

Are we paying attention?

We write out of concern that the City plans to change the existing zoning code without a full understanding of what Falls Church residents actually want for the City. Regardless of where residents ultimately land on this issue, we call on everyone to pay attention to the City Council's proposed changes for "Transition Zones" ("T-Zones"). There are dozens of T-Zone parcels in the City (and additional parcels have been marked as such on the City's Future Land Use Map), and all of the parcels were so designated because they are in especially sensitive locations that serve as buffers between commercial and residential areas. The proposed changes, currently before the Planning Commission for its recommendation, nullify the very purpose of T-zones and risk irrevocably altering the small scale and green feel of our City.

The City Council's proposal would allow the "by-right" construction of commercial buildings up to 80% of a lot's footprint (versus the current 40%); increase building height allowances to 50 feet (versus the current 35 feet for residential use and 45 feet for other uses); and significantly reduce curb setbacks to as little as 10 feet. The same bulky dimensions would be allowed for residential buildings after minimal oversight under a wholly new "special use" review process that eliminates the existing careful and considered review process—known as the "special exception" process—during which public input is solicited and the relevant City boards and commissions ensure neighborhood-compatible designs and uses.

It is an economic reality that developers will build up to the new maximums, since bigger buildings have more square footage and are more lucrative. The proposed amendments raise important questions that Falls Church residents should all consider. Do we wish to make it easier for developers to build bigger buildings with less oversight, or do we wish to retain control over how our city is developed? Over the years, the existing city zoning laws, including the special exception process, have enabled the construction of many "missing middle" housing developments, including appropriately scaled and thoughtfully designed apartment, condominium, and townhouse projects. The result is a City that is eminently walkable, physically beautiful, and cohesive.

Compare our City with other jurisdictions that surround it and that have loosened zoning and review controls. Does a majority of our City favor replacing green spaces, tree canopy, small business spaces, and historic structures with large concrete and glass boxes? Do we wish to be Ballston? We should pave the way for more Clares and Dons, not Clarendon. We do not need more developments that promise to "deliver" a "sense of place" while demolishing small business spaces and historic buildings that have defined our community. We should protect our low skyline, trees, and pedestrian-friendly streets so that we remain a city of walkers and environmental consciousness, and not turn more of the City into boxy buildings that block sunlight and increase impervious surfaces.

Does the Proposal authentically address affordable housing?

We support creating affordable housing, but these amendments won't accomplish that goal. There's no mandate that any housing be built on any of these lots. And if a residential development is constructed,

all that is required is that 10 percent of the units in any given development be committed as affordable and/or workforce housing. Nothing stops developers from pricing the other 90% of units at luxury rates, again driving up housing costs.

As successful developments in surrounding jurisdictions have shown, we don't have to give our City over to large-scale, overwhelmingly market-rate developments in order to increase affordable housing. The City would do better to think about creatively financing more ambitious affordable and workforce housing projects. Despite megadevelopments like Founders Row and Broad & Washington, the number of affordable dwelling units in the City is declining. The T-zone changes will not counteract that trend. We would do better for middle housing to simply allow duplexes, quads, and sixplexes *within current T-lot guidelines*.

What can you do?

The T-zone proposal is now pending review by the Planning Commission, which must ultimately recommend to the City Council whether to adopt the proposal. The Planning Commission's decision could happen as soon as December 21. We agree with members of the Planning Commission who have opined that the use of specific T-zone properties may be better dealt with on a lot-by-lot basis, and not by an across-the-board zoning amendment.

We call on you to learn about the Proposal for T-zones and make your voices heard. Here are our suggestions:

1. Learn more at: https://fallschurch-va.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=2075&meta_id=116263
2. Write to Planning Commission and City Council Members at cityclerk@fallschurchva.gov
3. Attend the next Planning Commission meeting on Wednesday, December 7, at 7:30 p.m. to learn more or share your views with the Commission

Signed,
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City of Falls Church