

From: Marina Popova

Sent: Monday, September 11, 2023 11:52 AM

To: Claire Ricker; Jim Feeney; Rachel Zsembery; Eugene Benson; Kin Lau; Stephen Revilak; Ashley Maher; Eric Helmuth; Stephen DeCoursey; Len Diggins; John Hurd; Diane Mahon

Subject: Please do not approve over-compliance with the MBTA density increase mandate

Dear Arlington Redevelopment Board, Arlington Select Board and Town Meeting Members,

I'm writing to express my concerns with the current MBTA compliance proposal prepared by the Working Group - and urging you to not approve this over-compliant plan .

There are many reasons for that - as you will see below - so I will just summarize the main points here - with the details below:

- this is the most drastic change to the Zoning laws in Arlington in decades - which will affect environment, town infrastructure and service, and literally lives, livelihoods and quality of life for most of the current Arlington residents - yet, almost no appropriate research, due diligence, town-wide outreach, communication and feedback collection was done - probably more than 90% of town residents are not even aware of the potential changes!
- ALL Arlington residents deserve to be fully informed and deserve to express their agreement or disagreement with the proposal via a town-wide voting or other equally democratic process, much like passing any kind of a tax overwrite
- it is much safer to start with a MINIMUM required increase and add more later based on the results of the experiment, than take away the rights that were already granted to developers!

Below are my concerns with more details and substantiation. Sorry for the long email - but this is just an indication of HOW MANY concerns there are with this proposal!

- the proposed density would alter the Arlington from being "one of the best **small towns** to live in MA (<https://www.nbcboston.com/news/local/massachusetts-well-represented-on-new-list-of-best-small-cities-in-america/2857869/>) " to an urban super dense city with streets like below:



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- most current residents worked very hard, often multiple jobs - like me and my husband both, to be able to move to Arlington because it is a SMALL TOWN, with shade trees, gardens, parks and great schools. If they wanted to live in multi-story multi-family apartment complexes - they would have chosen a different option like Sommerville or Downtown Boston
- **No comprehensive and documented research of the impact** - This is the largest zoning change for Arlington in many decades - that would potentially increase the population drastically - yet no research was made /published of its effect on the town resources: schools? parking? traffic? water/sewer systems? open space? air quality? dozens of other town services?
 - these changes will literally affect life and livelihood of ALL residents of Arlington, not just the areas directly affected by the Zoning changes - yet no town wide communication/ information sessions and, eventually , a town-wide voting and approval of the plans was conducted
 - the traffic increase alone will make Arlington on par with Cambridge, Boston and Sommerville for congestion and air pollution
 - the argument that all new families moving to Arlington will have no cars due to the "great MBTA" we have here - are laughable - as the reality is that those will be high-income families able to afford \$1M+ units , and they will definitely bring cars to conduct most of the daily life, especially if they have kids with sports and other activities
- proposed density, and severe decrease in the requirements for open space and setbacks, **will drastically reduce trees/greenery/open space in Arlington** - contributing to, instead of combating, the disastrous changes to our Climate - and replacing shade/trees canopy with heat islands
 - the argument of the density proponents that "if we don't cut trees here - they will be cut in Central Mass" - are quite naive and probably intentionally misleading: those families who want to buy a single family house in Arlington now, because of its beauty of a "small town" - will not just as happily buy a luxury condo in a 5-6 story appt complex. They will just move on farther out looking for what they want. Otherwise - they would be looking into already super-dense cities like Cambridge , Sommerville, Boston, etc.
 - we should not be cutting ANY trees - given that the whole world is either on fire from the extreme heat, or flooded or subjected to extreme hurricane and other weather patterns - and any decision to "just cut a few trees here for the greater good later" is exactly the opposite of what needs to be done to save our planet
 - you don't have to go far to see other examples of the same disastrous and short-term for-profit thinking and actions - which will stay in history as such and are opposed by thousands of residents :
 - the Belmont Hill private school plan to cut acres of mature woods (and kill hundreds of animals there) - all in order to build a huge parking lot for occasional special events!
 - or the Wakefield town/ VOKE school decision to destroy a huge forest to build a new school there - while there were other much easier and much less environmentally destructive options!
 - please do not follow the same path here - please preserve our town for generations to come
- one of the arguments for the over-compliance and super-high density is that it will **increase affordability in Arlington. This could NOT be further from the truth.** The proposed Zoning changes do not require any additional affordability in the new developments , other than what

is already a requirement in Arlington for apartment complexes with more than 6 units. And, thus, the newly developed units will be just as expensive as existing ones - just many many more of them!

- this also means, that the proposed changes will effectively "push out" the existing families that invested heavily into leaving here - because they loved the "small town" qualities of Arlington - by effectively eliminating and degrading many of those qualities
- and they will be eventually replaced by just as wealthy individuals who can afford to buy \$1M+ units and like dense living
- if the affordability is truly a concern of the WG and the Town of Arlington (as it should be!) - **the existing numerous apartment buildings could be turned into affordable units!** - without any additional over-development
- **potential number of units that could be built, and corresponding increases in population and traffic, are constantly down-played by WG as "not realistic"**
 - yet the simple common sense and Math will prove that once you let developers to build as much as they can fit into a lot - they WILL , as it will be in their direct financial interests
 - consider this: if a single family house goes on sale, any family that would love to buy it would make an offer close to the asking price; the only buyer that could double and triple the price would be - guess who? - of course developers, who know they will make up their profits 2-4 times given they can squeeze in many more units into the lot, destroying any "wasteful" things like trees and greenery
 - this means the changes will be happening very quickly and will drastically affect everyone in Arlington
- **Arlington is ALREADY the 5-th (or so) densest town in the Metro Boston** - and should not incur the burden of over-development even further - as there is clearly a huge way to go for other towns to even half-math Arlington's density - so why not focus on improving MBTA and public transportation to reach more locations faster and easier (is not it what MBTA improvement should be about anyway??) ?
- given the concerns above - it is very clear that **the proposed changes are not going to benefit the majority of current Arlington residents**, yet the WG is consistency using expressions like "community approved, agreed with community, community is very happy with this" to describe community feedback - **which brings me to the next set of issues:**
- **very imbalanced composition of the Working Group :**
 - most of the WG members seem to be well known density advocates - and members of pro-density community groups like "Arlington Neighbors for More Neighbors" - and, thus, the 3-5x density over-compliance was an expected outcome of the work of this group
 - only one WG member tried to consider the implications of such huge buildings close to normal houses, and when he asked a question "how would a resident of a house right next to a 6-story building feel with such minimal /no setbacks?" - the answer from another WG member in essence was "well it is not our concern right now, we are more concerned with how Arlington will look 20-30-40 years from now" - I'm not making it up, this can be seen in the recordings of the 08/15/2023 WG Public meeting: specifically, watch the recording at ~30:00 - 35:00 minutes into the meeting: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvKEk6-vKZY>
- **no disclosure of the WG members affiliations** - which could lead to serious conflict of interests

- I've heard quite a few rumors that some members of WG are either directly or indirectly affiliated with developers/architects - if this is true, the results of the Zoning changes would be financially beneficial for them
- to make sure this is not the case and in the interests of building trust with the Arlington community - there should be a very clear disclosure of any such affiliations of the existing members, if any - and, obviously, no individuals that might have financial benefit from the Zoning changes should be allowed to influence such decisions in any way
- given the scale of the impact of these decisions on all Arlington residents - **a democratic and transparent process of electing / screening of members for any Arlington Board and Working Group should be a must** - after all, highest US officials (Supreme Court, Senate, the President of the US) are being investigated and held accountable to a Code of Ethics - so it is only fair to expect the same in Arlington
- **very limited/lopsided community notification** - excluding many areas/groups of Arlington
 - there were very few (if at all) town-wide communications about the scope of the Zoning changes and the impact on the town - there was one survey that asked WHERE to put the required increase in density - but not HOW MUCH of density is preferred; given that the survey explained the purpose as complying with the MBTA law of 10% increase - it was very easy (and logically) to assume that it was indeed the 10% increase the survey was asking for preferred location options for - very misleading!
 - and even with the above survey - only about ~1K residents responded - given we have ~42K residents in total in Arlington this makes it **less than 1% of residents who gave their feedback!** - and this also confirms my point further down that much less than 1% of all residents of Arlington even knew about the potential changes
 - WG mentioned that there was an outreach at AHC communities - which is great but is certainly not a good representation of the majority of Arlington residents
 - there were no direct mailings to all Arlington residents informing residents of the potential changes to Zoning - until after all WG office hours and meetings were virtually concluded - thus, majority of Arlington residents had no idea about this and did not attend office hours or whatever other outreach might have happened
- **misleading representation of the community feedback**
 - even with the feedback received from those residents that did manage to learn about the MBTA WG work - via the word of mouth and efforts by other residents to spread the word - the majority of residents attending office hours were against the over-compliance, citing numerous reasons - that are mentioned in my email
 - yet, all negative feedback was brushed aside as coming from an "insignificant number of people" - as was explained by a WG member when asked why nothing other than the "community is very happy with the proposed density" type of feedback was brought back to the WG meetings
 - even with the above mentioned limitations / failures of a wider community notification and involvement
 - those who did come to the office hours to voice their concerns were 2:1 to the density supporters , and
 - over 500 residents signed the petition asking to not over-comply with the MBTA law
 - this clearly shows that the number of people concerned with the over-compliance is not small/negligible at all !

- If you truly believe that this proposal is in the interests on the majority of current Arlington residents - **please allow the whole Town of Arlington to Vote on the proposed level of density as one of the ballot questions** - and , thus, ensure a fair and democratic process of getting feedback from ALL Arlington residents
- instead of pushing the drastic Zoning changes without proper planning and due diligence process - why not try **to fix the existing issues in Arlington** - such as an out-of-control replacement of "normal" single-family houses with huge Mac-Mansions that go for \$2M+ ?? Just look at the latest monstrosity recently built on the Morningside Str below - this kind of mansions should not be allowed to be built in Arlington, and this is what makes houses so out-of-reach for many families!



Given all of the above - I believe that the Arlington residents deserve to have a much better thought through, researched, communicated and discussed plan before the proposed changes are approved.

Best Regards,
Marina Popova
current Arlington resident, Ridge Str