

Consideration of approval of the Planning Commission Minutes of the Planning Commission  
Retreat of August 22, 2025.

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Members Present:

Melissa McMahon  
David Brown  
Robert Dube  
Holly Lennihan  
Jody Manor  
Vivian Ramirez

Members Absent

Vice Chair Stephen Koenig (Excused)

Staff

Paul Stoddard  
Jeff Farner  
Carrie Beach  
Tom Canfield  
Robert Kerns  
Tony LaColla  
Katherine Carraway  
Ashley Casimir  
Nancy Williams

Location: Alexandria Police Department Headquarters, 3600 Wheeler Road, Community  
Room.

Chair McMahon called the Retreat to order at 9:01 a.m.

Retreat Agenda: [https://www.alexandriava.gov/sites/default/files/2025-08/fy\\_2026\\_pc\\_retreat\\_agenda.pdf](https://www.alexandriava.gov/sites/default/files/2025-08/fy_2026_pc_retreat_agenda.pdf)

▪ How Small Area Plans advance Community Partnerships

Small Area Plans (Slides 2-28 of the presentation)

- Chair McMahon inquired as to the length of Duke Street between Telegraph Road and Landmark Mall? Distance is 5.6 miles according to Google Map. She indicated that there are a lot of businesses and said it is easy to walk from King to Telegraph but challenging from Telegraph to Landmark Mall. She indicated that the Telegraph to Landmark Mall portion could be improved with a tree-lined multi-modal path so people would have somewhere safe to walk and bike along the roadway.
- Commissioner Dube indicated that the warehouse section off Duke Street was designed for train accessibility and now Duke Street is designed for the car. He agreed that we need to make it more walkable.
- Commissioner Manor inquired as to the meaning of the term “City Campus” that is referenced in the presentation? Staff gave examples of City-owned property in the area such as the Witter field parcels, and the T&ES, DASH, ACPS, APD, AFD and Salt Dome facilities.
- Chair McMahon indicated that she rode through the campus on her bike enroute to the Retreat; she indicated the campus should be designed as a place where people can be and would want to be.
- Commissioner Ramirez agreed that the Duke Street planning process could use this opportunity to visualize the City parcels as a campus; she encouraged the area to be looked at in the same manner as developers might envision it through a mixed-use development lens.
- Commissioner Dube indicated that consideration could be given to co-locating departments since several facilities are already here such as APD, the fire station across the street, etc.
- Commissioner Ramirez inquired as to item #2 in the findings in slide #26 titled “Place Matters” and indicated that when you have transit, you bring people and people make neighborhoods thus creating a sense of place.
- Chair McMahon made an observation regarding slide #27 showing the fiscal difference between townhouses and multi-unit development and how transit supports quality of life. However, she observed that if a developer is not onboard with a Small Area Plan (SAP), as a Commissioner, she feels like she is in a difficult position because she has to take the developer at their word that they can’t afford to build what our SAP envisions. She asked what can be done to help property owners pencil-out to meet the vision? Or, does the City wait until the developer meets the vision? She further indicated that townhouses are a good development type to help with transitions, and there are lots of opportunity areas for townhouse infill, but they should be used strategically as a transition from single-unit neighborhoods to transit

- density neighborhoods. She indicated her final observation on slide #27 is that the value of the property type is not affordable to many households. Staff responded by indicating that PEW Charitable Trust has published an article titled [“New Housing Slows Rent Growth”](#); the topic is on new housing production and how new housing production takes rent and sales pressure off the existing rental and housing stock. In short, staff indicated that there is not sufficient stock but, if more housing can be created, costs can be brought down.
- Commissioner Brown indicated he shares the Chair’s concern about the dilemma with which they are faced when a project doesn’t meet the goals of a SAP. Yet; he added, that because there may be a project in front of the Commission, they must decide, at that time, to approve it or to not approve it. He stated his larger perspective is that the U.S. is a democracy and, as such, citizens vote for elected officials who are meant to fulfill residents’ interests around planning processes. He indicated he thinks Alexandria has done an excellent job in ensuring all have a voice in the planning process. He added he also thinks Alexandria’s SAPs do a good job of making sure technical values and input of residents are included so, when projects come along, the projects should be consistent with the SAP.
  - Commissioner Lennihan indicated she likes the images in the presentation around density and thinks they show what is meant by it. She indicated that maximizing what we have in unexpected ways will be beneficial in how we use space, density, parks, etc.
- Long Range Work Plan (Slides 29-32 of the [How Small Area Plans advance Community Partnerships](#) presentation)
    - Commissioner Brown indicated that 5-6 years ago, he said he intended to do a deep dive into Subdivision regulations. He indicated that although he hasn’t delivered on that yet, he will produce his first results in a memorandum to staff later today. He said the memorandum will focus on whether Subdivisions have been compromised as a result of the 2007 Seymour case. Staff indicated that Commissioner Brown’s insights on the matter of Subdivisions would be welcome.
    - Commissioner Dube inquired about the long-range facilities plan and how that relates to the long-range ACPS plan. Principal Planner Katherine Carraway responded to the question and, also, indicated that more information will be forthcoming through upcoming meetings of the City-ACPS Subcommittee.
  - [Planning Documents - Development Review Compendium](#)
    - Chair McMahon asked about the Master Plan Chapters and indicated, besides the SAPs, which topical plans are required to be included in a Master Plan. Staff responded by stating typically topical chapters include land use plans, transportation strategies, economic considerations, forestry or the natural environment, housing, community facilities, and historic resources; they cover elements of a community that are essential to its livability, functionality, and viability.
    - Chair McMahon asked about which document should guide the Commission on projects – the SAP, a topical plan, Zoning Ordinance or another document? Staff responded indicating that when something is referenced in the Zoning Ordinance it becomes more binding than a recommendation in a SAP.

- Commissioner Manor asked when was the Master Plan written? Staff responded stating that most of the SAPs were updated in 1992, but the City has not done an overall update to the Master Plan. Staff added that the City is updating the 1992 SAPs on an individual basis but topical plans are being updated as well.
  - Commissioner Manor asked why use the term “voluntary contributions”? Staff responded that every Zoning Ordinance allows property owners to have an option with their land - a by right choice – but if you want increased allowances available by a SAP, then the City has voluntary contributions to mitigate the impacts of development.
  - Chair McMahon indicated the hierarchy (slide #2) suggests that the Green Building Policy has the same authority as Master Plan chapters – is that right? Is the Green Building Policy more binding than a SAP? Staff indicated they are both advisory; the Green Building Policy sets expectations City-wide, but if a SAP or zoning feature describes City Council’s will more explicitly for that neighborhood then staff would defer to that.
  - Chair McMahon indicated that information in some documents does conflict with information in other documents, thus creating uncertainty across community, the Commission and Council. To help avoid being confused about which document is the authoritative document, it is recommended that staff acknowledge it and how that document may relate to others.
  - Commissioner Brown indicated that he agrees and thinks the prevailing document should be included in staff reports and, more specifically, staff’s analysis should indicate which document(s) is/are the basis for the analysis.
  - Chair McMahon inquired as to whether there are criteria or policies that don’t fall under the Master Plan? Staff indicated there may be some examples and staff can explore and generate a list of examples.
  - Commissioner Brown asked that the policy for a rezoning without a Master Plan be included on the list.
- Survey – Staff Reports
    - Chair McMahon indicated that iLegislate will often crash, and it will take an extremely long time to get back into it when she is reviewing documents and especially when she has to Google something while reviewing documents. Staff indicated that they have heard from ITS that there may be an issue with iPads in terms of their age and staff will follow-up.
    - Chair Mahon suggested including links within the text of a staff report so that Commissioners can go straight to the reference source.
    - Commissioner Ramirez suggested adding bookmarks in the pdf or table of contents, etc.
    - Commissioner Lennihan indicated that sometimes there’s a gap for me when during a hearing there’s a contentious matter discussed but the staff report may not have highlighted it in the same way. She indicated that if there is a real issue, as a Commissioner, she would like to be prepared for the conflict. She added that she would like to look at older approvals which might help her in her preparation for current dockets.

- Commissioner Brown indicated most staff reports recommend approval, but he does not think it is because staff is predisposed to approval, but that staff has worked hard with the applicant to make it “approvable.” He indicated it might be helpful to have a section in the staff report about the evolution of the project which essentially tells us how hard staff had to work to get the project to an approvable level. He said he wonders about when a Commissioner has a differing opinion. He inquired if it would be appropriate to include in the staff report a summary of a Commissioner(s) differing opinion. He also asked if it would be appropriate to create a supplemental staff report that explains why staff’s position remains the same given the differing opinion(s) of a Commissioner(s). He asked does anyone think that’s appropriate?
  - Paul Stoddard indicated that when staff conducts briefings for City Council they’ll ask specifically what the Planning Commission thought about issues raised and then they will ask how the Planning Commission’s issues are being addressed; in some cases, an applicant may make a change for the City Council report to address the Planning Commission’s concerns. In terms of supplemental materials, staff tries to keep the conversation in the same document so that the City Council can see what the Planning Commission said within that document.
  - Commissioner Manor indicated he would like to consider the financial aspects of development issues. He said he thinks we ought to be mindful that empty commercial buildings mean less value, less taxes.
  - Paul Stoddard indicated the City does operate a fiscal impact model.
  - Chair McMahon indicated it is important to focus on the directive that the Planning Commission has been given. She recommended that staff reports be organized so that material, not on the Planning Commission’s direct path of decision-making, go into the background; it may warrant our awareness but it doesn’t fall within our decision-making area. She also indicated that she would place community input in the early part of the staff report before the analysis section.
  - Commissioner Lennihan indicated we want to respect public speakers but what they have to say may not impact where our decision-making lies. She said it is context; it is important, but it’s also a complicated process. The speakers may be valid in their statements, but what they are sharing may not fall within our purview. She said maybe referencing the jurisdiction of the Planning Commission in the staff report would be helpful.
  - Staff indicated that we are trying to provide a summary and not filter the views of community members so moving community input to the early background section is a good idea.
- White Papers: Chair McMahon indicated it is 11:30 a.m. so we are running out of time; she gave the Commission a homework assignment to think about one- or two-page white papers that the Commission may want staff to generate. Some ideas identified include:
    - Staff indicated an example might be rooftop space and how various uses such as solar panels, open space, elevator shafts etc. may be organized.
    - Chair McMahon suggested the challenges and opportunities of co-location of facilities.

- Commissioner Ramirez suggested how policies established now will affect our future in terms of issues of today and tomorrow; how we guide development; how we approach placemaking; etc.
- Commissioner Lennihan indicated a concern that we'll have a pool of money from developers who don't choose to include solar panels.