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CC: Mr. Mark Schwartz, County Manager countymanager@arlingtonva.us
CC: Arlington County Housing Staff housingarlington@arlingtonva.us

Re: Addressing the Housing Shortage and Affordability Crisis in Arlington

YIMBYs of Northern Virginia strongly urges all members of the Arlington County Board to support the full staff version of the [Missing Middle Housing Study \(MM\) Phase 2 Analysis and Draft Framework](#). Doing so is a crucial first step to systemic reform of land use rules, which is required to help address our region’s housing shortage. Our local grassroots organization’s 700+ members hold deep concern for housing affordability as well as racial justice, access to socio-economic opportunity, and environmental sustainability. Without structural changes to Arlington’s land use rules, these objectives will be impossible to achieve.

Arlington is increasingly unaffordable to individuals and families who are not already affluent. Many residents rely on intergenerational wealth. Even households considered upper-middle class increasingly struggle to afford a home in Arlington. Our region’s housing affordability crisis stems from a [severe shortage](#). MM has the potential to meaningfully address that shortage by enabling diverse housing choices in Arlington. However, getting policy details right will be crucial.

Policy Details Will Make or Break Missing Middle Construction

Board members must take pains to ensure that MM and other medium-density housing are not saddled with additional regulations beyond those applied to single-family detached homes. These regulations might take the form of granular aesthetic standards or parking location rules. Such undue regulation would hinder MM development and cannot be allowed.

The MM Draft Framework in current form is smart policy that sensitively balances various community interests including affordability, tree cover, and stormwater management. We believe specific alterations would yield more housing units while furthering those interests.

Reducing or eliminating the parking requirement for multiplex housing would go a long way to ensuring MM homes are actually built. Builders are shrewd enough to determine how many parking spots to include in a small-scale development. Street parking could be allocated, if the need arose, through a simple permitting or pricing scheme.

As the Phase 2 report notes, residential density uses land efficiently, reducing impermeable surface and other environmental impacts. Allowing up to four stories for all MM housing would

enhance its sustainability and affordability, requiring only minor adjustment to the current 35-foot height limit. Even this change would be quite modest in the context of the housing crisis.

Finally, our leadership team believes board members should at least consider relaxing footprint and mass restrictions for MM housing. We appreciate the political sensitivity of such changes, but they [may ultimately prove necessary](#) to enable significant multiplex construction. With that said, we believe the official estimate of expected MM housing construction is overly conservative.

Affordability and Equity Depend on Eightplexes

About 23% of Arlingtonians live in [detached single-family homes](#), yet only that housing form is [permitted by-right](#) on almost 87% of the County's scarce residential land. Detached single-family homes [occupy](#) more than 73% of Arlington's residential land.

Permitting up to eight units per lot in all of Arlington's current single-family zones would send an important message that multifamily housing is not a nuisance or threat from which other residents must be protected. Unobtrusive pockets of multiplexes and townhomes, and indeed apartment buildings, [already sit alongside single-family homes](#) in Arlington neighborhoods such as GlebeWood, Aurora Highlands, and Lyon Village. People are not a blight.

Eightplexes are critical to housing affordability and equity. County staff estimate that units in a new eightplex would be affordable to 39% of Black or African American households, 39% of Hispanic or Latino households, and 60% of Asian households in the Washington region. Those economics break down for a building of six or four units. Eightplexes would give families at or even below the Area Median Income the chance to build a life they could not otherwise have.

An eightplex with approximately 750-square foot units--the size of a large one-bedroom or small two-bedroom apartment--could become an option for a Community Land Trust, to offer homeownership or rental opportunities to moderate-income households. Or it could be constructed as committed affordable housing by a developer such as Habitat for Humanity. Whether occupied by owners or renters, more MM housing will be an asset to the community.

Affordability goes beyond the price of new units. Even so-called "luxury" housing diverts more affluent residents from competing for less expensive homes. Current residents are displaced when new residents of higher income lack more attractive housing options. Only an acute shortage can explain why old, cramped Arlington homes command seven-figure prices.

Any discussion of housing equity in America must acknowledge that exclusionary single-family zoning was born of [racial and class prejudice](#). Arlington County has an obligation to [reckon with](#) that history and to rectify it. Assuming that individuals who support single-family zoning today are prejudiced would be unfair, but the policy still has discriminatory effects.

Single-Family Zoning Is Unsustainable Economically and Environmentally

Eliminating exclusionary zoning is a first step to making Arlington [more inclusive](#). More families of modest means will gain access to desirable neighborhoods with meaningful economic

and educational opportunity. Fewer school teachers and staff will have to [commute dozens of miles](#) each day to work in the communities where they contribute so much. More low-income retail and service sector workers will be able to live near their jobs. More first responders, sanitation workers, and librarians will be able to live in the neighborhoods they serve.

Continuing the status quo would also be ecological malpractice. As Northern Virginia's population grows, policymakers including yourselves will determine how much new housing and its residents contribute to climate change. Denser, infill development inflicts exponentially less environmental and [climate damage](#) than greenfield sprawl, not to mention existing sprawl. New tract housing causes far more runoff into local watersheds and destroys vast swaths of trees and wildlife habitat. Arlington County must stop artificially limiting sustainable development.

Some Arlington residents have legitimate concerns about infrastructure issues such as school crowding, flooding, and tree canopy. These concerns must be addressed, but cannot justify shutting out new residents, much less driving out current ones. The County should appropriately invest in infrastructure to support badly needed development. Arlington's Comprehensive Plan components are the appropriate venue to further refine the community's approach to these critical elements of a well-functioning urban environment.

Arlington County has for decades been a leader in transit-oriented development. You each have contributed to this smart growth by supporting policies that allowed dense development along Metro corridors, even in the face of opposition. The Missing Middle Framework would position Arlington County once again at the forefront of urban planning, opening up currently exclusive neighborhoods to a more attainable form of housing. This gentle density is vital to building an equitable, sustainable Arlington. We commend you for the vision and commitment that have brought Arlington to this important moment. Our organization and its members will continue to support the MM initiative and look forward to your final approval of it by Fall of this year.

I wish to close with a personal story about Arlington's housing affordability crisis. My family is extremely close with another. They rent in Fairlington and, like us, have two small children. I consider their oldest son my three-year-old daughter's first friend. One family drops off a meal when the other is home sick. When our friends learned their lease would end, they decided to buy a home. They quickly realized that even with two incomes and their own small business, Arlington was unattainable. Most of their clients are in Clarendon, so they looked in Alexandria. Then they searched Woodbridge and Montgomery County. They were repeatedly outbid. Finally they closed on a home, in southern Maryland, 50 minutes away from us. We are relieved and even happy for our friends; their new neighborhood seems wonderful. Yet I grieve the loss of these treasured neighbors. I will always think about what might have been.

Please do not delay. Please approve Missing Middle.

Respectfully,

Luca Gattoni-Celli

Founder, YIMBYs of Northern Virginia | Former resident of an Arlington quadplex