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# The Council Connection

*your connection to City Council by Mayor Justin M. Wilson*

November 1, 2023

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This Saturday, the City Council will have our annual budget retreat. This is the first step of the FY 2025 budget as we receive the first peek at the revenues and expenditure pressures we will grapple with in the Spring. The public is welcome to attend in person or virtually to watch the Council discussions.

Next weekend is the return of the Alexandria Film Festival, with screenings occurring in-person and online. Buy your tickets online today!

This Thursday, I am partnering with my friends at Pacers Running at 1301 King Street, for another "Running Town Hall."

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Grab your sneakers, your questions about the City and join us before 6:30 PM for a good run.

The following weekend is the traditional start of the holiday season in Old Town, with the [Holiday Tree Lighting in Market Square on Saturday November 18th at 6 PM.](#)

[Thanksgiving brings the return of the 48th Annual Alexandria Turkey Trot, a 5-mile run through Del Ray and Rosemont with thousands of your friends and neighbors.](#)


Last month, the City Council held a Town Hall meeting at Charles Houston Recreation Center to address questions from residents and provide updates to the community. If you were unable to attend [you can watch the entire event online from the comfort of your home.](#)

Last month, I also had the pleasure of being back on The Politics Hour with Kojo Nnamdi on WAMU to discuss housing and more! [You can listen to the full appearance online.](#)

If you would like me to host a town hall in your neighborhood, [please drop me a line](#) and we'll get it on the calendar!

[Contact me anytime.](#) Let me know how I can help.

## Initiatives and Updates

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## Zoning For Housing

Tonight, the Alexandria Planning Commission will accept public testimony and act upon [a series of proposals](#) designed to expand Alexandria's housing production, improve affordability and address past and current barriers to equitable housing access.

The Planning Commission's hearing will begin at 7 PM and it will be held at City Hall in the Council Chambers. Any resident can address the Planning Commission in-person or virtually. You can [sign-up in advance online.](#)

With Planning Commission action this evening, the City Council will take up this proposal later in the

month. While the City Council will cast our final vote on the evening of Tuesday November 28th, given the importance of this issue, we are providing two separate public hearing dates for residents to provide testimony.

Residents will have the opportunity to provide public testimony on the package before the City Council on either the evening of Tuesday November 14th or Saturday November 18th. The meeting on the 14th will begin at 5:30 PM in City Hall. The meeting on the 18th will begin at 9:30 AM in City Hall. Testimony can be provided virtually or in-person and **[you may sign up online](#)** once the docket is published.

These actions are the culmination of a year of engagement with residents around our City. Whether you have been supportive of the City's effort or have been generally skeptical of our approach, your input in this process has been valuable, and I am hopeful you will continue to provide it as we conclude this phase. In an effort to be fully responsive to the input we have received, **[our staff has posted the specific input and their responses to the input on our website](#)**.

Two months ago, our staff formally presented the specific proposals in a joint worksession with the Planning Commission. You can **[watch the full joint work session, including our Planning Director's presentation online](#)**. Our staff has also prepared an estimate of the **[net impacts of these proposals and the infrastructure requirements](#)**.

The specific land-use proposals made by our staff address these areas:

- **[Single-Family Zoning](#)**
- Removal of Restrictive/Exclusionary barriers from the zoning code
- Bonus Height
- Expanded Transit-Oriented Growth
- Industrial Zones
- Coordinated Development Districts (CDDs)
- **[Inclusionary Zoning](#)**
- Townhouse Zoning
- Property Conversions
- **[Expansion of the Residential Multi-Family Zone \(RMF\)](#)**

This effort is prompted by an urgent reality: Alexandria has become largely inaccessible to those of low and moderate incomes.

In all likelihood, next year Alexandria's housing stock will reach a important, albeit largely psychological, milestone: The average single-family home in our City will be valued at \$1 million.

So far this year, 8 newly-constructed detached single-family homes have been sold in our City. The average sales price was \$2.1 million, with the lowest price at \$1.9 million.

**With two-third's of Virginia homeowners' mortgage rates under 4% and another third with a rate under 3%**, low supply and astronomical sales prices has made homeownership all but impossible in Alexandria for anyone but the upper-middle class.

The average 1 bedroom apartment now rents for \$2,186 per month, requiring a salary of nearly \$90,000 to afford renting a small apartment in our City.

If you own a home on a fixed-rate mortgage, without adult children or aging parents in your lives, it can be easy to ignore these realities and the corrosive impact on our community.

It is that benign neglect, coupled with policy inaction, that leads to a community that rapidly becomes inaccessible to the diversity of people who have made Alexandria their home for generations. That inaction stifles economic growth as employers hopelessly chase a workforce disappearing from our community.

**You can watch my comments at our kick-off event at the beginning of the year**, and leading into presentations from Richard and Leah Rothstein, **the authors of the recently released book, "Just Action,"** a follow-up to Richard Rothstein's **seminal tome "The Color of Law."**

All of the sessions **have been recorded and are viewable online.**

While this effort has a pair of motivations, a foundational acknowledgement is that for much of the 20th Century, **wide swaths of Alexandria housing was off-limits to Alexandrians that were not white.** That reality was enforced by a patchwork of ordinances, restrictive covenants, intimidation and lending practices that served to effectively segregate our City for generations. While de jure policies that explicitly enforced segregation **were made illegal long ago**, the legacy of these policies live on today. In fact, in recent years, **Alexandria has grown MORE segregated.** These realities are detailed in the **Draft Regional Fair Housing Plan** that I wrote about a few months ago. This plan **was formally received by the City Council recently.**

The question before our community is what can be done about it. It was generations of intentional acts that led to our current reality. It will require intentional acts to change it.

**In September of 2019, the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) unanimously adopted new regional housing creation targets.** This was the first-ever regional commitment to accelerate the development of housing supply as a means to address our affordability crisis.

These targets, while voluntary, commit the City to the creation of additional units, with most of those units committed to be affordable for low to middle income households. To ensure that this housing creation does not exacerbate existing transportation challenges, most of this new housing must be located near job centers and high-capacity transportation infrastructure.

In 2013, while adopting our **Housing Master Plan**, City Council had set an ambitious goal to create or preserve 2,000 affordable units by 2025. **We are on track to meet this goal. In March of 2020, the City Council became the third jurisdiction in the region to endorse new housing targets** in conjunction with the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG).

With the adoption of the new COG housing targets, the City has committed to an additional 11,500 housing units, with 4,250 as committed affordable or workforce housing.

Over the last three years, the City has achieved the preservation or creation of **just about 1,000 units of committed affordable housing.**

The housing non-profit HAND has begun an annual report to measure the work that each jurisdiction in the region is doing to achieve our commitments. HAND recently released the annual update of this measurement. **The HAND "Housing Indication Tool" report shows that Alexandria has made significant progress, with more work to do.**

While there is a broad agreement in our community about the problem and the need to focus on solutions to our affordability challenges, bringing together agreement on the correct solutions to pursue is a little more challenging.

While the City's Housing Master Plan contains a variety of tools in our housing "toolbox," the options the City has are generally limited to:

1. Raising and Spending Tax Dollars: To develop and preserve housing as well as assist residents in obtaining housing.
2. Using land-use policy (zoning) to create and preserve housing

In the budget the City Council approved in May, we expanded the tax dollars we have committed annually to affordable housing. **One cent from the real estate tax rate now goes to affordable housing**, which generates \$4.6 million annually. One percent of Alexandria's dining tax rate also goes to affordable housing, yielding another \$4.9 million annually. Together this generates \$9.5 million of annual revenue that is used to fund the creation and preservation of committed affordable housing, **with an aggressive project pipeline planned years in advance**.

This year has been very busy in putting those resources to work:

- Last month, **we broke ground on "Sansé and Naja," a new affordable housing development being built by the Alexandria Housing Development Corporation (AHDC), the City's housing non-profit developer**. This is the site of a former Safeway and an office building bought by the City 2 decades ago, demolished and used as a parking lot as an interim use. This is the largest-ever City affordable housing development and it will include 474 units of committed affordable housing, including many deeply affordable units.
- **In September of last year, we gathered at the corner of King and Menokin to celebrate the opening of "The Waypoint at Fairlington."** This partnership with Wesley Housing and Fairlington Presbyterian Church created 81 new units of committed affordable housing where there used to be an asphalt parking lot.
- A year ago, **City Council approved an application** for the construction of 94 units of committed affordable housing on the site of a car dealership at 2712 Duke Street. This project is being proposed by **Community Housing Partners, a housing non-profit based in Christiansburg**.
- In February, the City Council approved the redevelopment of the Samuel Madden Homes. Samuel Madden is currently a 66-unit public housing development owned by the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority (ARHA). **This redevelopment will replace this property with 532 total units, 326 of which will be committed affordable units and 206 market-rate units**.
- Last year, the City' Council approved an application by another housing non-profit, **Wesley Housing Development Corporation, to build 373 committed affordable housing units at Parcview on Holmes Run Parkway**.



- In December of last year, the City Council unanimously approved **a separate proposal by AHDC to develop 36 affordable homeownership units (31 townhomes and 5 condominiums)** and 3 flats to be operated by Sheltered Homes of Alexandria for 12 residents. This project is located on Seminary Road just east of the City's Fire Station.
- Earlier this year, the City Council **approved an application from Community Lodgings, an Alexandria non-profit, to redevelop an existing 28-apartment affordable housing complex into a new 91-unit affordable-housing development.**
- Last year, **Wesley Housing used resources from Amazon's Housing Equity Fund and a loan from Housing Partnership Fund, to purchase 66 private units in Arlandria and preserve them as affordable, with future redevelopment plans to come.**
- Early next year, the City Council will consider a proposal for **redevelopment of the Ladrey High Rise**, another ARHA property. The current Ladrey is 170 units of committed affordable units, affordable for those at 30% of Area Median Income (AMI). The new Ladrey would be 275 units of committed affordable units, with 170 remaining for those at 30% of AMI, joining 27 new units affordable for those at 60% of AMI and 78 new units for those at 80% of AMI.

**During the summer, the City was awarded a grant of \$60,000 from the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, funded by Amazon's Housing Equity Fund, to explore two possible affordable housing developments, one on the site of the Van Dorn Metro station and another on property owned by WMATA next to their new office building which just opened last week in Carlyle.**

Yet, the City cannot raise and spend enough money to make an appreciable impact on this problem. The City's power to determine how land is used, our land-use authority, provides a critical tool to spur the creation and preservation of both committed affordable housing as well as market-rate housing. Said another way: building additional housing supply, whether committed as affordable housing or market-rate housing, helps address our housing affordability challenges and reverse generational impacts.

Somewhat inexplicably, local governments have been reluctant to use the single most effective tool to increase the supply of affordable housing: build more housing. The reluctance of local governments has been even more surprising giving that a supply-based approach has been the policy of the last three Presidential administrations, two Democrats and one

Republican. It's **the policy of our current Republican Governor**. It has been the approach of the Sierra Club and the National Association of Home Builders. It has been the approach of the Brookings Institute, the Hoover Institution and the Cato Institute. It is that policy basis that has driven our Zoning For Housing initiative.

The City will continue to seek creative partnerships, new land-use tools and innovative financing to preserve and create affordability in our City. I look forward to your input as we conclude this latest reform effort.



## Tourism Is Back!

Last month, we had the annual meeting of **Visit Alexandria**, Alexandria's convention and visitors association. This is the time when we discuss the performance of the City's travel and hospitality industry.

The summary is short, but celebratory: We are back!

In 2019, we were celebrating a record \$867 million of visitor spending.

In 2020, that visitor spending dropped in half to \$445 million, as the pandemic ravaged our local economy.

**In 2022, that visitor spending rebounded, reaching \$801 million.**

The consumption-based tax revenues (sales tax, dining tax and transient lodging {hotel} tax) went from \$66 million in Fiscal Year 2019 (July 1, 2018 - June 30, 2019) to \$58 million in Fiscal Year 2020 and \$59 million in Fiscal Year 2021. In Fiscal Year 2023, we have broken a new record, with \$81 million of consumption tax revenues.

Our consumption-based tax revenue generates the equivalent of nearly 17 cents on the real estate tax rate. Said another way: If we did not generate these consumption-based taxes, our real estate tax rate of \$1.11 would have to be nearly \$1.28 to provide the same level of services we fund.

It has been the creativity of business leaders around our City, the tireless work of their dedicated employees and the partnership with government that has led our local economy into recovery.

We still have work to do, but we have made considerable progress from the dark days of 2020. With the pandemic behind us, we can return to offense as we grow our local economy.





## Time to Vote

Early voting for our November election is almost done and Election Day is almost here! So far **over 9,200 Alexandrians have cast their ballots in this important election.**

On November 7th, all 140 members of the General Assembly (40 members of the State Senate and 100 members of the House of Delegates) will be up for election. Alexandria voters will elect a member of the State Senate to represent the entire City and a member of the House of Delegates from one of three districts.

This will be the first election held in the new General Assembly districts. With the collapse last year of the brand new Virginia Redistricting Commission, the Virginia Supreme Court was called upon to determine the new boundaries for Congressional, State Senate and House of Delegates districts. After appointing two Special Masters, the Virginia Supreme Court **unanimously approved new districts.**

Alexandria will be entirely represented in the **39th State Senate District** and will be represented by three members of the House of Delegates, those elected from the **3rd District**, the **4th District**, and the **5th District**.

On Tuesday November 7th, all City polling places will be open from 6 AM until 7 PM for the General Election.

**Sample ballots are now available for your review online.**

Last year, Virginia introduced "no-excuse" early voting, so voters have three choices to vote this November:

1. Any mailed ballot that you have already received can be mailed back or dropped 24/7 at the drop-box located in front of 132 N. Royal Street.
2. **You can vote early in-person at the Alexandria Registrar's Office (132 N. Royal Street) or at Beatley Library (5005 Duke Street).** Today, tomorrow, Friday and Saturday are the last 4 days of early voting!
3. You can vote in person **at your precinct** on the General Election day of November 7th.

I'll see you at the polls!



## Food Waste Collection

Last year, when City Council approved our current budget, an amendment I proposed was included to expand the City's collection of food waste. My proposal funded both an expansion of **our existing Farmers' Market Composting program** and a new curbside collection program.

Our Farmers' Market composting program has added two new sites, the Old Town North Market (901 N. Royal Street) and the Southern Towers market collection point (4901 Seminary Road).

Earlier this year, **we launched the new curbside collection program** and you **can sign-up online right now**. Under this new program, up to 2,000 residents who receive City trash and recycling collection will receive a free start-up kit and 6 months of service for free. The City has contracted with **Compost Crew** to provide this service.

After 6 months of service, residents can opt to continue the service with a monthly or annual fee.

Earlier this year, **the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced that it has awarded the City additional funding to supplement local funds in expanding this new program**. These funds, drawn from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) are a portion of \$9.4 million distributed nationally to support compost and food waste reduction projects.

I am excited to see this program come to fruition. This is a program that will reduce waste and improve the environment. I hope you find it useful!



## Alexandria Panhandling Laws

One of the fun things about service on the City Council is that it can be difficult to predict where the next issue will come from. In this case, a little anticipated Supreme Court decision has had significant impact on Alexandria and our laws.

In June of 2015, the Supreme Court delivered a **unanimous opinion in Reed vs. Town of Gilbert, Arizona**. Let me preface this by saying that I'm not an attorney, and most definitely not a Constitutional scholar.

Justice Clarence Thomas wrote for the unanimous Court at the time: "Content-based laws—those that target speech based on its communicative content—are presumptively unconstitutional and may be justified only if the government proves that they are narrowly tailored to serve compelling state interests."

The case involved the town's signage ordinances and the impact those ordinances had on temporary signs that a church wished to place directing parishioners to their services. **But the impact reached farther.**

Prior to the Reed decision, local panhandling ordinances were already on shaky ground. **In 2013, the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals, invalidated a panhandling ordinance from Charlottesville on free speech grounds.**

Since the Reed case, **Federal courts around the nation have struck down local panhandling ordinances**, calling these local restrictions on panhandling an unconstitutional infringement on freedom of speech.

**Alexandria City Council adopted our panhandling ordinance in 1994.** Before adoption, the City Council made changes to the ordinance in response to concerns raised by Constitutional advocates.

Yet, given the context of current Federal caselaw, the Alexandria panhandling ordinance would likely be difficult, if not impossible, to defend. **Given that, the Alexandria City Council voted to repeal the ordinance last month.**

While the panhandling ordinance is no more, laws remain on the books prohibiting more aggressive forms of panhandling, when it results in assaults, harassment or more. Those laws will continue to be enforced.



## 495 Southside Express Lanes

At the end of Former Governor Northam's term in office, the Virginia Department of Transportation notified the City that they intended to study the expansion of the **Express Lanes system that currently is on sections of Interstates 495, 395 and 95.**

The current proposal is to **expand the system by 11 miles, from the Springfield interchange across the Wilson Bridge into Maryland.**

You can **review the details of what VDOT is proposing and submit your comments online.**

The City has generally had a "cautiously skeptical" stance towards similar proposals in the past. We have worked with the Commonwealth to ensure that these projects generate revenue for transit initiatives and include protections to prevent such efforts from exacerbating cut-through traffic on City streets.

Last month, [our staff provided formal input on behalf of the City, citing specific concerns regarding induced demand, increased cut-through traffic, potential impediments to future transit connectivity over the Wilson Bridge and more.](#)

The City will continue to work with the Commonwealth and its regional partners to assess this proposal and ensure that the interests of Alexandrians are well represented.



## Green Business Recognition

The work to address climate change, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and building a more sustainable community is not simply the work of government. In fact, if we are to be successful in addressing these significant challenges, we must harness the partnership of the private sector as well.

To recognize the sustainability success achieved by businesses in our City, [the City is now launching our "Green Business Recognition Program."](#)

This new effort will recognize businesses who have achieved a set of requirements that represent sustainability practices and allow those businesses to share this recognition to their customers.

Encourage the businesses you patronize to participate in this new program!

## ALX Breathes Program



In 2019, just prior to the pandemic, [the City completed a Community Health Assessment.](#) The comprehensive report, created with partners throughout our community, provided an overview of public health conditions and disparities around our City.

While the report showed that overall Alexandria is a healthy community, it did indicate disparities in health conditions within the City, particularly relating to chronic illness.

As one example, the report indicated that the City's adult asthma hospitalization rate is the highest in the West End (Zip Code 22304), with 10 hospitalizations per 10,000 residents. Yet in Central Alexandria, residents experience only 2.9 hospitalizations per 10,000 residents.

Given how strongly correlated asthma and other respiratory illnesses are linked to housing conditions, our Health Department partnered with the National

Center for Healthy Housing **to prepare a report detailing how we can promote healthier homes.**

With this factual basis, the Health Department worked to design interventions to help improve the health of homes, and reduce the impacts of these chronic illnesses. From this effort the **ALX Breathes program was born.**

The Health Department is now looking for residents to enroll in this free program.

The program is designed for residents with either asthma or COPD who make less than 80% of the Area Median Income.

Through regular home visits, the staff will work to help manage breathing and reduce household triggers that can exacerbate breathing function. **Please sign-up for participation in this important program!**



## Art League

Six years ago the City Council approved the **Old Town North Small Area Plan**. The plan worked to shape the future growth of a changing area of our City between the Potomac River and the George Washington Parkway, north of Old Town and south of the airport.

A focus of the planning effort was to preserve the arts organizations that operated in the plan area, but may become vulnerable during the re-development that was contemplated. The City created a **new arts density bonus**, which has been used to create thousands of square feet of new real estate that is dedicated to the arts.

**The Art League**, one of the City's largest educational institutions, and a pillar of the local arts community, was one of the organizations that needed to find a new home. Their Montgomery Street location, where the League has significant classroom space, is being redeveloped.

While the League could not find a home in Old Town North, they did not have to go far, finding a new facility in the 800 block of Slaters Lane.

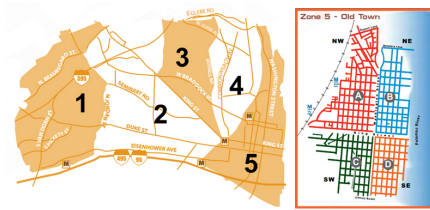
In order to build out this new space, the League needed financing. That's where the City stepped in. The **Alexandria Industrial Development Authority (IDA)** is an organization that was created by the City Council, under Virginia State Code, as a conduit for low-cost financing. The IDA can issue bonds and receive lending proceeds, working with non-profit organizations to finance real estate projects.



**Alexandria's IDA has been in the used in the past to finance projects** for Virginia Tech, Goodwin House, Episcopal High School, Institute for Defense Analyses, National Industries for the Blind, INOVA and much more.

**Our IDA was able to issue new debt, receive debt proceeds from a private bank and facilitate the deal for the Art League's new home.**

This creative transaction shows both the versatility of our IDA, as well as the commitment the City has to support the arts and ensuring a place for these uses in our City. I'm excited to see this transaction come to fruition.



## Leaf Collection

**Alexandria's annual leaf collection began on Monday!** Check online to learn your collection date.

Leaf vacuuming will proceed to each of the designated zones beginning on the scheduled dates. Each zone will take several days to complete.

Additionally, the City is making up to 15 leaf bags available for each residential household. The bags can be picked up at City Hall, the City's self-service shed at the corner of Roth and Business Center Drive or at Charles Houston, Chinquapin, Patrick Henry or Mount Vernon Recreation Centers.

These leaf bags can be placed out for collection on your regulation collection day.

Paid for by Wilson For Mayor | [www.justin.net](http://www.justin.net)



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