

## MEMORANDUM

December 21, 2022

**TO:** Karl Moritz, Director, Planning & Zoning

**CC:** Jim Parajon, City Manager

**FROM:** Owen P. Curtis, President, SWCA

**RE:** Need for a Citizen Advisory/Steering Group for Alexandria West Plan

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In conversation last week with Jose Ayala, Lead Planner for the Alexandria West Plan, I learned that the City has no plans for a citizen advisory or steering group for this community-based planning effort. The stated reason was that staff felt the area was so diverse, and that significant segments of the community were potentially disadvantaged in communicating their ideas, that such a committee would not represent the breadth of the Alexandria West community.

There is no question that this large area (approximately 2 square miles, or 13 percent of the City) is diverse in terms of its residents, its physical form, and its economics and land use types. That diversity is an asset, one I suspect the community will want to preserve in the new plan to be developed. But I cannot agree that by relying on staff outreach, online polls, et al, that the plan will be able to be assembled to reflect the inputs of the diverse groups who have an interest in the outcome. The outreach approach does nothing to bring these diverse interests to the table, let us hear each other, form a common bond on key matters, and identify where disagreements may occur. Instead, staff ends up filtering what each group says, and a sense of community is not created.

If there are divergent voices (which I think will chiefly be between citizens of all types and wealthy developmental interests), staff alone will be in a position to resolve those differences. And as this City's history makes clear, the large landowners and developers have the ear of staff and meet with them frequently, compared to ordinary citizens; thus it is easy to predict where this plan will end up. If that happens, it will NOT be the community's plan, but rather the developers', and it will not receive the support of those who rent, or who own condos, townhouses or detached single-family homes.

This City's history has been one of citizen-based planning. Some of us were on the citizen groups that helped define the 1992 Alexandria West Small Area Plan. That plan was well received because of citizen input and their ability to sit and discuss the issues with our developer neighbors, chiefly the Winkler Family. The result was a nice balance between economic growth and preservation of the quality of the community, which since has been significantly eroded by the BRAC 133 project and the Beauregard Small Area Plan. While

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these latter two efforts did have citizen advisory groups, it was clear that the winners of both those planning efforts were the big developers, and not the citizens.

The only chance the City has of creating a community-based plan is to bring the diverse voices and interest groups to the table on a regular basis to discuss and resolve the many issues the Alexandria West area faces. I suspect staff would be surprised to see how much common cause the significant immigrant rental population has with their neighbors who own their properties, a significant number of whom are also immigrants. We all want to preserve the assets of this community – its market-affordable rental housing, its tree canopy, its light and air, its parks, its walkability, its excellent transit service, its relatively low density – and we want to improve pedestrian safety and fix traffic congestion, among other things. We expect that development interests will see great opportunities to increase their bottom lines, which we all are concerned may decrease the quality of life in Alexandria West.

Please reconsider your decision to limit the voice of the people from the planning and decision-making on the plan for OUR community.



Owen P. Curtis  
President  
Seminary West Civic Association