



March 4, 2022

Honorable Katie Cristol, Chair
Arlington County Board
Ellen M. Bozman Government Center
2100 Clarendon Blvd, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: Top Priorities for the *Forestry and Natural Resources Plan* and Future County Funding

Dear Chair Cristol:

One of the reasons why Arlington County is such a special place to live and work is our vibrant urban forest. The County's trees and other natural vegetation not only improve our quality of life, they also bring enormous economic and health benefits, everything from reducing pollution, energy bills and stormwater flooding to attracting new businesses and fighting climate change.

But the urban forest and other natural spaces now are facing growing threats, which we ignore at our peril. The Forestry and Natural Resources Commission (FNRC) therefore believes that the County must step up its efforts to preserve and enhance those precious resources. Now is an especially crucial moment, because Arlington County is in the final stages of drafting a new Forestry and Natural Resources Plan after nearly two decades. In both the new FNR Plan and in County budgets in this and future years, the FNRC urges the County to include the following essential measures, listed here as bullet points and then discussed in greater detail below:

- Conducting and updating a tree canopy survey and natural resource inventory
- Elevating the urban forest and natural spaces on the list of County priorities
- Changing lot coverage rules and zoning requirements
- Ensuring a strong forestry staff with sufficient authority
- Continuing to advocate for expanded local authority to preserve and replace more trees, both to enhance the tree canopy and to help solve the growing stormwater problem
- Explicitly valuing trees and other natural capital in the Capital Improvement Plan
- Developing financial incentives for tree and natural space preservation and enhancement
- Expanding educational efforts
- Making equity a top priority

Here is the discussion of the bullet points above:

Conducting and updating a tree canopy survey and natural resource inventory

Without accurate data on the extent of tree canopy coverage, the areas of other vegetation, the size of built environment, and the total amount of impervious surfaces—along with knowledge of the trends in each of these—it is impossible to understand and overcome the barriers to protecting and enhancing our invaluable tree canopy and natural environment. Such data are especially important in correcting past injustices, which have led to lower tree canopy coverage in minority and historically disadvantaged communities, and in stopping and reversing the current rapid tree loss in neighborhoods with extensive infill development.

The County should therefore include funding for a tree canopy survey in the next budget and commit to periodic updates—every three to five years—in the Forestry and Natural Resources Plan.

The FNR Plan should also hold the County accountable for preserving the tree canopy by incorporating metrics on trends into official measures of County performance.

Elevating the urban forest and natural spaces on the list of County priorities

Arlington County is justifiably proud of its official designation as a Tree City USA over the last quarter-century. A vibrant urban forest and thriving natural spaces are essential not just for quality of life, but also for attracting business, reducing pollution and the severity of heat waves, and fighting stormwater flooding. But given the growing threats to the County's trees—and the alarming downward trends in some neighborhoods—the County cannot rest on its past laurels. Preserving and enhancing the urban forest must be an explicit high priority at the top levels of County government (County Manager and Board) and in the FNR Plan.

Changing lot coverage rules and zoning requirements

The building of larger and larger homes as older dwellings are torn down and replaced inevitably means less and less room for trees and natural, pervious surfaces. While changing the current rules is admittedly a challenging task, such changes can be powerful tools for making more space for trees and other plants. The FNR Plan, therefore, should include ideas for increasing minimum setbacks for the backs and sides of lots, reducing total allowable lot coverage, and considering other innovative measures, like removing the preference for lot coverage for a detached garage.

Ensuring a strong forestry staff with sufficient authority

Arlington has recently lost several urban foresters to other jurisdictions that pay more—and, in some cases, may offer greater scope for preserving trees and for personal advancement. This must change.

In its budgets, the County must ensure that forester salaries are competitive. In the FNR Plan and elsewhere, the County also must make sure that forestry and natural resources have sufficient staff to cover all their duties, that staff have explicit authority to rigorously enforce all existing codes and rules, and that staff are empowered to develop and implement new solutions to the County's issues.

Pressure and advocacy from outside civic groups and County Commissions can be effective in bringing about change, of course, but staff are absolutely essential. That's true not only fully implementing and enforcing existing policies, but also developing

new and better strategies for preserving and enhancing the urban forest and other natural areas based on their own experience and expertise.

It is crucial, therefore, that staff members be fully supported by the County in their daily (and sometimes contentious) interactions with developers, site plan managers, and other interest groups. Perhaps even more important, the County should create mechanisms for formally rewarding staff who take the initiative to go beyond their normal duties to create and implement innovative new ideas.

Continuing to advocate for expanded local authority to preserve and replace more trees, both to enhance the tree canopy and to help solve the growing stormwater problem

For several years, the FNRC has been advocating for two important and effective measures:

1) amend state law to give local jurisdictions more flexibility and authority to require higher levels of tree canopy coverage in their local tree replacement or preservation ordinances than state law currently allows.

2) grant formal credit for the stormwater mitigation potential of mature trees in the guidelines used to determine stormwater mitigation performance under the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act.

Some progress has been made on both of these fronts. The state has been working on adding credit for trees to the stormwater guidelines and legislation for greater local flexibility was introduced, but not passed, last year.

The County should now work to bring both of these past the finish line, and the FNR Plan should include the important role for the County in continuing to push for legislative improvements at the state level.

Explicitly valuing trees and other natural capital in the Capital Improvement Plan

The FNRC has already made this recommendation in comments about the CIP, but this should be made explicit in the FNR Plan. The value of trees and natural vegetation also includes their value for carbon capture and sequestration, which should be formally included in calculations of the County's net carbon emissions.

Developing financial incentives for tree and natural space preservation and enhancement.

Money is a great motivator. The FNR Plan should explore and include possible financial incentives for preserving and enhancing the tree canopy. Ideas include:

- Tax abatements for land that is preserved or restored as forests
- Stormwater fees that vary depending on percentage of impervious surface
- Tax credits for properties where trees are saved
- Grants from the Tree Canopy Fund or other dedicated fund for tree maintenance, ivy removal, arborist consultants, and other activities, building on the current pilot maintenance program.
- Requirements for new homeowners to post "tree protection" bonds as part of their occupancy permits for new construction. Money from those bonds would be returned to homeowners if the trees on the redeveloped property stay on track to meeting the tree canopy requirements under the County tree replacement ordinance.

Expanding educational efforts

The awareness of the immense value of trees and natural areas is growing in the county, thanks in part to advocacy groups and effective campaigns like the Tree

Stewards' "Mature Trees are Valuable Trees" effort. But the message still has not reached many residents and needs to be amplified.

The County, therefore, should include a line item in current and future budgets for an educational campaign specifically aimed at raising the levels of knowledge and appreciation for the value of trees and natural spaces. Education should also be a key part of the FNR Plan.

Possible specific ideas for campaigns to raise awareness include:

- Putting flyers on residential trash containers, signs on buses and on metro trains, or information at the Arlington County Fair and farmers markets
- Putting up signs at the entrances to parks
- Including information in water bills about how trees can lower energy and water bills
- Providing links to online calculators of benefits of trees.

Making equity a top priority

Minority, low-income, and disadvantaged communities have historically received the fewest benefits from trees and natural spaces. Those inequities must be corrected. The FNRC sees the need for a two-pronged approach, which should be explicitly described in the new FNR Plan:

First, ensure that equity considerations are included in all County operations, programs, and plans.

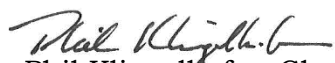
Second, provide staffing for a County equity initiative that would develop new ideas and programs to reduce inequities, such as spearheading tree planting and maintenance programs (for example, ivy removal) in disadvantaged and underserved communities, while also reaching out to those communities to understand their needs and to take advantage of their experience and knowledge.

Final Thoughts

In its role as liaison and sounding board for County residents and activist groups, the FNRC can report to the County Board that there is a high—and increasing—level of concern around the County about the threats to Arlington's precious natural resources. That concern is not something that the County government can afford to ignore. But now, in the new FNR Plan and in its upcoming budgets, the County has an unmatched opportunity to demonstrate real leadership on this vital issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our views.

Sincerely,



Phil Klingelhofer, Chair
Forestry and Natural Resources Commission

Cc: Members, Arlington County Board
Mark Schwartz, Arlington County Manager
Jane Rudolph, Director, Department of Parks and Recreation