

Arlington County's Smart Growth Journey Continues - Implementing the General Land Use Plan

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Department of Community Planning, Housing
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Robert J. Duffy, AICP, Planning Director



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At the 2017 American Planning Association (APA) national conference held in New York on May 6 – 9, Arlington County received the Gold 2017 National Planning Achievement Award for Implementation of its General Land Use Plan (GLUP). This major award recognized Arlington's unprecedented and transformational commitment to community based and sustainable planning, growth management and Transit Oriented Development (TOD). The following provides an overview of our County's planning journey, allied commitment to community engagement, strategic approach for addressing and adapting to emerging issues and opportunities, and the successful application of award winning planning program and process beyond the Metro transit oriented corridors.

Introduction

For over 50 years, Arlington County Virginia's General Land Use Plan (GLUP) has served as the primary guide for the County's Smart Growth Journey. During this period, Arlington has experienced a remarkable transformation from a suburban, auto centric collection of neighborhoods to one of this country's most recognized examples of the benefits of smart growth, sustainability, walkability and Transit Oriented Development. As a regional, national and international model of smart growth, Arlington, has demonstrated through the GLUP, and its allied comprehensive plan elements, policies, programs and zoning, how the mistakes and impacts of American suburban sprawl can be corrected and avoided through a visionary and continuous commitment to innovative planning. As noted by Christopher Leinberger, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution "Arlington is the most important suburban place in the country," and "If you don't understand Arlington, you don't understand the future of the country."¹

Transformational Journey Begins

Arlington County's historic commitment to visionary and implementation based planning began in the 1960's as northern Virginia and the Metro Washington region were first faced with the impacts of expanding suburban sprawl, accelerating reliance on the automobile and the introduction of the interstate highway system. The Arlington County Board, Planning Commission, citizens and professional planners recognized early that significant impacts would result if a primary land use planning and policy guide was not in place. The importance of focusing growth, preserving low density neighborhoods, and fully integrating land use and transportation planning were key planning principles.

¹The Suburb of the Future is Here, Salon, July 6, 2014.

As regional planning advanced for both Interstate 66 and the Metro transit system in the 1960's and 1970's, the County fully embraced long range planning, including a landmark decision that recognized the importance that transit could play in both concentrating growth and supporting and activating existing and potential mixed use transit centers. The "Bulls Eye" concept for the Rosslyn – Ballston corridor was a visionary land use policy decision that relocated the planned Metro Orange line away from the median of Interstate 66 to the commercial spine of central Arlington along Wilson and Clarendon Boulevards. This decision was incorporated as part of the GLUP in 1975 and, together with early transit based planning for the Jefferson – Davis Metro corridor and Pentagon City, marked one of the earliest commitments by a suburban community to what today is considered Smart Growth. The

County expanded on the GLUP's core planning principles in the form of sector plans for each Metro station area in order to provide further guidance on the County's expectations for transit oriented growth. In addition, the County developed incentive based zoning to enable urban form and design features envisioned by the sector plans.

Unprecedented Commitment to Planning

Arlington County's commitment to implementation of the GLUP has resulted in a transformation that has avoided the commercial sprawl characteristic of much of suburban America and conserved the quality and diversity of neighborhood life. Nancy Iacomini, Chair of the Arlington County Planning Commission, notes "The long-range planning efforts started by Arlington County leaders in the 1960s and the County's continued implementation of the GLUP and the expansion of planning in strategic and thoughtful ways has been key to achieving the high quality of life we enjoy in Arlington".

Today, as a result of Arlington's Smart Growth Journey and supporting GLUP, residents, businesses, employees and visitors daily experience the results of an unprecedented commitment to planning that's success can be measured as follows: seven (7) mixed use, walkable and bicycle friendly Metro transit villages with over 71,000 (220,400 total population) residents and 136,900 (211,000 total jobs) employees; over 6 million square feet of highly diverse retail space has been retained or developed; the 36 million sq. ft. of office space within the two Metro corridors is greater than many downtowns; focused high density commercial growth within 11% of the County's 25 square miles and one-quarter mile of Metro stations produce nearly 50% of the County's real estate revenue; residential demand remains high with over 8,000 units constructed since 2010; low density neighborhoods and commercial districts enjoy one of the lowest tax burden in the Washington Metropolitan area; over 27% of residents rely on transit for their daily work commute; overall reduction of traffic on local streets and an increase in the number of residents who walk to work that is almost double the national average; 12% of residents have no car and less than 41% have 2 or more cars; and over 6% residents telework.

Planning and Civic Engagement - The Arlington Way

Arlington County's progressive commitment to sustained community based planning has its roots in the early formulation of the GLUP and later in the 1970's as planning was initiated for the Metro transit corridors and station areas. The Arlington Way, the County's long standing commitment to civic engagement, facilitated often contentious but productive engagement with citizens, property owners, businesses and development interests during the early planning and decision making processes that led to both the initial adoption and later ongoing review and refinement of the GLUP. During this period, the importance of a planning partnerships between the community, Arlington County government, and the private sector originated and continues today to ensure ongoing implementation success. Most importantly, these early planning efforts involved a small team of professional planners and citizen Planning Commissioners who essentially pioneered the basic planning principles, that while common to smart growth planning practice today, were unique at that time and often counter to local and regional land use planning, policies and political objectives.

The civic engagement process and public – private partnerships that began during the foundation years of Arlington's commitment to planning expanded as part of the following planning efforts that are essential to supporting implementation of the GLUP: sector plans for each Metro station area and Small Area Plans for geographically discreet planning and urban design areas; the formulation of incentive

based zoning tools to enable planned densities to be realized in conjunction with community improvements defined by sector and area plans; and the public engagement process for individual development applications that occurs through the site plan / special exception review process. These planning efforts continue to benefit from Arlington's commitment to both a professional planning staff within the Department of Planning and Community Development and highly committed citizen Planning Commissioners.

Addressing Issues and Opportunities

Over the course of several decades of commitment to implementing and refining the GLUP, Arlington County has and continues to address change, issues and improvements through the following policies, processes and supporting planning efforts.

Sustainable Growth Issues and Opportunities

Every five years the Planning Commission and the County Board conduct a public process to assess the performance of the GLUP and associated elements of the Comprehensive Plan in order to evaluate the course of Arlington County's Smart Growth Journey. This process enables the community to identify potential issues and opportunities to improve and support ongoing implementation of the GLUP.

Affordable Housing

The County's commitment to Affordable Housing has been advanced through the following planning, zoning and financing tools: GLUP designation of Special Affordable Housing Protection Districts; Establishment of affordable housing dwelling unit zoning provisions for increased density consistent with the GLUP; Establishment of an Affordable Housing Trust Fund; and adoption of an Affordable Housing Master Plan.

Commercial Office Vacancy

As result of recent reductions in federal employment and contractors, regional economic transitions, changes in work place demands, and aging commercial office buildings, the County is pursuing strategies through site plan amendments that will enable creative and adaptive reuse of vacant office buildings, such as the recent We Work We Live project in Crystal City which provides co-working spaces and micro living units as part of one of the region's growing innovation hubs.

Demand for Public Facilities

A Community Facilities Study was recently completed through collaboration between the County, Arlington Public Schools (APS), a citizen committee and the broader community. The Study strategically addresses community challenges that, if unaddressed, could threaten Arlington's overall sustainability and what facility needs are necessary to support growth envisioned by the GLUP and associated County demographic and economic forecasts.

Commitment to Planning Beyond the METRO Corridors

The GLUP and Arlington County's Smart Growth Journey have played a leading role in expanding and solidifying the community's commitment to sound and proactive planning. Today, planning is fundamental to Arlington County's policy and decision making processes. Planning has further advanced through the following efforts, many of which have or will be incorporated as part of the GLUP.

Columbia Pike Commercial Areas and Neighborhoods Plans - Form Based Code

Columbia Pike is often described as Arlington's "Main Street," and that was exactly the vision defined through an intensive and community-based planning effort and the resulting Form Based Code.

Lee Highway Corridor Initiative

This is a unique and joint effort between Arlington County and the Lee Highway Alliance (LHA) to achieve a vision for the unplanned corridor and identify actions and strategies through a multi-year planning program that will begin in 2017.

Neighborhood Conservation and Special Revitalization District Plans

Arlington applies its experience with thoughtful long-range planning, smart growth and urban design principles to the conservation of the County's diverse neighborhoods. Through the County's Neighborhood Conservation Plans, neighborhoods organize to develop a ten-year vision through a community-led process. Today there are over 50 neighborhood conservation plans.

Arlington's commitment to sound, inclusive and ground breaking planning has and will continue to enable our County to achieve its vision as a "diverse and world class community with secure, attractive residential and commercial neighborhoods where people unite to form a caring, learning, participating, sustainable community in which each person is important." Arlington's GLUP and its history, evolution and innovative implementation has and will continue to serve as the foundation for that vision as well as a leading example of American planning achievement.

Robert Duffy has served as a planning and community development director and land management administrator with town, city and county agencies in the Midwest, North East, New England and Florida. He has also served as a planning commissioner at the city and county levels. Mr. Duffy currently serves as Planning Director with Arlington County's Department of Community Planning, Housing and Development.