



February 4, 2020

Nate Macek, Chairman and
Members of the Planning Commission
City Hall
301 King Street, Suite 2100
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

RE: DOCKET ITEM #15: Eisenhower East Small Area Plan Amendment

Dear Chairman Macek and Members of the Planning Commission:

I am writing on behalf of Carlyle Council in regard to the Eisenhower East Small Area Plan Amendment (EESAP) being considered by Planning Commission. Concerns about traffic impacts have been brought to our attention.

Since the 1990s, Carlyle Community Council (CCC) has represented property owners for Carlyle, a 76-acre mixed use, transit-oriented community directly adjacent to the Eisenhower East area covered by this Master Plan Amendment.

Carlyle is home to the highest concentration of workers in the City, including the USPTO campus, as well as multi-unit residential properties and a lively mix of retail, restaurants and open space. A lot has happened since the original Eisenhower East SAP was adopted in 2003. The Carlyle Community has been built up and we have witnessed first-hand the changes occurring in Eisenhower East. Most have been positive, others not.

In particular, traffic congestion has increased dramatically along the Eisenhower corridor. After years of delay, the City is about to embark on the Eisenhower Avenue widening project that should ameliorate certain congestion points. That said, we have concerns about new traffic stresses that will be created with the higher density permitted under this proposal. One possible remedy we support would shorten headways for DASH buses along the corridor. And, providing better connectivity to the rest of Alexandria is long overdue.

In the near term, we understand the City will soon conduct new outreach efforts to the Eisenhower East/Carlyle Community to educate residents and business interests on what to expect during the upcoming street widening construction project. In the development realm, we ask your support for ongoing outreach efforts to keep our residents, workers and businesses informed of the potential consequences generated by the EESAP higher density allowances.



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As such, we look forward to working with the City of Alexandria to become more actively engaged so we are better equipped to assess outcomes or complications that may arise during the upcoming street widening as well as future development projects in Eisenhower East. Thank you for this opportunity to provide our views on this important matter.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Morgan Babcock". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Morgan Babcock
Council Manager

Cc: Phil Weber, CCC President
CCC Board of Directors
City of Alexandria Council Members



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Nate Macek, Chairman and
Members of the Planning Commission

RE: Docket Item 15: Eisenhower East Small Area Plan Amendment

Dear Chairman Macek and Members of the Planning Commission,

We write with partial support and optimistic enthusiasm for the Eisenhower East Small Area Plan (EESAP). The City has worked hard to balance commercial and residential bases around Eisenhower. We appreciate the effort and offer support for much of the plan. However, we have also noted important issues with the plan that must be addressed before it can be adopted.

Constraints Vs Incentives

Alexandria struggles with a perception of being unfriendly to business. Altering the EESAP to incentivize rather than constrain potential developers in Eisenhower East would help change this impression. Parts of the current version of the EESAP contain too many constraints and create uncertainty for developers. Unchanged, this will lead to decades of empty lots as opposed to productive sites.

We suggest that early builders in Eisenhower East be considered early investors and be given more leeway. Once Eisenhower is a success the bargaining position for attracting development will improve. As discussed in the plan, the desirability of this area will play out over coming decades. We are growing, but for now we must foster development, not constrain it.

The City and developers share a goal of more density. Instead of constraining developers at the cost of that density, City Council and staff should incentivize preferable development. We further agree with Mayor Wilson's recent proposal that cities like Alexandria work with the Commonwealth of Virginia to increase state investment in factors such as affordable housing.

Affordable Housing

The Housing Department has spent many evenings with community members, developers, and attorneys to develop the current plan. It shows. The affordable housing requirements and bonuses are largely reasonable for developers. At the Eisenhower Partnership, we commend

the goal and the effort. However, we cannot support this passage, as it adds unnecessary uncertainty to every developer's process:

“In cases where the City believes that more than ten percent of affordable housing can be efficiently achieved based on additional density granted, and/or through City technical or financial assistance, a third-party financial analysis will similarly be required to confirm the feasibility of staff's recommendation.”

Developers often spend multiple years and millions of dollars negotiating plans. If they are subject to conditions that could restart the process, especially the end of the deal, they will naturally build elsewhere. Several comments for the EESAP sought to foster certainty in the developer process, so we would like to see this concept addressed or removed. Before this amendment, ten percent affordable housing was intended to apply to additional density over the allotment of each block. We can support that goal as it was originally written.

Ownership

The plan makes no mention of property ownership, as opposed to rental units. We would like the plan to address ownership, as it makes residents more likely to build wealth, form neighborhood bonds, care for the property, and become civically engaged.

However, to again quote Mayor Wilson's [recent column in the Alexandria Gazette](#), Alexandria's metrics are sharply trending toward renters.

“In Alexandria, our ownership stock has been largely stagnant for the past decade. Ten years ago, we had 21,883 single-family homes. Today, we have 200 less. Ten years ago, we had 18,247 condos. Today, we have just about 400 more. Now our rental stock has grown, during that period, from 33,467 apartments a decade ago, to 40,188 today. Included in these numbers are nearly 1,500 committed affordable units in the past 6 years.”

As Commissioner Lyle stated in an article for ALXNow, housing, such as back-to-back units, two-over-two homes, and rows of housing with back-facing garages can

“...provide an ownership entry into the market that doesn't have to be funded by [the city housing authority] that can be entered into by young couples. We are doing ourselves a disservice as a city if we don't start looking at different housing types and get over ourselves.”

Garages

Requirements for one level of underground parking and screening for above grade parking could stall future projects. While underground parking and screened above grade parking are

preferable they have substantial cost implications. Conversions of garages to usable spaces are costly under the best of conditions. The City will not be involved in helping them happen.

To incentivize development, the City should make requirements such as convertibility of garage space optional. Leaving this requirement in will deter development based on the untestable hypothesis that it won't be needed for cars later. Should it occur, what to do with an empty garage is an owner's problem. The plan should not force buildings to be designed for it.

Placemaking, Parks, and Livability

The plan needs a centralized gathering space. Let's build a plaza or square that becomes the heart of the community. Since it is in the far Northwest corner, John Carlyle Square cannot serve that function, especially for neighborhood 1. The square must be a key attraction in and of itself. By its nature, the space under the metro tracks will not suffice for this, although this park should proceed as a good use of otherwise undesirable space.

Green space, play areas, electricity, acoustics, public art, water, and light are all important to making such a place desirable. These aspects are not mentioned in the parks section.

Having several spaces that are hard to describe and appear tethered to individual buildings prevents sizable things like movie nights, small outdoor concerts, farmers markets, and beer gardens from succeeding. The footprint of these small parks is inadequate for the massive number of people that will live and work on Eisenhower.

The plan should provide a means for developers to propose central gathering space options. If developers are overly constrained and told to focus on individual gathering spaces, they won't pitch good ideas for central spaces. We understand a steering committee is being developed to understand the City's needs, how to accomplish them, and how to pay for them.

The plan also needs provisions for City investment in livability so people will be attracted to life on Eisenhower Avenue. We ask the City to focus on making retail and restaurants more viable in this area through reduced costs of design and compliance with demands for benefits.

Traffic

The plan cannot be adopted without funding for traffic improvements. The plan acknowledges traffic will be terrible, but offers only to tinker with signalization and crosswalks.

Eisenhower needs a vision for taming and deterring traffic. Cut-through traffic is rampant, [residents are angry](#), commuters are trapped each day, and the coming Wegman's project at the end of a beltway ramp will attract shoppers from around the region at busy times of day. Incoming commuters regularly travel to and from areas not served by Metro. Eisenhower's bus service, neither current or planned, is not frequent enough for commuters to use regularly.

Projected development over several years suggests the impact of increasing traffic will be absorbed slowly, but this is misleading. Existing traffic is already approaching crisis levels. Tenants of existing buildings can't access their garage entrances due to long lines of cut through traffic, and owners dread bad online reviews. If not addressed, this problem could make it difficult to sell lots, causing avoidable economic damage.

We suggest working with developers, the Commonwealth of Virginia, even the National Science Foundation to fund new ideas for solving traffic problems. The City is adding new lanes and traffic patterns to Eisenhower, but the project is [expensive and unpopular](#). It likely will not solve the issue and despite more pavement over decades, [traffic problems have grown worse](#).

Conversely, we have not tried using the [bus lane built into the Wilson Bridge](#), variable speed limit technology, [adaptive traffic signals](#), real-time tracking and responsiveness for our busses, or pedestrian counting systems. Smartphone GPS apps have made Eisenhower increasingly attractive to cut-through-drivers and commuters that could be taking public transportation. Slowing the flow of traffic down Eisenhower with adaptive lights at peak hours could disincentivize these drivers, to free up traffic throughout Alexandria for those who live and work here. If we do not respond to these changes, we will be subject to whatever they unleash.

Accessibility

Eisenhower Avenue needs more porosity and connectivity with the rest of Alexandria. It is positive that the staff recognizes the tunnel by Telegraph road to Duke Street needs to be expanded, but this will not suffice. The only entry points to the rest of the City from Eisenhower are the Telegraph overpass, dangerous for pedestrians and drivers, the Carlyle and Holland Lane entrances, which are not designed for heavy traffic, and Van Dorn, far in the West End.

For decades, Eisenhower has functioned as a barrier to cut-through-traffic for neighborhoods to the north, forcing traffic jams in Eisenhower East. As the City stakes development money and effort on this area, this unfair and illogical situation cannot continue. At the least, busses should begin to run between Duke and Eisenhower, as additional options are explored.

Attractive amenities such as the Wegmans will make roads and pedestrian bridges and tunnels more palatable to engaged citizens north of Duke Street. As noted in the above traffic section, controlling the flow of traffic off the beltway with additional lights may also prevent this from becoming the problem these homeowners fear. However, politically palatable or not, the success of Eisenhower will depend on these connections and a more distributed traffic model.

School

The plan states that it will integrate necessary social infrastructure, including a public school, to make up a complete community. It further states that it may co-locate the school with other uses such as affordable housing. This is a controversial and experimental pairing, ostensibly to

bypass the affordable housing rules placed on commercial developers. No one knows if it will work or become a problem. We should not bet some of Alexandria's most expensive commercial land on it.

Alexandria needs another school. However, better locations are close by, just over the Telegraph bridge. Most parents would rather send a young child a mile by bus to a green stretch of land than into a high-traffic, extremely dense urban area, complete with high rises and a Metro. Should this experiment fail, and render the school a problem, not a benefit, it would repel young couples from the area. The City should build a school in the central or western portions of Eisenhower Avenue that are less commercially desirable and not slated for high density, rather than in an expensive, high-risk area.

Logistically, a school next to the Metro station would be a traffic disaster for little net gain, as students are unlikely to arrive via Metro. School busses and drop offs would add to an already untenable peak traffic situation, creating a danger for students.

Land acquisition will be costly and difficult. ACPS and the City would need to offer incentives to developers to obtain land at a below market price. The City would need to make generous zoning exceptions, including those required in other buildings such as unlimited height, no design review, and no above ground parking. The school's footprint would be smaller than all comparable Alexandria schools, likely hurting its rating. Finding acres of open space for a play area will be difficult.

Conclusion

Although we detail the issues we found with the Eisenhower East Small Area plan, we respect the time and effort that has gone into this process. Much of the plan is good and we appreciate staff working hard on an optimistic vision of the future on Eisenhower. Should the commission adopt the ideas we have listed here, we would be happy to fully support it.

Sincerely,



Daniel Beason
Vice President
The Eisenhower Partnership

