The Falls Church Village Preservation and Improvement Society

April 21, 2023

Mayor Tarter and Members of the City Council
City of Falls Church
300 Park Avenue
Falls Church, VA 22046

Subject: VPIS Priority Amendments to the Proposed FY 2024 City Budget

Dear Mayor Tarter and Members of the City Council:

The Board of the Village Preservation and Improvement Society (VPIS) is writing to urge you to adopt several high priority amendments to the proposed FY 2024 Falls Church City budget including:

- increased support for work related to trees, landscaping, and City gardens;
- acceleration of funding for items related to energy and climate change; and
- addition of a total of 4 open hours per week at the Mary Riley Styles Library.

The VPIS Board applauds the City's recent efforts to revise employee compensation, invest in staff training, and take other steps to reduce staff turnover and improve employee retention. We hope that these investments will address issues related to delayed or reduced services in recent years.

The VPIS Board strongly urges the Council to adopt several priority amendments to the proposed expenditures while working within the proposed revenue framework, including the current property tax rate.

1. **Increase Work Related to Trees, Landscaping, and City Gardens:** The City's mature trees and tree canopy provide diverse and significant benefits to the community including reduction in summer temperatures, effective retention of rainfall and

stormwater flood reduction, increased property values, reduced energy use in homes and buildings, improved human health, and support of wildlife. Landscaping throughout the City and maintenance of City gardens also provide aesthetic value and are a critical contributor to making Falls Church an attractive and desirable community. VPIS has for many years managed the Neighborhood Tree Program that plays a critical role in sustaining tree canopy and maintaining Falls Church's designation as a "Tree City". VPIS has also implements diverse projects to improve gardens and streetscapes.

The City's management of trees, landscaping, and gardens has suffered due to staff turnover and inadequate staffing levels. The City should make funding for increased staff in this area a priority returning to earlier staffing of 6 FTE, including support for an "Urban Forestry Crew Leader (1.00 FTE) $100,000 identified in the budget as a "Future Priority".

In addition, several other investments identified in the budget as "Future Priorities" should be added to the FY 2024 budget including:

- New Chipper $90,000; and
- Tree Inventory Update $100,000.

We strongly urge the City Council to increase funding for staff and other priority investments in departments providing services related to trees, landscaping, and gardens. The VPIS Board supports the proposed "downtown beautification" tax, but this new funding alone is not sufficient to restore these critical services on a community-wide basis.

2. **Acceleration of Funding for Items Related to Energy and Climate Change:** The City has adopted ambitious goals for energy use and reductions in release of greenhouse gases causing climate change and is now in the process of developing plans and projects to achieve these goals. The VPIS Board has urged you on several occasions to expand efforts to better manage energy use as needed to meet climate change goals (see letters of April 21, 2022 and May 14, 2021).

   The report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released just last month makes a compelling case that the world is on the brink of catastrophic warming, noting "There is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a livable and sustainable future for all (very high confidence)."

   Although we applaud the City's investment in contract support for the further development of plans and projects to address its adopted energy and climate goals, this planning process will not be complete prior to FY 2024. The proposed budget includes several key climate-related investments, including funding for electric vehicles. But, the budget also identifies (page GF-32) as future priorities a range of critical unfunded investments including:

- Virtual Power Purchase Agreement Planning Consultant ($9,000);
- Energy Data Management Software ($14,000);
- Energy Audits of Government Facilities ($18,000); and
- 100% Renewable Energy Credits (RECs) for City Operations ($12,600).

We strongly urge the Council not to miss the chance to make FY 2024 investments for energy management and climate change and to begin now to support projects that are clearly needed and within the scope of plans now under development, including at a minimum the four specific investments identified above.

3. **Additional Library Hours:** The budget proposes to fund two additional hours at the Mary Riley Styles Library, increasing open hours from 54 to 56 per week and extending hours from 3:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday. This investment is badly needed but not sufficient. The Library Board of Trustees recommended funding an additional four hours per week, extending weekend hours from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. The proposed budget identifies these additional hours as a possible use of "contingency funds" included in the budget that might cover this and other needs.

   Extending weekend hours is critical to allowing Falls Church residents who work during the week full access to the Library. Many parents work during the week and are only able to bring their children to the Library on weekends and additional hours will encourage parents and children to use the Library together. In addition, the recently renovated Library building includes significantly expanded meeting rooms and event space for Library sponsored events (e.g., author talks, musical events) and for community use (e.g., local organization meetings, student groups, tutoring sessions). Expanded weekend hours would encourage and promote these uses and provide a significant benefit to the community.

   VPIS appreciates that the Library plays a central role in the Falls Church community and is an essential resource for maintaining local history. VPIS also strongly supported the recent Library expansion and renovation project. **We strongly urge the Council to amend the budget to direct contingency funds already identified in the proposed budget to the additional two open hours per week for a total of four additional hours.**

We look forward to working with you to develop the best possible FY 2024 budget for the City of Falls Church.

Sincerely,

Mark Gross
VPIS President
on behalf of the VPIS Board

cc: City Manager