

From: "Shaw, Rosalind H." <Rosalind.Shaw@tufts.edu>  
To: "jraitt@town.arlington.ma.us" <jraitt@town.arlington.ma.us>  
Date: Fri, 12 Mar 2021 14:29:19 +0000  
Subject: Letter of support for affordable housing warrant article in Monday March 15 Redevelopment Board meeting

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To: Jennifer Raitt, Director of Planning and Community Development

### **Why we need to increase affordable housing in pandemic and post-pandemic Arlington:**

After a year of pandemic, many of us, as well as our neighbors, friends, and family, are struggling on reduced incomes. Some are on furlough. Many lost their jobs altogether. Businesses have folded. Many had to stop work to care for their children and supervise remote schooling. Some got sick or had to care for sick—and sometimes dying—family members. A new class of disability has arisen with Covid long haulers who, like two of my friends, suffer from a combination of neurological, cardiovascular, and pulmonary damage, cognitive impairment, and often intractable fatigue.

All over the US, the pandemic has expanded the low-income and very low-income population. The Federal Reserve Chair, Jerome Powell, tells us that the real unemployment rate is now around 10%. Recovery, he argues, will take a society-wide commitment.

We know that a single crisis, like hospitalization or temporary job loss, can put people at risk of losing their homes. But Covid is not a single crisis: it has unfolded in complex ways on multiple levels for more than a year. In greater Boston, with some of the highest housing costs in the country, many people owe several months' rent or mortgage. Some face eviction at the end of the eviction moratorium. Some are forced into more crowded (and riskier) living conditions with family or friends. People of color are disproportionately affected by these Covid-related crises.

Massachusetts and Arlington have provided Covid Assistance programs, including housing assistance. But the scale of this crisis overflows the support they offer. To take one example, when I click on the Housing Corporation of Arlington's website link to one of these programs—the Covid19 Rental Assistance for Families in Transition's (RAFT), I receive this message from the MA Department of Housing and Community Development: "There are no open waiting lists at this time." This is not to criticize the HCA or DHCD, but to draw attention to the scale of the problem.

A critical piece that we need is an expansion in affordable housing. Several decades ago, Massachusetts set a goal to have at least 10% of every community's housing be affordable. Arlington falls far behind this goal: its percentage of affordable housing—5.7%—is lower than almost all our neighboring communities. The Housing Corporation of Arlington has 48 new affordable units under construction. This is extremely welcome, but nowhere near enough. An Arlington zoning bylaw designates 15% of units in new housing developments as affordable. This is nowhere near enough either. Given the escalation of the housing crisis during the pandemic, we must catch up.

A citizen warrant article to be discussed in the Redevelopment Board meeting on March 15 offers an opportunity to tackle this problem. This article urges the amendment of Arlington's zoning bylaw to increase the affordable percentage of new housing developments from 15% to 25%. This would mean that one unit out of four—instead of Arlington's current allocation of one unit out of six—in a new building would be affordable.

It is co-sponsored by three Arlington residents: (1) Judith Garber, who works for a local nonprofit; (2) Laura Kiesel, a journalist and disability advocate who is herself an affordable housing tenant; and (3) John Sanbonmatsu, a university professor. All three are renters: this may be the only housing-related warrant article to be authored by tenants.

One objection we sometimes hear to suggestions of increasing the affordable earmark is that it would make it more difficult for developers to recover their expenses. Would this not give developers less incentive, resulting in substantially less new housing? In a response to this issue, the Low Income Housing Tax (LIHT) Program now incentivizes the construction of affordable housing by giving developers and others who invest in it a huge tax credit.

A further objection is that Arlington primarily needs “workforce” housing. There are two problems with this argument. First, who is the workforce? The argument that housing our workforce be prioritized over affordable housing is based on a basic category error, since it assumes that those with incomes lower than 80% of our Area Median Income (AME) do not work. In fact, 40% of those earning much lower incomes—60% or less of AME—work. As do the majority of people of working age with disabilities. In fact, many low-income Arlingtonians are the essential workers who have helped the community survive the pandemic: grocery store workers, health aides, wait staff, garbage and recycling workers, receptionists in medical offices, crossing guards, nannies, and many more.

And second, what kind of community do we want Arlington to be? One that sends a message to retired residents, who have worked all their lives, that they are a lower priority? One that counts people with disabilities who cannot work as having a reduced right to housing? I do not believe we want to send those messages.

Six relevant organizations endorse this warrant article. They include City Life/Vida Urbana—the principal tenants’ and housing rights organization in the Boston metro area; the Boston Tenants’ Coalition; the Disability Policy Coalition; Mystic Valley NAACP; Boston Center for Independent Living; and our own Arlington, MA Diversity Task Group.

I urge the Redevelopment Board to do the same. If implemented, this warrant article would be a crucial step to furthering our community’s post-pandemic recovery.

I have also attached this letter.

Thank you,

Yours truly,

Rosalind Shaw  
106 Richfield Rd

Associate Professor Emerita, Tufts University