

# COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH

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May 27, 2011

Chairman Sharon Bulova  
Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, Suite 530  
12000 Government Center Parkway  
Fairfax, VA 22035

Re: Recommendation against mandate for 36 foot wide streets in residential neighborhoods

Encl: Staff Memo to Planning Commission of May 20, 2011 with Swift and CNU reports

Dear Chairman Bulova, members of the Board of Supervisors and the Planning Commission:

Fairfax County is becoming a leader in addressing the challenges created by the patterns of suburban development, through transit-oriented development, commercial corridor revitalization, affordable housing, stormwater, and reform to parking policies. We believe that Fairfax County can also join places like Charlotte, North Carolina, in addressing the design flaws and safety risks inherent in overly wide suburban streets. Therefore, we are concerned about and recommend strongly against the proposal to mandate a standard width of 36 feet for new suburban streets in the county.

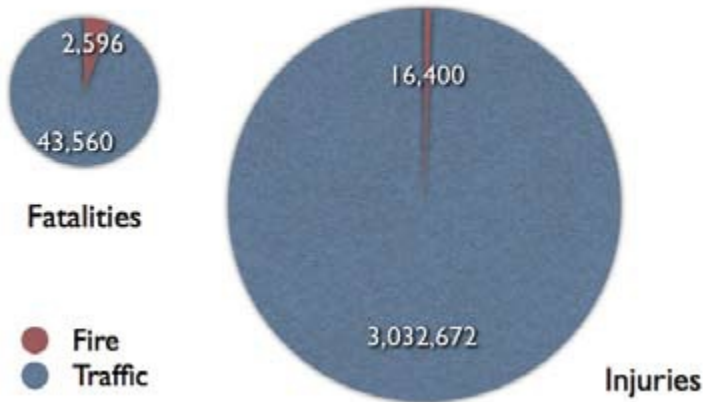
We have been very impressed by how the Planning Commission and staff have worked through complex issues related to the county's transformation, and we are confident that the county can adopt a flexible and safe approach to street design. We understand the concerns of the county's fire department, but believe that the research on injuries and fatalities and on new urbanist street design supports narrower, more interconnected streets offers the greatest overall safety benefits for residents of Fairfax County and other area jurisdictions.

We endorse the comments of the county's official Environmental Quality Advisory Council (EQAC) and we also base our position on the research provided by staff to the Planning Commission, specifically:

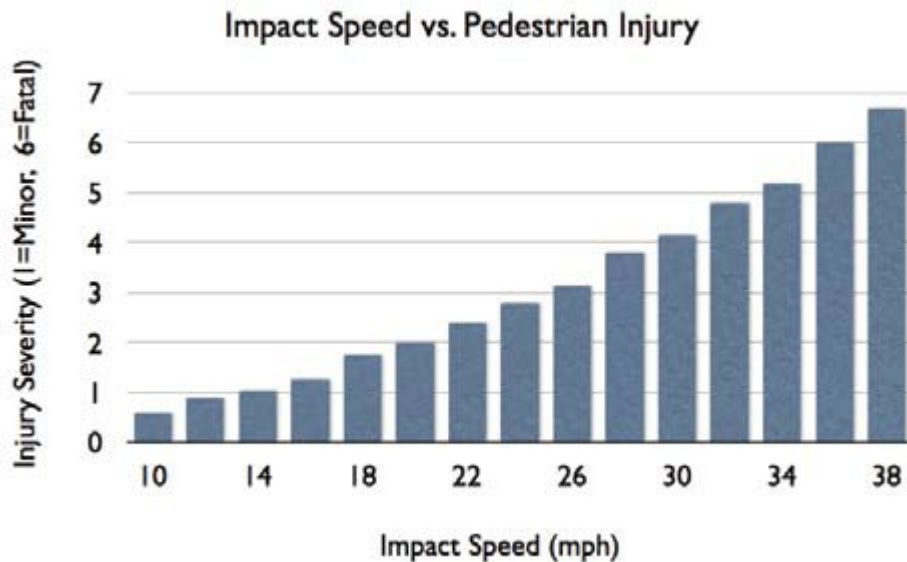
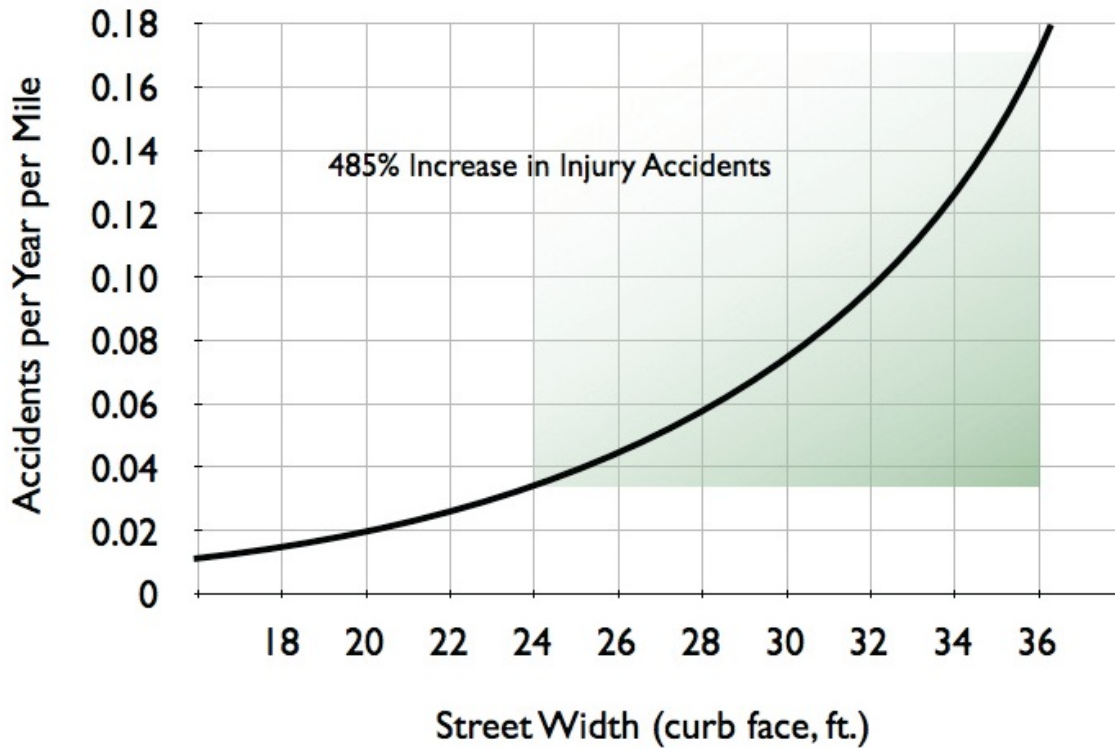
- 1) Residential Street Typology and Injury Accident Frequency by Swift, Painter and Goldstein, June 1997.
- 2) Emergency Response and Street Design, Congress of New Urbanism Report, 2009.

The Swift, et al report found that the most significant contributor to injury accidents was street widths. "As street widths widen, accidents per mile, per year increase exponentially, and the safest residential streets are the narrowest." The authors demonstrated (see graphs) below that traffic injuries and fatalities far surpass those from fires. Our fire departments are really "life-saving departments" and are as responsible for serving as first responders to traffic accidents as they are for responding to fires.

### Fire vs. Traffic Injuries and Fatalities



## Wider Streets = More Accidents



We acknowledge, as does the Swift report, the critical importance of fire-fighting access. The Swift report also concludes that "because of the fire access needs, narrow streets should not be used without at least a second means of access. This can be accomplished with alleys and/or an interconnected network of streets."

Research by Charlotte and Raleigh, North Carolina, cited in the 2009 report of the Congress of the New Urbanism, has demonstrated the advantages of narrower, more interconnected to fire departments in terms of response time, service coverage area and cost to the taxpayers. In Charlotte, "the study confirmed that higher street connectivity means that a single station can serve more households at lower per capita cost." In Raleigh, a review at response area coverage within a 1.5 mile radius of fire stations concluded that "older neighborhoods had greater service efficiencies due to their greater street connectivity... a fire station in the most interconnected neighborhood could provide service to more than three times as many commercial and residential units as the least connected neighborhood."

### **Recommendation:**

We recommend that instead of a mandate for a street width of 36 feet, that the county adopt a standard for evaluating street width based on the factors recommended by the Congress for the New Urbanism. Under their recommendation, **the local fire code official would be empowered to work with the transportation director to approve a decrease in the width of a fire apparatus access road below 20 feet of unobstructed space under specific circumstances. The officials would consider traffic safety, maximum building heights, fixed fire suppression systems, the degree of street interconnections, and the adequacy of turning radii to determine if reduced street widths would be appropriate.** There are varying options that could be adopted for particular neighborhoods. For example, EQAC has recommended consideration of narrower streets where parking is allowed on only one side of the street. Neighborhoods built with alleys, and those with parallel streets, offer fire coverage from both sides of a home. Also, even if a street does not have 20 feet clear on a continuous basis, if there are frequent driveways, then they offer a number of openings with 20 foot clear space.

We understand that a particular concern of the county's fire chief has been the speed that newly constructed homes have burned as a result of the materials used in construction. We concur with EQAC that Fairfax should mandate sprinklers for new residential construction as is the case in Prince George's and Montgomery Counties. We also recommend changes to state building codes to require more fire retardant materials for residential structures. We should address this underlying fire safety problem, not make safety problems worse by magnifying traffic safety issues. In our view we have an obligation to improve both fire safety in new homes and safety on our streets.

Again, we appreciate the work of the Planning Commission, the Fire Department and County transportation and planning staff, and we hope that together with the community we can create neighborhoods in which we can enhance both fire safety in the home and safety on our streets.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Stewart Schwartz  
Executive Director

cc: Anthony H. Griffin, County Executive  
David Molchany, Deputy County Executive  
James W. Patteson, Director, DPWES  
Battalion Chief Carlton Burkhammer, Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department