

## **City Should Deny Proposed Amendment for School Zoning Decisions**

The Alexandria Planning Commission will consider a proposal on September 1 to fast-track zoning approvals for larger new school buildings, while eroding major protections that normally come with such projects. We support the North Ridge Citizens' Association recommendation to deny these changes.

No one can argue that we don't need more school capacity in Alexandria. Larger schools stacked higher and wider may be a necessary long-term approach given the lack of surplus ACPS property and our growing school population, but we should retain our case-by-case review process, which ensures that significant increases in building size meet the character and needs of the neighborhoods they serve.

If approved, the latest proposal would give the city automatic allowance to build new schools with a FAR of .60 "by right," without a public hearing – even though such buildings could be more than double the size of any surrounding structures in low-density residential neighborhoods. For example, in an R20 zone that currently limits FAR to .25, this would allow for more than double the bulk.

A city council member indicated to us that the proposal would assist new school building projects in high-density areas, such as Landmark, Eisenhower and Potomac Yard. Yet as drafted, this change would also impact ACPS sites in single-family housing areas – where low-density zoning restrictions under the city's own Master Plan have served to protect and preserve what little remains of dwindling community open and green space areas.

There is simply no justification for doing away with a maximum limit for school building FAR, nor do we understand why schools would be altogether exempt from the same zoning rules that apply to other surrounding buildings.

In reviewing city approval applications for recent school building projects, the city has routinely approved school designs that satisfied "by right" zoning requirements. In practical terms, if the City moves ahead with this proposal, citizens will have little recourse to prevent the allowable doubling of school size.

There is also no assurance that the city wouldn't take advantage of its expanded authority to seek potentially controversial uses for school buildings that go beyond the core educational mission of ACPS, such as the collocation of housing with schools.

We need to think creatively about ways to maximize space and services for our schools. As Alexandria continues to grow within its confined boundaries, it is more important than ever to involve residents in school zoning decisions and to maintain the process protections that exist for neighborhoods.

If the city is truly seeking a zoning change to help build bigger schools in higher-density areas of the city, why not seek a less sweeping modification of the zoning code to apply more narrowly to such projects?

We urge other concerned residents to contact City Council and use Alexandria 311 to urge the Planning Commission to reject the proposed text Amendment for Zoning Code Section 7-2100. Instead, let's work towards a proposal that includes a more reasonable process for contemplating larger schools, with a clear limit on school density and existing protections for residential zones.

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