



## PLANNING COMMISSION

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February 12, 2025

James F. Parajon, City Manager  
City of Alexandria  
301 King Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314

Dear Mr. Parajon:

**Subject:** Civic Engagement for Alexandria City Public Schools George Mason Elementary School Modernization Project

The City of Alexandria and Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) have developed a collaborative approach for advancing school capacity projects, which address key facilities planning needs in the City. This letter offers guidance regarding opportunities to improve civic engagement for future school capacity projects, including involvement of the general public and advisory group members. The Planning Commission believes that striving to uphold the principles of [Resolution 2597 Establishing the City's Civic Engagement Policy](#) is key to ensuring the public engagement process is fair, and that the concepts brought for approval are best placed to serve the community.

We are concerned with several aspects of the recent civic engagement process undertaken by ACPS for the George Mason Elementary School Modernization Project. The Planning Commission actively participated in this project, with one member serving as an advisory committee member. The process run by ACPS has been highly accelerated and offered limited opportunities for direct community feedback, with little to no opportunity for alternative solutions or analysis concerns to be addressed.

The George Mason Elementary project is well grounded on a comprehensive feasibility study. The materials presented by the ACPS Capital Projects team to the community for information and to the Supervisor's Advisory Team for feedback have been uniformly thorough and well organized. The design team is working productively to develop a durable, high-performance facility that is a compelling learning environment. However, of concern are: 1) the great speed with which a single design option was selected, and 2) the fact that all community meetings have been exclusively virtual and without an adequate format for interactive engagement.

### ***Rapid Design Selection without Meaningful Engagement***

On September 4, 2024, *Virtual Community Meeting No.1* was held at which the project was introduced, the existing conditions were reviewed, and three design options were presented. On October 1, 2024, *Virtual Community Meeting No.2* was held at which refinements of the three design options were presented. On October 10, 2024, *The Alexandria School Board* voted to select one design option.

In the 37 days between the public's first look at the concept options and the Board's selection of a single design solution to take forward, broadly held community concerns were expressed about the open space aspect of all three designs, with the desire to explore a building form that would accommodate more open space. The community input was not addressed because ACPS had already determined a three-story design would not be operationally acceptable, and that the timeline was too tight to attempt to create such a design.

- On the issue of timing of involvement and the stage of decision-making, the *Alexandria Civic Engagement Handbook* states: “*Alexandria identifies and involves stakeholders early in decision-making processes. Community members are involved in framing issues before any conclusions have been drawn, requiring early and ongoing communication with participants through each phase in the process.*” (Early Involvement, p. 10)
- On the issue of what constitutes meaningful engagement, the *Alexandria Civic Engagement Handbook* states: “*Alexandria provides opportunities for all community members to participate in an open and unbiased process, free of predetermined outcomes, to consider and deliberate feasible options. The City authentically solicits, acknowledges, incorporates, and responds to community input.*” (Meaningful Engagement, p.12)

The Planning Commission supports full utilization of timely stakeholder input to inform, challenge, and strengthen project designs. Particularly important in advance of critical decision points, this can maximize creative, pragmatic solutions and build durable consensus. In this case an opportunity to do so was missed. Public buildings such as these will stand for decades after they are built and impact generations of young people; to so abbreviate this design process is to forego a rare opportunity to shape a neighborhood for the better.

### ***Exclusively Virtual Engagement without Adequate Interactive Format***

The four virtual community meetings to date have consisted of a highly informative slide presentation followed by Q+A in which questions are submitted only by chat, then read out by the ACPS moderator, and then answered by ACPS staff or a design team member. There is no real-time follow up for questioners, and no opportunity for dialogue among members of the community and/or presenters. It is a relentlessly antiseptic exercise in which the actual voice of a community member is never heard.

- On the issue of selecting appropriate engagement strategies, the *Alexandria Civic Engagement Handbook* states: “*Do not consider online participation the primary method for community engagement. Although it can be efficient, it is less successful at building the kinds of relationships formed during in-person meetings which allow participants to understand*

*each other's' point of view, to brainstorm together, and to reach consensus.” (Engagement Strategies, p.36)*

The Planning Commission understands the need and value of using a virtual medium to reach the broadest group of affected community members. However, the principles of inclusiveness and creative problem-solving are undermined when the virtual format cuts off dialogue and restricts the back-and forth of constructive criticism, among both Advisory Group members and the general public.

### **Recommended Actions**

As similar future projects proceed through to City Council approval, the Planning Commission advises your administration to consider directive 2 of the engagement policy, which describes City Council's responsibility to: *“Ensure that prior to the adoption of public policies which will significantly impact the quality of life of members of the community, (1) the nature of the proposed policy or action has been fully disclosed, (2) the public has had reasonable opportunity to be informed, consulted, involved, or to collaborate on the proposed action, and (3) the decision-making body has had sufficient opportunity fairly to consider and reflect before acting.”*

We encourage your administration to work with City Council, the Alexandria City School Board, and ACPS to embody the spirit and letter of the City's Civic Engagement Policy in crafting community input processes for future school capacity projects that provide opportunities for community members and advisory committee members for meaningful co-creation of future concepts. Through such efforts, we believe that community concerns regarding project concepts may be best addressed by project design teams at a stage when refinements may be comprehensively vetted and appropriately addressed while change is still feasible.

We thank you for your attention to these concerns and your ongoing commitment to robust, collaborative, considerate, and equitable public participation in our City's planning.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nathan M. Macek". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Nathan" being more prominent.

Nathan M. Macek, Chair  
Alexandria Planning Commission

CC:

Planning & Zoning Director Karl Moritz  
Superintendent of Schools Melanie Kay-Wyatt