The Falls Church Village Preservation and Improvement Society

April 17, 2024

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

Subject: VPIS Comments on the Proposed FY 2025 City Budget

Dear Mayor Hardi and Members of the City Council:

The Board of the Village Preservation and Improvement Society (VPIS) urges the Council to adopt several priority amendments to the proposed FY 2025 Budget and Capital Improvement Plan. These suggestions will work within the proposed revenue framework, including the proposed tax rate adjustment.

1. **Restore the Neighborhood Tree Program:** VPIS and the City have worked together for over twenty years to implement the Neighborhood Tree Program (NTP) planting hundreds of trees throughout the City at a very modest cost. These trees reduce urban heat, soak up stormwater, and provide aesthetic value. At a time when extensive new development is eliminating mature trees across the City and slowing progress toward the goal regional goal of 50 percent tree canopy, the City should be expanding the NTP, not proposing to suspend and defund it.

   The proposed budget proposes to maintain staffing and funding for urban forestry while also proposing to suspend the NTP without an explanation of why this is necessary. Given the long history of cooperation between VPIS and the City, it is unfortunate that the City did not communicate its interest in suspending the program to the VPIS Board prior to proposing program suspension in the Budget. The budget also identifies "Priorities for Future Funding" including two new positions for $220,000 indicating that this funding would allow for "programs on hold to be restored".

The Council should maintain the operation of the NTP. We believe this is important and can be accomplished. We also support including additional staffing now that is currently listed as "Priorities for Future Funding."

2. **Expand Support for Implementation of New Energy and Climate Change Plans:** The City has just adopted ambitious plans for energy use and reductions in release of greenhouse gases causing climate change. In this first year of implementation, it is critical that the City follow-through with the staff support and funding needed to be sure that these plans get off to a good start and begin making progress toward 2030 greenhouse gas reduction goals.

   Staff support for implementation of both the community and general government energy plans is proposed from the single FTE now also covering all the other City sustainability and environmental matters. We appreciate that staff from all departments will support energy plan implementation efforts, but central management of this effort is needed and will require additional staff support. The budget proposes an increase in contract support of just $50,000, which is not sufficient to advance the many projects proposed in the new plans for near-term implementation.

   The City should provide new, dedicated staff to manage the implementation of City energy and climate plans along with additional funding needed to support this work.

3. **Support Additional Library Hours:** The budget proposes to fund two additional hours at the Mary Riley Styles Library, increasing open hours from 56 to 58 per week and extending hours from 4:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday.

   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.

   The Council should approve the proposed increase in weekend hours at the Library.

4. **Clarify Funding for Community Arts and Culture:** The draft budget describes "Priorities for the Future" related to community arts and culture, including additional funding of $10,000 for competitive grants to Falls Church nonprofits and for arts projects. The budget also describes new FY2025 funding of $25,000 for "materials and supplies" for a new grant to the Levine School of Music. It is unclear whether this proposed grant was made as part of a competitive process.

   There are several issues related to the proposal:

   - City grants to nonprofit organizations for cultural programs should be limited to those headquartered in Falls Church;
   - all City grants to nonprofit organizations for cultural programs should be competitive (i.e., not funded outside the normal competitive process);
   - the funding available for City nonprofit programs and events is small compared to the benefits and should be modestly increased.

   The Council should maintain policies providing that:

   - City arts and culture grants be limited to nonprofit organizations headquartered in Falls Church;
   - City grants for arts and cultural activities be competitive; and
   - overall funding for arts and culture grants be modestly increased.

   The Levine School may provide valuable cultural services to City residents, and the City schools are providing the Levine School with space at Oak Street Elementary. The Levine School, however, is a large, regional operation and is not headquartered in Falls Church, and it is unclear whether there was competition for the proposed grant. This fund has always been intended to support Falls Church-based nonprofits, primarily through competitive grants.

   Given the importance of increasing grant support for local nonprofits, the $25,000 proposed for "materials and supplies" for the Levine School should be redirected into the City fund to support competitive grants for local nonprofits.

5. **Develop Investment Plan for Property Yard:** The FY 2025-2030 Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) proposes to use debt starting in FY 2028 for a $30 million investment in upgrades to the existing property yard subject to approval by referendum.

   There are several issues associated with the project as proposed:

   - the need for a total replacement of the existing buildings is stated in the CIP but not well documented or explained;

- the project cost is a significant portion of City debt authority, would preempt other City debt financed projects (e.g., significant uncertainty remains about future capital costs related to sewers), and is not yet justified as a least cost approach;
- the property yard could be included in private investment and we should not now preclude inclusion of property yard space in future private projects; and
- we are unaware of data supporting the $30 million figure.

Despite the significant uncertainty concerning this investment, the City CIP proposes that the Council endorse a major investment of $30 million in FY 2028 based on very preliminary, insufficient justification.

A better approach is for the Council to approve new funding in the CIP at a level adequate to continue the assessment of needed property yard improvements, possibly coordinate with potential future private developers, and only then present a more considered proposal. The proposed commitment of $30 million in FY 2028 is premature and should be removed from this year's CIP.

We look forward to working with you to develop the best possible FY 2025 budget for the City of Falls Church.

Sincerely,

Mark Gross
VPIS President
on behalf of the VPIS Board

cc: City Manager
Planning Commission