

Submission to the Town of Arlington Redevelopment Board and Select Board

From: Pat Hanlon, Town Meeting Member, Precinct 5

Date: January 13, 2020

Re: Meeting the Regional Housing Shortage: Moving Forward in Arlington

I applaud the decision of your two boards to work jointly on addressing Arlington's policy regarding housing. Housing is an Arlington problem. While Arlington is unfortunately not especially diverse in some dimensions, it is economically diverse. Many households in Arlington (and many of those headed by elderly people) spend an excessive portion of their income on housing. At the same time, the Arlington housing market provides much too little choice for residents who would like to age in the community, but not necessarily in the houses in which they raised their families. It ought to be a town goal to provide a diversity of housing opportunities to support a thriving and balanced community. I believe that that is Arlington's goal. I hope that the result of the process on which you are embarked will lead to a resounding and unambiguous restatement of that goal.

This is not exclusively an Arlington issue: The shortage of housing in the Boston metropolitan area is a regional concern. Still, Arlington is not, in the words of John Donne, "an island, entire of itself." We are privileged to live in an economically vibrant area. The regional shortage of housing is a threat to the regional economy and to the wellbeing of all Arlingtonians. We have a responsibility to do our part, in cooperation with others, to address the housing shortage in our region.

Our role, of course, must take into consideration the built environment in our community as well as generally accepted principles of urban planning. Although Arlington is largely built-out, there are still opportunities to build up and fill in. Our town is close to the Boston-Somerville-Cambridge urban core. We have the opportunity to add housing where it can be served by transit. Communities further out do not have that opportunity to the same extent, and few residents of Arlington would welcome more traffic from the outer suburbs clogging the roads here.

While addressing the housing problem is important, it doesn't take precedence over everything else. It needs to be balanced against other objectives, particularly environmental ones. It is important for the process going forward to be clear on how to achieve the necessary balance, and, even better, how to take advantage of possible synergies. Too often our planning documents identify goals in a way that allows all sides of a proposal to cite them to their own purpose – thus leaving the town without guidance on controversial questions.

This is not the occasion for addressing substantive policy. I would, however, like to make a few points about the process going forward and the issues that ought to be on the agenda.

1. The issues before you have to do with housing, not just zoning. Of course zoning is an important aspect of housing policy. Land use regulations hold back housing development, and unreasonable regulations hold it back unreasonably. A part of the problem, therefore, is to examine the town's zoning regulations to identify and reform

rules that are unreasonably restrictive. This is the task on which your two boards are now focused. However, your collaboration cannot be a simple matter of the Select Board providing appropriate encouragement, advice, and support for zoning decisions taken by the Redevelopment Board. There is plenty of work for the Select Board to do on matters within its own jurisdiction.

- a. For example, if the housing policy that emerges from the engagement process under way involves redevelopment of existing housing, the Select Board will need to think about whether and how to protect the people being displaced. What compensation might they receive? How might we deal with displacement issues? Could we work out ways of giving those people priority in newly constructed houses? What to do about zoning is for the Redevelopment Board; how to deal with the unintended side effects of zoning changes may be for the Select Board.
 - b. Similarly, the Select Board needs to address housing issues that have nothing to do with zoning. At the simplest level, increasing housing boils down to reducing costs (which is where deregulation come in) or increasing funding. The expected ATM 2020 warrant article seeking home rule authority for a transfer tax on certain housing sales is an example of attending to funding issues. So is the establishment of an Affordable Housing Trust Fund. While the Redevelopment Board has some role (e.g., in inclusionary zoning), the Select Board has the lead on the funding side. Arlington's housing issues cannot be reduced to zoning alone. Attention must be paid to funding also. I want to be clear that I'm not recommending any particular funding solutions now. This is a complex matter that should be addressed in the sort of engagement process you are discussing. I do want to stress that some people who cannot find common ground on zoning issues might well see eye-to-eye on funding..
2. Engagement with the community means listening. It is also important to consult the people of Arlington intensively (and comprehensively) before broaching solutions to housing issues. The Engagement Schedule is intended to make sure that the consultation process works better in 2020-2021 than it did in 2018-2019. This means listening as well as explaining. I heard several people who attended the precinct and outreach meetings last spring complain that they felt lectured to. These were not people already committed to one side of the debate. Perhaps they missed chances earlier on to influence the shape of the proposals. Certainly the perception at Town Meeting, however, was that the consultation process was primarily about soliciting support for decisions already made rather than soliciting advice on what decisions should be made. Our housing policy needs to be, and be seen to be, community driven rather than expert driven.
3. Credible and Complete Factual Analysis. The engagement process needs to be based on careful and credible factual analysis that addresses every important area of concern. For example, housing skeptics argue that new housing will disproportionately increase the cost of public services, particularly schools, and thus lead to higher taxes. This argument needs to be addressed in a rigorous analysis of the financial impact of new housing. The engagement process needs to identify factual issues of this kind early on and commit to their analysis in a timely way.
4. The Issue is Housing, Not Just Affordable Housing. The Metro Mayors Coalition has identified a mismatch between housing production in the Boston area and demand

brought about by our thriving economy. It is not as though the housing market is working well for everyone but the poor (even though, as usual, it works least well for the poor). The market is badly serving people in the middle of the income distribution, young people starting out, people with disabilities, people who would like to age in the community without necessarily aging in their houses, and people experiencing financial hardship because they cannot afford rent or other housing costs and others. While Arlington needs to increase its supply of (regulatory) affordable housing – “Affordable Housing” in caps - that is only one part of a larger problem: a housing market that is increasingly dysfunctional for much of our community.

5. Housing issues need to be considered in the context of other issues. Housing strategies need to promote other important goals, where that is possible, and to minimize the adverse impact on other goals, where it isn't. New housing might, for example, provide opportunities for moving more quickly to zero net greenhouse gas emissions. It might provide ways of increasing climate change resiliency. Done sensitively, new housing could improve the streetscape, provide better designed and more useful open space, promote the use of public transit, provide customers for local businesses, and more. While sometimes housing must yield to other goals, our new housing strategies must be sensitive to the desirability of promoting values other than housing.
6. Engagement should include a broad range of stakeholders, including town boards and committees and civil society organizations whose missions are touched by strategies to address the housing puzzle. Some of these stakeholders are obvious – for example the Housing Plan Implementation Committee, HCA, the Community Preservation Committee and so on. Many others, however, might provide useful advice and information, even though they might not think of themselves as deeply involved in housing policy. These might include the Council on Aging, the Disability Commission, Sustainable Arlington, the Clean Energy Futures Committee, the Tree Committee, TAC, the Sustainable Transportation Advisory Committee, the Economic Development Committee, the School Committee and others. On the civil society side, the town should be sure to involve organizations representing potentially affected businesses (builders and brokers, property owners, commercial tenants) as well as public interest groups interested in housing and issues touching on housing. This list of organizations is illustrative. Some organizations will not want to participate in the discussion, and I've no doubt left out some organizations that are important and do want to participate. Many of these organization will be interested in parts of the housing question and not all of it. The important things are to identify the key organizations in town with an interest in this issue and to encourage those organizations to be actively involved throughout the engagement process. We need their involvement not just to avoid surprise interventions at town meeting time, but also because these organizations will have information and ideas that we will need.

It is exciting to see the Redevelopment Board and Select Board collaborating on strategies to address failing local and regional housing markets. What a remarkable potential there is! But, make no mistake, time is short. Winter 2021 is only a year away, and there is a lot to do. The Town Manager first proposed this joint meeting in a presentation last July, almost 5 months ago. You will not get where you want to go at that pace. So, my last recommendation to you is this: Recognize that success next February requires a new sense of urgency starting now. There is not a moment to waste.