ACCF, builders, and other representative stakeholders during the course of this study; and
4. Complete the revised study by December 2026, coupled with recommendations to the Board on how to address these issues in proposed amendments to the Zoning Ordinance, including whether and how to grandfather existing structures or modifications thereof from the application of any such amendments, with consideration of how the Board addressed these issues in its 2005 amendments.

---

[1] Department of Parks, Recreation & Cultural Resources, Urban Forest Master Plan (2004), at 15.
[2] County Board Agenda Item, Meeting of Nov. 15, 2005, dated Nov. 2, 2005, at 4.
[3] County Board Agenda Item, Meeting of Feb. 12, 2005, dated Feb. 8, 2005, at 4.
[4] Stormwater Master Plan, adopted Sept. 20, 2014, at 60.

[5] Department of Parks and Recreation, Forestry and Natural Resources Plan Online Engagement Summary (released April 2021), at 16-17.
[6] Letter from Phil Klingelhofer, Chair, Forestry and Natural Resources Commission, to Honorable Christian Dorsey, Chair, Nov. 17, 2023, at 1, 2.
[7] Arlington County Forestry and Natural Resources Plan (adopted Dec. 16, 2023), at 58.
[8] Letter from thirteen civic associations to Libby Garvey, Chair, Mar. 29, 2024.
[9] ACCF, A Resolution on Climate Adaptation, Oct. 29, 2024, at 2.
[10] Missing Middle Housing Study, Housing Market Pressures, Bulletin 2, July 2020, at 8.
[11] Arlington County Forestry and Natural Resources Plan (adopted Dec. 16, 2023), at 16, 32, 48.
[12] For example, of the 65% of lots that are in R-6 districts, 45% of such R-6 lots exceed the 6,000 square-foot minimum by over 1,000 square feet. Low Residential Study, County Board Update, Apr. 22, 2026, at 13-14.
[13] Impervious Surface Dynamics and Trends in Low Residential Areas, Nov. 2024.
[14] For these lots, the building footprints (including accessory structures) range from 1.82 to 1.92 the size of the other impervious surfaces. Low Residential Study, County Board Update, Apr. 22, 2026, at 13, 18.
[15] Low Residential Study (LRS) Project Plan, available at https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/environment/documents/lrs/lrs-project-plan.pdf.
[16] *Id.*