



Community Demands

regarding the City of Falls Church's East End Small Area Plan (SAP)

April 19, 2023

Viet Place Collective is a grassroots community organization not affiliated with the City of Falls Church or Capital Commercial Properties (property owner).

These Community Demands were created in collaboration with Eden Center business owners, employees, and community members who graciously trusted us with their experiences and feedback.

Background

These Community Demands were co-created with Eden Center business owners and community members as a direct response to the City of Falls Church's Draft East End Small Area Plan (SAP).

They reflect the perspectives of the people who would be most affected by the SAP, and must be incorporated into the final version.

Over the past several months, our grassroots organizers have built strong relationships with the business owners and employees of the Eden Center, working tirelessly to provide clear and direct information about the SAP, and actively dispelling rumors that Eden Center might be torn down. We have come to understand the day-to-day challenges that threaten long-term business operations and patronage. Most importantly, we have helped the Vietnamese community better understand the potential consequences and hidden costs of redevelopment — in particular, their displacement from a place they've called home for nearly forty years.

PREPARED BY
Viet Place Collective

PREPARED FOR
City of Falls Church

Though the City of Falls Church outwardly champions equitable development and diversity, the drafted plan does not adequately support those goals and may actively contribute to commercial displacement. These Vietnamese and immigrant-owned businesses are at highest risk for displacement as a result of redevelopment. As such, it is imperative that their voice, needs, and desires are heard and reflected in the final SAP.



Community Demands

01 **Make Anti-Displacement a Primary Goal of the SAP**

In order to achieve true equitable development, preventing commercial displacement should be present throughout the SAP, and not relegated to a subsection in the Economic Development Chapter.

02 **Add a Legally-Binding Agreement to Fund Anti-displacement Strategies using Tax Revenue**

A percentage of the tax revenue Eden Center generates should be invested into programs to ensure the survival of the small businesses.

03 **Implement Culturally Relevant Anti-displacement Strategies**

We outline several rigorously-researched and culturally relevant strategies such as Community Benefits Agreements, Legacy Business Preservation, and Legal Assistance.

04 **Increase the Total Amount of Free Parking Spaces**

Inadequate parking is the #1 complaint among business owners and customers, and increased parking is necessary to support existing businesses.

05 **Formally Designate POA5 as "Little Saigon East"**

"Little Saigon East" would celebrate Eden Center's Vietnamese cultural identity and promote it to new in-state and out-of-state visitors and customers.

06 **Ensure Infrastructure Improvements & Community Safety as a Requirement of Any Development Plan**

Infrastructure investments, funded both by City and Developer, must occur before any development or vision for multi-modal transit can come to fruition.

07 **Commission Vietnamese Artists for any Public Art**

Any public beautification efforts should hire Vietnamese-American artists to celebrate the community's contributions to the City.



1

Make anti-displacement of Vietnamese-owned businesses a primary goal of the SAP's overall Vision & Goals, rather than a subsection of the Economic Development chapter.

Anti-displacement must be front and center in the SAP - not relegated to an afterthought in the Economic Development chapter. Though one the stated goals is to “preserve the Eden Center,” the plan focuses on building facades and fails to provide specific guidance on how to prevent commercial displacement as a result of potential redevelopment. This is not an unfounded fear:

Vietnamese-American businesses making up the “Little Saigon” in Clarendon, Virginia were displaced as a direct result of a lack of anti-displacement protections. After mid-rise developments were approved by Arlington County and the Clarendon metro station opened in 1979, rents skyrocketed from \$1/sf to as high as \$25/sf.

Although Arlington County was vocal about their support for the Vietnamese community when planning for additional development, they ultimately failed the community. At the time, the Executive Director of Clarendon Alliance was quoted as saying “We would like for the Vietnamese to stay [...] We don't want just a bunch of tall office buildings.” Now, only one restaurant remains from Little Saigon.

We suggest the following language:

“The primary goal of this Small Area Plan is to provide detailed guidance for future development in the East End that will 1) actively prevent the commercial displacement of Vietnamese-owned businesses that define the cultural identity of the Eden Center and 2) ensure that businesses share in the benefits of any development in the area.”

2

Add a legally-binding funding agreement that allocates a percentage of the tax revenue generated by Eden Center to fund anti-displacement programs and other community resources.

Eden Center generates more tax revenue than any other property in the East End POA (over \$1.3 million in 2020 alone). Its true economic impact is far greater than taxes – from job creation to cultural cachet, Eden Center’s impact should be re-evaluated by the City and directly re-invested into an anti-displacement fund to ensure the survival of the Vietnamese owned businesses.

The SAP currently only presents the property taxes generated at the Eden Center relative to other parcels around the city. Examining only property taxes omits the true economic impact (meals & sales tax, jobs), and furthers the false narrative of economic underutilization.



3 Implement culturally relevant anti-displacement strategies in the SAP

Strategy	Relevance
<p>Community Benefits Agreement</p>	<p>We ask that the Special Exception (SE) criteria be amended to explicitly require the negotiation of a legally binding agreement between community stakeholders and any future developer. This is essential in ensuring the listed anti-displacement strategies (and any other specific amenities) have legal standing as necessary conditions for development.</p> <p>A contractual agreement will ensure that the community will benefit directly from any development that occurs.</p>
<p>Legacy Business Preservation Program</p>	<p>We acknowledge the inclusion of “Legacy business preservation programs” in the draft SAP. We call on planners to ensure that such programs, created and funded by the City, address the specific challenges business owners are facing. Based on our calculations, rent rates in some Eden Center businesses are upwards of 330% higher than comparable area averages. Tenants have also noted out of order toilets, ceiling leaks, and cracked floors that go unfixed for months. Several Vietnamese-owned businesses have already relocated in favor of places with better conditions and lower rent (e.g. Four Sisters, Mark’s Duck House). Without intervention, this pattern is likely to continue until Eden Center loses the businesses that are vital to its character.</p> <p>Grants for long-standing businesses can help mitigate rent increases, fees, and update neglected infrastructure.</p>
<p>Vietnamese-speaking Community Outreach Specialist</p>	<p>Given the misinformation that has surrounded the SAP to date, a Community Outreach Specialist is necessary to effectively promote the City’s resources and help businesses navigate regulatory processes. Currently, few businesses are aware of existing City resources. Regarding the regulatory process: one owner shared, “It was very difficult working with building and fire code to get doors open...” The ideal Specialist will go beyond translating communications, and will use community-based approaches to gain a full understanding of Eden Center businesses. They, however, must not serve as a punitive enforcement liaison.</p> <p>A Specialist is necessary to strengthen the relationship between Eden Center businesses and the City. One business owner shared: “When we asked [the City] for help in 2008, we got nothing. Why should I trust the City now?”</p>



3 cont.

Include culturally relevant anti-displacement strategies in the SAP

Strategy

Relevance

Pro bono or Discounted Legal Assistance

Legal assistance will help business owners better understand their tenant rights, leases, and negotiation power. Current lease agreements are, at best, disadvantageous, and at worst, exploitative of existing businesses. Several businesses shared that their leases are highly “restrictive and unbalanced.” The standard 8% yearly rent increase is double the commercial average, and is negotiable with legal assistance. Given English only leases, many business owners sign without a full grasp of its content. Providing accessible legal assistance will help level the playing field for businesses to succeed.

Negotiating leases is standard practice for businesses to achieve fairer operations. This is not feasible for many Eden Center businesses due to language and cost barriers.

Construction Mitigation

Redevelopment construction can cause extensive disruption and long-term challenges for small businesses. As one business owner shared, “Any construction, in or around Eden Center, will kill business. People will not come to shop if it’s a mess. Businesses must be compensated for the traffic they lose.” Another business expressed that an interruption of even one or two years is too long to weather.

Assistance can mitigate the burdens associated with construction by providing small businesses with marketing, signage, and financial assistance in the form of grants or forgivable loans.

Neighborhood Business Incubator

One business owner predicts that Eden Center will eventually become less Vietnamese since there are often no successors for these family-owned businesses. Establishing a Neighborhood Business Incubator will help sustain the community for future generations, and create a hospitable environment for diverse small businesses and entrepreneurs. This could include fast tracking small business projects that have minimal impacts, or recruiting businesses that address gaps in the current business mix.

“Eden is too difficult right now to break into as a new business. We need a space that gives support to young people who are just starting out.”



4

Increase the total amount of free parking spaces

Though we acknowledge the desire of the City to increase community and retail use of space in the East End POA, not all square feet of the Area are equal. Parking is the #1 complaint of Eden Center business owners and customers. Increased parking is necessary to support the existing economic activity. We call on the Planning Commission to clarify and separate the Eden Center in their final plan from true “underutilized parking lots,” such as the BJ’s parking lot. While we long for a less car-dependent future and multi-modal transportation, it does not reflect the very real needs of Eden Center business owners and customers today who come from across the East Coast and largely outside of the public transit system. When asked about public transit, one community member stated:

“I buy my groceries for the month; I couldn't take the bus carrying all my food.”

The current parking lot is insufficient for weekend and holiday crowds. This limits the number of customers patronizing businesses. One owner stated:

“Even one day of limited parking kills my business.”

5

Formally designate Planning Opportunity Area 5 as “Little Saigon East” and rename part of Wilson Blvd Saigon Blvd

We acknowledge and celebrate the City’s intention to rename Wilson Blvd as Saigon Blvd and other “enhancements like a cohesive and culturally relevant design [...] and programming” to better market the area’s cultural identity.” We call on the City to follow through with this plan of action. Eden Center is the largest Vietnamese commercial hub on the East Coast. Numerous community members recommended this at the January 2023 Listening Session. This is an opportunity for the City to celebrate Eden Center’s regional prominence.

One business owner agreed that rebranding the area as “Little Saigon East” would clarify Eden Center’s Vietnamese cultural identity and promote it to new in-state and out-of-state customers.

This change would also indicate to potential developers the intangible cultural importance of Eden Center (similar to San Jose’s or Seattle’s Little Saigon) in addition to its consistent and outsized economic performance as a source of revenue for the City.



6

Ensure infrastructure improvements and community safety as a requirement for any development plan

Although the draft SAP mentions that "Larger redevelopments are expected to improve streetscape and utilities on their site," we call on the City to require that potential developers address community safety and accessibility concerns.

There is currently a lack of safe and accessible pedestrian and bike infrastructure on roads surrounding the Eden Center property. Based on our calculations from VDOT crash data, this deficiency has, from 2015 through 2023, contributed to over a hundred vehicle collisions and eleven where a pedestrian or bicyclist was injured by a vehicle. Bus stops within a quarter-mile walking distance of Eden Center do not have benches and shelters, resulting in a greater burden for all riders, particularly elderly riders. The only bus line that connects Eden Center to the East Falls Church Metrorail Station (26A), has an average wait time of 30 minutes.

Before the City's vision of multi-modal access to a re-developed East End can come true, infrastructure investments must make that car-independent travel possible.

7

Commission Vietnamese artists for any public art projects

We acknowledge and celebrate the City's current plan to commission public art to showcase at Eden Center. Additionally, we call on the City to invite Vietnamese-American artists to design public art. Art is just one way to celebrate the contributions of the Vietnamese community to the City as well as an opportunity to revitalize the appearance of the area, denote its economic significance, and drive art-tourism.

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Thank you

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