



A F F O R D A B L E
H O U S I N G S T U D Y

S U M M A R Y O F
V I R T U A L F O R U M P A R T I C I P A T I O N

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Overview

From April 3, 2015 to May 31, 2015, Arlington County offered residents the opportunity to provide feedback on a set of questions about the draft Affordable Housing Master Plan and Implementation Framework on the web-based Open Arlington platform. The forum was publicized through the main Arlington County webpage, an article in *The Citizen*, the Affordable Housing Study email distribution list, Facebook and Twitter. The forum provided an introduction to the study and its purpose and provided links to the Affordable Housing Study website and key documents. County residents could respond to some or all questions and were given the option to share their names, share their names but keep them hidden, or participate anonymously. The majority of those who created accounts requested their names be kept separate from their responses. The forum received 254 responses estimated to be equivalent to 12.7 hours of public comment. Of the 254 responses, 72 were made by participants who shared their names, though most who shared their names elected to remain anonymous in the reporting.

About the data

The data collected by the online forum is entirely qualitative, and due to the emphasis on open-ended comment there is necessarily a level of subjectivity present in any attempt to quantify it. An effort is made in this summary to categorize each comment in order to provide a general understanding of opinions expressed regarding specific questions. Individual comments may be counted in multiple categories if they contain multiple points, and comments that were deemed to be unclear were not counted, though remain in the record. This summary also provides quotes from comments received in each section in order to provide a general sense of opinions expressed. Quotes may be edited slightly to correct spelling or insert words in brackets for clarity. Opinions expressed in the forum or summarized in this document do not reflect the opinions of any government agency or elected official, or of the consulting team tasked to the Study. Unedited, time-stamped responses from all participants to all questions are attached to this document. All those interested in the Arlington County Affordable Housing Study are strongly encouraged to read the attached responses in full.

Analysis

Affordable Housing Target

Is the 17.7% target for a sufficient supply of affordable rental housing appropriate?

Responses to multiple-choice questions

A preponderance (47.2 percent) of participants did not believe the target was appropriate, with 40.9 percent believing the 17.7 percent target is correct and 13 percent remaining unsure.

Open-ended comments

A total of 144 comments were received on this question, with 110 participants skipping the opportunity to comment.

The greatest number of comments (39) emphasize that determining the appropriateness of the target hinges on other factors, like who will be served, where the housing will be located and how government investment in affordable housing will impact other needed county programs and services.

“The target for affordable housing percentage should be based on how many households at that income level that we WANT or NEED to meet our diversity and economic development goals not based on how many [people] are forecast to be here.” – Name Withheld

Fourteen responses indicated the target should be higher, and 34 believed the target to be too high. Sixteen participants commented that the government should not be involved in affordable housing, or commented in support of the market determining affordability exclusively.

“I actually wish it could be a little higher. At one time 26% of the rental units in Arlington were affordable.” – Name Withheld

“This target is entirely too high. Arlington is a small county and there are other places to live close-by that are more affordable.” – Anonymous

“The number should be 0%. Let the market decide what is and what is not affordable. All of this messing around with the supply is causing the market rate housing to be placed at a premium. Affordable housing IS THE PROBLEM.” – Anonymous

Other comments included concern that affordable housing brings outsiders or other undesirable elements into the county, general support for the proposal or questions about using a percentage versus numeric goal.

It appears from the comments that some participants may have believed the question related to targets specifically for CAF units, not for all types of affordable housing.

Geographic Distribution

What are your thoughts regarding the approach to the geographic distribution of committed affordable housing?

Responses to multiple-choice questions

Responses split relatively evenly to this question, with 58.3 percent in agreement and 37.8 percent disagreeing. Finally, 3.9 percent were not sure.

Open-ended comments

A total of 162 comments were received on this question, with 92 participants skipping the comment section.

Many responses (85) favored broad geographic distribution and/or a deconcentration of affordable housing.

“Arlington is too racially and economically segregated. The schools are also too segregated. Proposed options should target increases in economic and racial diversity. Affordable housing policy should make all schools and communities reflect the diversity of the county.” – Anonymous

Many responses touched on transit, with some advocating for affordable housing to be aligned with transit corridors, others stating that Metro station areas are too costly for development and should be avoided, and others still expressing the belief that all parts of the County are already “transit corridors” or could become such with changes or additions to ART service.

“I especially support the strategy to locate affordable housing in proximity to transit, including bus services.” – Anonymous

“Property near Metro transit is expensive for a reason. Everyone loves the convenience....” – Name Withheld

“All of Arlington can be in proximity to public transportation with a more robust ART system. Arlingtonians can walk .5 miles to a bus stop.” – Name Withheld

Some responses (8) favored preservation of affordable housing over new development, and some (8) expressed strong objections to the existence of County-subsidized affordable housing.

“In order to deal with the very large loss of affordable units, I believe we should be alert to all opportunities to build or sustain affordable units all over the county. Having lived in South Arlington for more than 35 years I truly appreciate the diversity. It has been a place for immigrants to start new lives (Asians, South and Central Americans and presently many North Africans). It has been the home of freed slaves and African-American communities for many years. We are bound to have more high-end development but I hope we can honor our history and maintain some of the character of this very special part of Arlington.” – Name Withheld

“There should not be any additional interference with the free market.” – Anonymous

It appears from the comments that some participants were not aware that preservation of MARKs usually includes exterior and interior rehabilitation of those units.

Local Preference

Should Arlington County residents and workers receive a preference for committed affordable housing?

Responses to multiple-choice questions

The vast majority (64.2 percent) of participants agreed that both residents and workers should receive a preference. Those not in favor comprised 13.4 percent, 9.8 percent support preferences for residents and

not for workers, 7.1 percent support preferences for workers but not residents, and 5.5 percent are not sure.

Open-ended comments

A total of 94 comments were received on this question, with 160 participants skipping the comments.

Many written responses (22) were in favor of requiring residency as a qualification for CAF units. Sixteen participants commented that those working in the county should receive a preference and 18 participants expressed a preference specifically for those who work for the County (Arlington County Government and Arlington Public Schools).

“I agree that both Arlington residents and Arlington workers should receive a preference for committed affordable (CAF) housing. However, this is not sufficient. I consider it important that nobody who resides outside of Arlington should be eligible to receive housing in County-subsidized CAF units, regardless of their circumstances. Limiting occupancy of CAF units to County residents should therefore not be only a preference. It should be a requirement.” – Name Withheld

“I think that people who work in Arlington have more of a commitment to the community when they are also paying taxes there.” – Name Withheld

“I think Arlington County staff, teachers, police and firefighters deserve a preference if they qualify for committed affordable housing.” – Anonymous

Some participants (10) expressed concern that such preference could be illegal, discriminatory or decrease diversity. Others (6) were concerned about logistical or administrative complications of such a policy.

“I am not sure that it is legal to restrict federal funds so I am not sure.” – Anonymous

“I support an increase in diversity, and I do not think that these preference policies will increase diversity. I only believe in preference if it will increase our diversity.” – Anonymous

“People change jobs all the time—especially low-income workers. The administration of verifying people’s employment in Arlington is an unnecessary burden.” – Anonymous

Middle Income Ownership Questions:

Is it appropriate for this plan to address middle-income ownership housing demands?

Responses to multiple-choice questions

The majority of respondents (56.3 percent) indicate that it is appropriate to address middle-income home ownership in the plan, with 33.9 percent disagreeing and 9.8 percent unsure.

Should we be using public funds for higher-income households?

Responses to multiple-choice questions

The majority of participants disagreed (65.1 percent), with 17.9 percent agreeing and 17.1 percent unsure.

Would it be more appropriate to address this demand through land use provisions rather than financing?

Responses to multiple-choice questions

Responses were split on this question, with 39 percent agreeing land use provisions would be more appropriate, 25.5 percent disagreeing and 35.5 percent unsure.

Open-ended comments

A single opportunity to comment followed these three related questions. One hundred participants commented, with 154 skipping the opportunity to comment.

Sixteen responses favor Arlington County providing more housing assistance to middle-income households, and fifteen advocated for changes to zoning or land use, or increases in density to achieve middle- and high-income housing goals.

“I don’t want to see a community with many <60% AMI residents and no 80-120% AMI residents. An actual diverse community would have a spectrum of incomes and not a bulge at 60%.” – Anonymous

“Both land use provisions and financing are needed to enable middle-income workers as residents. Our local economy will benefit. The full range of housing needs should be addressed, not just low-income housing. We are a wealthy community and can achieve this.” – Name Withheld

Eighteen expressed opposition to government-subsidized housing or support for market-driven housing.

“NO! ‘Affordable housing’ initiatives of ANY kind are not an appropriate use of tax dollars. The ability to live in and/or buy a house in a certain location is a matter of personal economics, not an inalienable right.” – Name Withheld

Flexibility of Housing Types

Should opportunities for creating greater flexibility of housing types beyond the urban corridors that support both rental and ownership options be further studied?

Responses to multiple-choice questions

A large majority (68.5 percent) of participants agree they should be further studied, while 28.7 percent disagree and 2.8 percent are not sure.

Open-ended comments

A total of 100 comments were received on this question, with 154 participants skipping the opportunity to comment.

The greatest number of comments (40) appeared to support creating greater flexibility even without further study.

“Challenges are being studied for years while the problems increase, making the challenges even greater. Take some actions now. Evaluate their effectiveness and tweak as you go. There is no way any study is going to lead to a perfect answer so just get going and be open to improving- please!” – Anonymous

“Many of my neighbors would not have to move if they could lease out part of their homes to renters. Now at their age, over 65, they must now leave their home of 40+ years. I have been in my home for close to 30 years and envisioned living here ‘to the end.’ I am now considering a move out of the County due to the high property taxes. If I could lease part of my home, it would ease the burden.” – Anonymous

The next greatest number of respondents expressed hope for no new density (17) or no changes to current policy (14).

“We have plenty of affordable housing. Stop spending money on more studies.” – Anonymous

“I find this especially disturbing. The County committed to preserve the character of single-family neighborhoods and now as the County is built out we are seeing these types of proposals that are proposing multifamily dwellings in single-family neighborhoods. This is absolutely not acceptable and a violation of that long-standing promise.” – Anonymous

Open Comments

Additional comments on the Draft Affordable Housing Master Plan and Implementation Framework (optional).

The final section of the forum provided an opportunity for open comment. Comments were left by 129 participants, and 125 forum participants skipped this section.

The open nature of the question made for a wide range of responses.

The top three comment types were in support of geographic distribution of affordable housing, consideration of impact on schools in planning for affordable housing, and in support of affordable housing policies and programs in general, with 25, 24 and 20 mentions respectively.

“Whatever is decided, it needs to be fair and equitable for all Arlington neighborhoods. Impact on transit and schools need to be significant considerations. Feel strongly that intended or unintended result [should] not create highly concentrated areas of affordable housing in a few areas of the county, South Arlington to be specific. Be true to the desired diversity of the county.” – Anonymous

“Very glad that the affordable housing study raised these issues and that the community is working on supporting policies that make Arlington affordable for those in need.” – Anonymous

The next most-frequent comments were in support of keeping affordable housing out of public land (17), against subsidized affordable housing or in favor of reliance on the free market (16), support for the study and/or the draft Affordable Housing Master Plan (16), and support for assisting moderate-income households with their housing needs instead of or in addition to lower-income households (11).

“Policy 3.5.2 is a reprise of the discredited Public Land for Public Good which was withdrawn by a unanimous vote of the County Board on January 27, 2015. Policy 3.5.2 should be deleted from all three sections where it appears.... If 3.5.2 is not deleted in its entirety, then the modifier “stand-alone” should be deleted from 3.5.2 in all three places where it appears in the draft Master Plan and Implementation Framework.” – Michael T.

“I oppose the affordable housing initiative. I do not want my tax money used for it and I don’t want the zoning laws manipulated to enact it.” – Anonymous

“I am so glad that Arlington County is taking this seriously. I live, work and worship in Arlington and having a diverse community is very important to me.” – Anonymous

“Housing is unaffordable to many people in Arlington. Have to help lower and middle class. The entire budget shouldn’t be focused on one demographic. Janitors, servers, secretaries, firefighters, police officers and teachers have just as much a right to live here as investment bankers, company executives and other high-income earners. Make it easier for those groups.” – Anonymous

Other less-frequent comments included comments on the forum itself, support for regional affordable housing policy, objections to increased density or changes in land use policy, admonitions to consider the cost of affordable housing programs and support for the preservation of existing affordable housing.