



City of Falls Church Village Preservation and Improvement Society
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July 12, 2010

Letter to City of Falls Church Officials and Interested Citizens:

We are pleased to provide you with the attached policy statement by the Village Preservation and Improvement Society (VPIS) titled "*Growth and Development*," adopted by the VPIS Board of Directors last month.

With this policy statement, VPIS encourages the City of Falls Church to renew its commitment to manage growth and development while protecting residential neighborhoods, to preserve the environment, and to retain the historic and cultural features of the community. The VPIS Board of Directors believes there are five key policies which must be followed by the City:

- 1) Support the Adopted City Comprehensive Plan;
- 2) Support High Quality Residential Neighborhoods;
- 3) Support Strong Architectural and Landscape Design;
- 4) Favor the Environment; and
- 5) Build Commercial Revenues with More Diverse Businesses.

VPIS will promote the implementation of these policies to insure that these goals are accomplished. For example, VPIS will support the policies goals by implementing our programs (e.g.; tree planting, development of gardens and green spaces, and community grants), by supporting changes to the City Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinances, by educating City residents through our website, newsletter, and special events, and by encouraging other City organizations to support these policies.

VPIS looks forward to working with you to manage growth and development in the City of Falls Church in the years ahead. Please contact us at www.VPIS.org if you have questions.

Sincerely,

Karl Ensign
President

Michael Volpe
Vice President

Jeff Peterson
Immediate Past President

Attachment: *Policy Statement on Growth and Development for the City of Falls Church*



FALLS CHURCH VILLAGE PRESERVATION AND IMPROVEMENT SOCIETY

STATEMENT OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT JUNE 2010

Today, City of Falls Church residents are actively debating issues related to land use, growth, and economic development. A major concern in this discussion is the recent decline in property values resulting in calls for expanded development to generate more revenue to pay for government services, especially maintaining the high quality of the City schools. The Village Preservation and Improvement Society (VPIS) has actively participated in discussions of growth and development in the City since the mid-1960's. The VPIS Board of Directors considered these issues over the past several months and adopted this policy statement on growth and development at its June 2010 meeting.

BACKGROUND

VPIS has consistently encouraged the City to manage growth and development so as to protect neighborhoods, preserve the environment, and retain historic and cultural features of the community.

- o VPIS was reinstated in 1965 to prevent the destruction of the historic Lawton House by the proposed extension of Park Avenue.
- o VPIS promoted creation of a Tree Commission and Tree Ordinance and created the Neighborhood Tree Program to keep neighborhoods across the City green.
- o VPIS promoted the acquisition of the Cherry Hill farmhouse and barn.
- o VPIS promoted the acquisition and landscaping of the bike trail.
- o For almost 50 years, VPIS has promoted outstanding architecture and design by recognizing excellence in building and landscape projects in the City with awards and plaques.
- o VPIS has been active in major City "visioning" projects including revisions of the Comprehensive Plan and the "Streetscape" project.
- o VPIS provided financial support for the preservation of the historic State Theater.

- o VPIS has actively supported preservation of parks and open space and acquisition of additional parkland and open space.
- o VPIS has supported numerous community garden and beautification projects throughout the City and at City schools.
- o VPIS has adopted specific and challenging environmental goals for the City and actively promotes adoption of programs to accomplish these goals.

POLICY STATEMENT

Although the City is facing unprecedented fiscal challenges, the fundamental elements of the community, including its physical infrastructure and human resources, remain strong. The City should continue to rely on and implement the existing Comprehensive Plan, last updated in 2004 – 2005, including key elements of the Plan related to Land Use and Economic Development described in Chapter 4 (see attached goals).

In addition, in light of new information concerning fiscal limitations and recent experiences with major development projects, the Comprehensive Plan should be implemented giving special attention to:

- o protecting residential neighborhoods;
- o supporting strong architectural and landscape design;
- o protecting the environment; and
- o building the tax base by expanding commercial revenues through a new focus on recruiting a more diverse range of business enterprises to the City.

Collectively, these policies promote development that will provide the City with needed revenue while preserving the characteristics of the City that make it attractive to developers as a place to invest and desirable to existing and new residents as place to live and do business. Each of these five key policies is described in more detail below.

POLICY #1: Support the Adopted City Comprehensive Plan

The City made a major investment in the review and revision of the Comprehensive Plan in 2004 – 2005. VPIS actively participated in that process and believes that the final Plan is sound and should continue to provide both overall direction and detailed guidance for future development. More specifically, VPIS believes that the Plan, especially Chapter 4 relating to Land Use and Development, articulates a sound vision for promoting economic development while preserving core community values, such as protecting the desirable features of residential neighborhoods, environmental quality, and

historical features. **Despite the daunting fiscal challenges the City faces, the City should implement the vision for growth and development described in the Plan.**

The specific goals for Land Use and Economic Development described in the Plan are identified in an attachment. These goals are intended to be implemented together and function as a whole. The City should actively work with the development community to design projects that recognize these goals. For example, the Plan supports major new projects in the City associated with West Falls Church Metro station.

VPIS has participated in review process for most major projects in the City and has urged that projects be revised to more closely fit the Comprehensive Plan. In a few cases, VPIS has objected to projects that address some of these goals but not others. At the same time, VPIS recognizes that no major project is perfect and has not objected to other major projects.

POLICY #2: Support High Quality Residential Neighborhoods

VPIS encourages the City to use the existing Comprehensive Plan as a base to expand and strengthen programs and policies in several key areas. An especially important project now underway is the revision of the City zoning code. **VPIS strongly encourages the City to expedite work to revise the zoning code and promptly adopt comprehensive revisions that are badly needed to strengthen and improve the code. The code must also be strictly enforced.**

High quality residential neighborhoods are a defining characteristic of the City. Residents value their neighborhoods and want the City to take reasonable steps to prevent residential development that would undermine the "livability" of existing neighborhoods. Revision of the zoning code offers many opportunities to implement the vision on the Comprehensive Plan, including changes that will support the quality of neighborhoods throughout the City.

Examples of steps that the City can take to protect the quality of residential neighborhoods include:

- o managing density and traffic so streets are safe for children and pedestrians;
- o preventing lot line-to-lot line construction that destroys the trees and green surfaces that soak up rainwater and prevent flooded basements; and
- o scrupulously administering the zoning code and making needed changes to clarify requirements to avoid misinterpretations.

POLICY #3: Support Strong Architectural and Landscape Design

VPIS has a long commitment to preserving the remarkable architectural heritage expressed by many of the homes and other buildings around the City. Historic homes play an important role in defining the character of residential neighborhoods. Well designed buildings, such as the Mary Riley Styles Public Library, demonstrate the City's commitment to design that is at a human scale and consistent with nearby buildings.

In addition, VPIS has strongly supported the elements of the Comprehensive Plan that express the City's commitment to encouraging new development that complements the architectural traditions of the City and that is at a scale that does not overwhelm treasured buildings, such as the historic Falls Church. VPIS promoted development of the existing voluntary "Design Guidelines" that reinforce the overall policies of the Comprehensive Plan by providing developers with clear direction and examples for multiple design elements.

Sustaining the architectural heritage of the community will encourage the kind of thoughtful development that both expands tax revenues and conveys to new and old residents the sense of place that is Falls Church. **VPIS recommends that the City formally adopt the "Design Guidelines" as binding requirements of the zoning code and affirmatively promote these requirements early in the project development process.** These actions will reinforce with developers the City's commitment to top-notch architectural and landscape design.

POLICY #4: Favor the Environment

In the several years since the approval of the Comprehensive Plan, the importance of environmental protection in both residential and commercial development projects has increased dramatically. Communities are doing more to make sure that developers account for the impacts of storm water to avoid flooding of neighboring basements and damage to local streams. Commercial developers have increasingly recognized the need to document measures to protect the environment through certification programs like the "Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design" (i.e.: "LEED" program). And, growing understanding of the threats posed by a changing climate has reinforced the need to reduce energy use by designing more walkable communities and energy efficient buildings.

VPIS encourages the City to continue to implement the environmental protection policies identified in the Comprehensive Plan. At the same time, the City should work with homeowners and the development community to encourage projects that go beyond minimum requirements. Several recent projects approved in

the City have included a commitment to LEED certification for buildings based on advanced environmental and energy management practices. VPIS has adopted specific and measurable goals for improvement in five key environmental areas including increased tree canopy, increased solid waste recycling, and promotion of building environmental standards (see *Five Environmental Goals for Falls Church; 2009*).

In the long run, a strong commitment to environmentally sustainable infrastructure will make Falls Church more attractive to developers and inspire investments in high value projects that will be a long-term financial asset to the City.

POLICY #5: Build Commercial Revenues with More Diverse Businesses

The City needs to build its revenue base, and expanding commercial revenues must be a key part of that effort. For several years, the City has invested significant time and resources in review of large scale development projects. Some of these projects, such as the Read Building and the Flower Building have been successfully completed, while others have had mixed success (e.g.: the Pearson and the Spectrum) and still others have not been successful (e.g.: recent proposal for City Center). Although these large projects have the potential to bring major revenue increases, they often also require substantial time and resources from City staff and limit the attention that can be given to bringing a wider range of commercial enterprises to the City. In the present economic conditions, these large projects are increasingly difficult to finance and poor financing makes commitments to high value projects with high quality design and environmental attributes more difficult.

Falls Church is a strong community at many levels, but perhaps one of its strongest elements is the network of local business owners. These established businesses, many of which are locally-owned, support each other through organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce and many give generously to support the schools and other civic projects, such as affordable housing.

As an alternative to focusing on recruiting major projects, the City should expand efforts to promote Falls Church as a small city that is friendly to a wide range of business enterprises. Rather than trying for major development projects that are revenue "home runs," the City should give top priority to getting "base hits" by recruiting a diverse range of businesses to the City and encouraging expansion of businesses already in the City. As noted in the report by City consultants Hyett Palma, Inc. in 1991, "incremental" development strategies can still be very aggressive and action oriented. The City has been attractive to many professionals with small office needs and those spaces have performed well with high occupancies and professional business taxes.

Steps the City could take to actively promote location of more diverse businesses to the City and expansion of existing businesses include:

- o temporary adjustment of local fees and other financial incentives;
- o city-wide promotion of available commercial office and retail space;
- o maintaining high standards for commercial development that make the City a good business investment over the long-term;
- o coordination with a network of existing businesses in the City;
- o expand marketing of the City to commercial real estate brokers throughout the metropolitan area; and
- o better documentation of the very high quality schools available to City residents and wider dissemination of this information.

CONCLUSION

The financial challenges facing the City are serious and unlikely to improve significantly in the near future. In order to support outstanding quality schools and other City services, the City needs to expand its tax base, especially its commercial tax base. VPIS believes that the existing Comprehensive Plan offers a reasonable blueprint for responsible economic development that guides development to appropriate areas of the City and sets common-sense boundaries for redevelopment of residential neighborhoods. VPIS also believes that implementation of the Plan would be improved by a renewed commitment to:

- o promoting high quality architectural and landscape design;
- o preserving the desirable features of residential neighborhoods;
- o encouraging environmentally sustainable infrastructure; and
- o expanding the commercial tax base by providing new incentives to encourage a diverse range of businesses to locate in the City and encourage existing businesses to expand.

In sum, VPIS believes that the surest strategy for strengthening the commercial and residential tax base in the City is to build on its reputation as a quality community earned over many years. The best way to strengthen the residential tax base is to commit to policies to make already desirable neighborhoods even more desirable, rather than to maximize development on a square foot basis. The best way to strengthen the commercial tax base is not to lower standards but to maintain the commitment to high standards for design and environmental quality that assures investors that Falls Church will be an attractive and successful place to do business for years to come.

ATTACHMENT

CITY OF FALLS CHURCH COMPREHENSIVE PLAN GOALS FOR LAND USE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

GOAL 1. Encourage development and redevelopment that is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan and its Future Land Use Map.

GOAL 2. Encourage sustainable development within the City.

GOAL 3. Adopt a land use pattern and development plans that increase transportation efficiency and transit use, and decrease single occupancy automobile dependency.

GOAL 4. Ensure that the Zoning Ordinance is user-friendly and is achieving the type of development that the City desires.

GOAL 5. Pursue interjurisdictional cooperation on regional issues.

GOAL 6. Guide land use and development such that it will not harm water quality and will not increase stormwater management concerns.

GOAL 7. Preserve and improve the identity, character, and integrity of residential neighborhoods.

GOAL 8. Protect residential neighborhoods from the impact of commercial development and from other nonresidential uses.

GOAL 9. Provide the appropriate level of commercial uses within the City that meets the needs of residents and supports the economic vitality of the City.

GOAL 10. Facilitate redevelopment and revitalization in existing commercial and industrial areas.

GOAL 11. Provide for mixed-use development areas composed of retail, office, and residential uses.

GOAL 12. Ensure that parking solutions enhance the character and efficiency of commercial areas.

GOAL 13. Develop a City Center for Falls Church, near the intersection of Broad and Washington Streets to include shopping, offices, recreation, residential, and civic uses.

GOAL 14. Promote efficient use of land within the City's commercial corridors.

GOAL 15. Encourage the retention and expansion of existing businesses.

GOAL 16. Determine what types of businesses will be assets and market the City to attract them.

GOAL 17. Ensure clear and efficient administrative procedures, policies, and ordinances that will attract and retain the type of office and commercial enterprises necessary to achieve the City's Vision.