

Unanimous: County Board OKs affordable-housing plan

by SCOTT McCAFFREY, Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, September 21, 2015 7:30 am

Arlington County Board members on Sept. 19 adopted a plan they believe will help stem the exodus of affordable housing out of the community, using tools ranging from additional tax dollars to developer incentives.

The unanimous vote, taken after hours of testimony and discussion, represented the culmination of a three-year process that include a public task force and, in the final weeks, negotiation among board members themselves.

John Vihstadt, who had remained on the fence about the overall package and on the day of the vote said he believed the plan and its implementation framework “fall short in important respects,” nonetheless concluded the pluses outweighed the minuses.

“The plan is a net positive, and an important blueprint for our collective future,” Vihstadt said as the vote approached.

Several other County Board members, whose support for the package never seemed in doubt, said their action presents an opportunity to include affordable housing as a bedrock tenet of Arlington’s commitment to a social safety net.

“While we can’t solve all the problems, we certainly can try,” County Board Vice Chairman Walter Tejada said.

The package had the support of most housing advocates, but some in the community voiced concern about the cost – Arlington already spends far more of its municipal budget on housing than neighboring jurisdictions – and over unforeseen and unanticipated side effects.

Helen Sioris, a resident of Lyon Park since the 1950s, wrote County Board members of her fears that the impact of the plan would be to “incrementally eliminate, ever so slowly, single-family zoning in Arlington” in order to squeeze “more persons into what up to now have been tranquil oases of suburban living.”

Supporters countered that the plan was evolutionary, not revolutionary, since it would use proven tools and try to come up with new ones to achieve housing goals.

“The county has made a concerted effort to respond to concerns raised in recent months,” said VOICE (Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement), which urged County Board members to “recognize the need for action now.”

The Arlington County government has never owned and operated housing for low-income residents, as do Alexandria and Fairfax County. Instead, it works with non-profit housing groups such as AHC Inc. and the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing, often by providing loans through the Affordable Housing Investment Fund. While not required to do so, some developers choose to pour funds into that fund in order to obtain higher zoning for their residential and commercial projects.

County officials acknowledge that passing the housing plan may turn out to be the easy part. And they may be right:

- There will need to be changes to county ordinances to move forward with parts of the plan, and the Arlington government may need to go hat-in-hand to a wary state legislature to win additional powers to implement other facets.
- Implementation of the plan also may face challenges in the current political environment, since advocates for other spending priorities (open space, schools, transportation) have become more aggressive in pushing their agendas, and more willing than in years past to throw sharp elbows at those pressing for competing priorities.
- Making progress stemming the loss of affordable units also will need the buy-in of the development community, which in the past decade has seen projects stalled by lengthy approval processes and what they privately see as micromanaging from county staff, advisory panels and, at times, the County Board itself.



2015 Arlington County Board
Member of the 2015 Arlington County Board: Jay Fisette, Libby Garvey, Chairman Mary Hynes, Vice Chairman Walter Tejada and John Vihstadt.

But before getting into the weeds of implementation, county officials paused to bask in the glow of the plan's passage.

County Board Chairman Mary Hynes – who, like Tejada, is retiring at the end of the year – said concerted efforts to address affordable housing and other social-safety-net issues helps to define the county's character.

“This community has been very concerned about our neighbors,” she said.