

Joint Comments from Fairfax Healthy Communities Network on Fairfax County's FY22 Budget

April 12, 2021

AUDUBON NATURALIST SOCIETY • COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH • FAIRFAX NAACP • FAITH ALLIANCE FOR CLIMATE SOLUTIONS • FRIENDS OF HOLMES RUN • NORTHERN VIRGINIA AFFORDABLE HOUSING ALLIANCE • SIERRA CLUB, GREAT FALLS GROUP • SOUTH COUNTY TASK FORCE • VIRGINIA CLINICIANS FOR CLIMATE ACTION

Dear Chairman McKay & and Members of the Board of Supervisors,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on and recommendations for the FY2022 Budget. We recognize and acknowledge the continued challenges the County faces during the ongoing health crisis and appreciate your leadership through these extraordinarily difficult times.

The above named organizations, as part of the **Fairfax Healthy Communities Network**, envision a Fairfax County where people can live, work, and play in connected communities that are healthy, sustainable, and inclusive. This vision recognizes that the intersections of equity, housing security, walkable, bikeable neighborhoods, transit-oriented communities, clean air & water, access to green space, and food come together in one word: health.

Healthy communities do not exist in a vacuum. They are composed of myriad environmental and social factors, all of which intimately intersect with the services the County provides. We ask that the economic and environmental disparities seen across the County and their correlation with the unequal impacts of COVID-19 serve as a guide for you to continue your work in the coming fiscal year.

Our budget recommendations below highlight what we see as the most significant outstanding funding opportunities to ensure a healthier, more resilient, Fairfax County.

1. Retain the Advertised Tax Rate of \$1.15 per \$100 of assessed value

While County revenue based on the current \$1.14 rate has increased due to higher real estate assessments, the need for essential services calls for a tax rate increase to help fund initiatives critical to achieving a healthier Fairfax.

2. Increase Investments in Affordable Housing

Ensuring healthy communities for all residents starts with ensuring our most vulnerable populations have housing. We appreciate the County's focus on this topic and the current work being done in this area, including evaluating recommendations proposed by the Affordable

Housing Preservation Task Force, and the transfer of public lands to the Fairfax County Redevelopment and Housing Authority to aid in the development of new affordable housing.

However, the County must invest more to address the scale and scope of the identified unmet housing needs. Despite the fact that most supervisors have advocated affordable housing as a priority, funds in this area were cut in half 11 years ago and not restored.

a) Amend the Budget at Quarterly Reviews to Incorporate Federal Funds

In support of the Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance's March 30, 2021 comments¹ we ask that you consider amending the budget at quarterly reviews to incorporate federal funds. Fiscal relief for the County of over \$220 million from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP) should alleviate some budgeting pressures. Opportunities for innovative funding of affordable housing that go beyond the per capita allocations of HUD are being discussed in new legislation.

b) Reinstate Paused Housing and Community Development Initiatives including adding at least 1 penny of the real estate tax to housing needs

The County could use the flexibility that ARP funding and other federal funds will present to reinstate housing and community development initiatives currently on hold, including assigning the value of at least one penny of the real estate tax for affordable housing needs. Initiatives like these could begin to address long-standing and underfunded housing and human service needs stemming from pre-existing racial and social inequities spotlighted by COVID.

c) Proactively Seek and Apply for RGGI Funding

Separately, but related, one of Virginia's newest funding sources, from the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), specifically budgets for locales to invest in low-income energy efficiency housing programs through the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development. Staff and funds should be made available to apply for these funds as, first and foremost, energy-efficiency programs improve the financial security of low-income residents by reducing their utility bills. These programs also improve health by reducing exposure of occupants to extreme temperatures, to indoor and outdoor air pollution, to moisture and mold, and to infiltration by rats, cockroaches, and other pests. We appreciate the County's FY22 budget of \$88,000 for the HomeWise program (in which volunteers perform weatherization in county owned low-income homes); with additional RGGI resources, residents could see benefits more quickly.

d) Prioritize Affordable Housing as a Key Climate Mitigation Strategy

Lastly, we must acknowledge the intersection of housing policy with climate policy², particularly in terms of transportation and land use impacts. Affordable housing is a key to combating the

¹ <https://nvaha.org/wp-content/uploads/FY2022-Budget-Advocacy-Letter.pdf>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/25/opinion/california-home-prices-climate.html>

current climate crisis, which affects all residents' health, providing yet another reason the County should invest further in more affordable housing stock in close proximity to frequent transit than is proposed today.

3. Support Public Transit, Biking and Walking for Better Sustainable Transportation Options

With transportation contributing 42% of the carbon emissions in our County³, the importance of the link between public health, carbon emissions, and the transportation sector is undeniable. Public transit along with good active transportation connections are critical as a climate solution to reduce greenhouse gas emissions but also to the overall well-being of our county and the region by providing opportunities for people to live closer to jobs and activities that are not reliant on cars.

a) Invest to Restore and Improve Public Transit Now

Our public transit system has been hit hard by the pandemic but at the same time has shown just how critical transit is for our essential workforce. While Metrorail ridership declined near 90% throughout the pandemic⁴, Fairfax Connector ridership was back to 60%⁵ by the end of 2020 as it continued to serve essential workers bringing them to their jobs at hospitals, grocery stores, and other businesses that serve as the backbone of our communities.

We urge the County to provide funding necessary to continue the 2020 program providing free fares at least through the continuing course of the pandemic *and* fully restore transit service for a better, more equitable bus system. Now is the time to utilize any emergency funds received and to prioritize additional funding to ensure frequent, reliable service; cleanliness and personal safety; free or reduced fares; and provide additional service to ensure extra capacity. We further urge the County to develop a marketing plan to demonstrate the benefits of returning to transit and the COVID-19 safety protocols being followed to keep riders safe. Looking ahead, the County should begin investing in converting the Fairfax Connector, and school buses, to all electric fleets.

b) Provide Needed Funding to Advance Active Transportation Program

Prioritizing funding towards safe streets for biking and walking, and accessing transit is a critical part of a sustainable transportation network. Over the last decade, Fairfax County has made strides in funding and implementing sidewalk, trail, and other active transportation facilities but there is still much to do. The County must accelerate funding and implementation of pedestrian

³https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/environment-energy-coordination/sites/environment-energy-coordination/files/assets/2020-03-31%20cecap%20task%20force%20virtual%20presentation_final%20web.pdf#page=26

⁴<https://www.wmata.com/service/covid19/Covid-19-Public-Information.cfm>

⁵https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/washington-transit-systems/2021/01/15/39f8f16-5039-11eb-83e3-322644d82356_story.html

safety improvements around the county, particularly in areas identified as high pedestrian crash corridors.

We commend the County for developing an Active Transportation program that ties planning for these facilities together and integrates them with the County's vision to focus growth in compact, mixed-use activity centers. We support expanding staff capacity for Active Transportation planning. Currently with only 3 FTEs dedicated to Active Transportation, the County is limited in its ability to implement bicycle and pedestrian improvements at the pace and scale needed to expand transportation options for everyone. This should include a full-time Safe Routes to School Coordinator to support active transportation as an integral part of the Fairfax County's school transportation program.

The ActiveFairfax Transportation Plan currently in Phase I of development will set a vision and provide a framework for the continued growth and success of the County's Active Transportation program. We urge the County to identify funding for Phase II of the plan to maintain momentum for this important effort and ensure its timely completion.

4. Further Investments in Diverse Community Engagement in Planning and Development

The way we use and redevelop our land can significantly impact the ability of residents to live a healthy life. We appreciate that the County also acknowledges this relationship as seen in the The Department of Planning and Development's FY2021 adopted budget summary: "Community engagement on land use issues is a priority and new strategies are required to ensure that the quality of life and the opinions of the County's growing and increasingly diverse population are considered and that all residents have an opportunity to participate in planning and zoning activities"⁶.

It is imperative that the County consider who benefits and who could be harmed by development proposals. Comprehensive plans and resulting development plans should avoid displacement of low-income communities of color. The County's outreach process must engage with communities that may be displaced, harmed, or negatively impacted—including renters and mobile home owners as well as property owners—to ensure all affected parties have a voice.

a) Increase funding to ensure recommendations will be implemented

We support increases in funding and staff capacity to be able to more fully implement the recommendations of the 2017 Community Council on Land Use Engagement. These increases will enable the Department to, for example, hire more bilingual and multilingual staff to expand outreach to Fairfax's diverse communities and connect them to land use planning processes

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<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/budget/sites/budget/files/assets/documents/fy2021/adopted/volume1/35.pdf#page=2>

affecting their communities. They could also, for example, support in-person consultations with low-income community groups to identify their needs for active transportation, considering both recreation and every day activities such as ensuring safe pathways to schools, bus stops, and grocery stores.

b) Account for and invest in resources to evaluate outreach process

We also urge the County to invest resources in evaluating the success of its expanded outreach strategies and reporting these outcomes to the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors. We cannot know how well we as a County are succeeding in diversifying community engagement in land use and development without defining the benchmarks of success more clearly, and tracking these benchmarks consistently. Efforts at community engagement should be evaluated using equity metrics to make sure the methods used are successful in achieving the desired representation.

5. Prioritize Environmental Review of Development Plans

The health of the environment in which we live—for example, the air we breathe, the water we drink—provides a baseline for the health outcomes of our residents. Fairfax County’s environment is signaling that land use decisions are degrading the very natural resources which we rely on to live.

We urge the Board to invest in the resources needed to (1) conduct more equitable and thorough environmental impact statements in land use decision-making; (2) conduct biological inventories before making land use decisions; (3) identify and prioritize already paved areas for redevelopment, while also identifying significant tree stands, stream corridors, and natural areas as priorities for increased protection, rejecting proposed development that exacerbates current degradation; (4) require more tree and native plant preservation, replacement and long-term maintenance. Two specific areas of concern which would benefit from additional attention are water and trees.

a) Invest in Ensuring Clean and Healthy Waterways

Based on County data collected in 2019, 88 percent of Fairfax County’s streams are in fair to very poor condition, with no “statistically significant progress” since the 2001 stream assessments⁷. DPWES’s Shannon Curtis described our stormwater problems very clearly in his March 13, 2021 NVSWCD Green Breakfast presentation⁸: “The preponderance of our problem [with poor water quality] has to do with our land uses.” Later, he explains: “How do we protect or improve our environment when Fairfax County is one of the most rapidly...redeveloping and modernizing landscapes in the region? We’re continuously seeing rezonings, redevelopments, new features on the landscape. And it’s outpacing the ability of stormwater management to

⁷ <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicworks/stormwater/stream-quality-assessment-program>

⁸ 44:55: <https://youtu.be/WORZe9FhZE0?t=2694> and 1:36:36: <https://youtu.be/WORZe9FhZE0?t=5795>

handle it. And so we're really pushing up against our limits conventional stormwater management.”

When our streams are degraded and conventional stormwater management can't keep pace with our built landscape, we jeopardize the drinking water and thus the health of all residents. We recognize the benefits of focusing new development in already paved areas where stormwater controls can be retrofitted while at the same time expanding stream buffers.

b) Invest in Updating Tree Inventory

The County's best tree canopy analysis, which showed a canopy coverage of 57%, was last completed using data from 2015⁹. While this percentage exceeds the Board's goal of minimum 45% canopy coverage, it is important that the County invest the resources needed to update this information on a pace relative to the pace of development. The *quantity* of tree canopy is one important metric, but equally important is the *equitable distribution* of this tree canopy as well as the *quality* of the tree canopy, in terms of the health, age, and species of the tree (e.g. native versus non-native). Trees are an important carbon sequestration tool, aid in stormwater management, clean our air, cool areas of impervious surface during the summer months, and contribute to positive mental and physical health outcomes, to name a few benefits.

6. Fund Staff Capacity for Aggressive Procurement of Federal, State, and Other Grant Funding Opportunities for Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Programs

Climate change takes advantage of the same vulnerabilities that COVID-19 does, and it is crucial that the budget reflect a continued commitment to climate mitigation, resilience, and adaptation. We applaud the Board's increase of \$0.37 million included in the Office of Environmental and Energy Coordination (OEEC) budget to support the development and management of the Climate Adaptation and Resilience Plan. We also strongly encourage the Board to pursue funding opportunities to further the County's climate initiatives from multiple Federal and State agencies, sources that are anticipated to significantly increase when funding from President Biden's American Rescue Plan Act is allocated to local governments, totalling \$2.8 billion nationwide¹⁰. Of particular importance and urgency will be funding the implementation of the Community-wide Energy and Climate Action Plan (CECAP) recommendations the Board will be considering later this year.

Given the wide range of opportunities available and the labor intensity of pursuing funding, we recommend the County fund staffing and/or consulting capacity for procurement of climate-related funding and other innovative private-public partnerships to get projects launched even

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<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicworks/sites/publicworks/files/assets/documents/tree-canopy-report-2015.pdf>

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https://richmond.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/suddenly-flush-va-revenues-up-by-1-billion-with-tax-refunds-lagging-federal-money-coming/article_021d3e43-8038-5b2b-a0f0-c0b9406fff87.html

as climate plans are developed. The OEEC is well-positioned to lead this effort as a convener, and also to act as project manager, drawing in resources from relevant departments.

Some funding examples include the RGGI funding above in the affordable housing section, resilience programs through FEMA¹¹ and the Department of Housing and Urban Development¹² energy efficiency and renewable energy projects through the Department of Energy¹³, grants for zero/low-emission buses through the Department of Transportation's Federal Transportation Administration, and Department of Agriculture's programs as well.

7. Fund an Economic Opportunity Analysis to Establish a Green Bank

New in 2021, the Commonwealth has given locales the ability to establish a green bank¹⁴ and the County should take steps immediately to begin the process of doing so. Doing so can promote investment in clean energy technologies and energy efficiency projects in low- to moderate-income communities that otherwise might not receive financing. Establishing a green bank fits perfectly with the One Fairfax policy - it will create jobs and foster an equitable energy transition. A locality must hold a hearing prior to establishing the green bank. But there are several different models of green banks nationwide. We propose the County first conduct an opportunity analysis, at a cost of approximately \$300,000, which could be done in partnership with the Coalition for Green Capital.

8. Increase Budget Support for Long-Term Stewardship and Protection of FCPA's Natural Resources

The importance of outdoor park space and natural areas for physical and mental health of our County residents has been documented through the Fairfax County Park Authority's (FCPA) Needs Assessment¹⁵. It has been further underscored during this past year of the COVID-19 health crisis as park visitation continues to be extremely high.

A more concerted, robust fiscal focus on protecting passive parks and stream valleys would be a key investment in our County's emerging goals of livable, sustainable communities, and resilient climate response. Further, in order to meet the open space and park needs of projected population growth, we urge the Board to ensure that it plans and funds (either through the annual budget or bond acts) for adequate public outdoor space and tree cover to meet demand before it is too late and development pressures create a lost opportunity.

¹¹ <https://www.fema.gov/about/offices/resilience>

¹² <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/community-resilience/>

¹³ <https://www.energy.gov/eere/apply-eere-funding-opportunities>

¹⁴ <https://www.billtrack50.com/billdetail/1307893/>

¹⁵

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/sites/parks/files/assets/documents/plandev/parkscount/needs-assessment-plan-050616.pdf#page=12>

a) Budget to staff FCPA's remaining NRMP program area to increase stewardship capacity

One easy win is to budget for the staffing of the fourth and final program area of FCPA's Natural Resource Management Plan (NRMP), "Fostering Stewardship and Expanding Natural Capital"¹⁶. As the NRMP states: "The natural capital infrastructure, which provides the county with ecosystem services such as clean air and water and quality of life benefits for residents, requires active management and financial commitment to maintain. The actions under this management theme focus on engaging citizens, staff and regional partners in resource management, with the goal of fostering support for programs and initiatives and raising awareness of the need for active stewardship." Staffing this area would raise the capacity of staff, resulting in a significant return on that budget investment.

b) Budget for long-term maintenance of FCPA natural areas

We ask the Board to prioritize funding for longer term maintenance of our Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) natural areas, particularly in light of increased usage and impacts. A commitment toward maintaining and preserving natural resources is vital for park assets which are critical to the public but are not, and may never be, self-supported through user fees. These parks provide respite for residents, but also include important ecological assets such as protected stream valleys, FCPA invasive management sites, forests and wetlands. We appreciate the Board's on-going support of the Invasive Management Area (IMA) program with this year's proposed allocation of \$300,000, for example, but further investment more broadly is needed.

Many stream valleys and parks are struggling with invasive plant species, increased stormwater, and other ecological impacts of development. Park bonds and third-party grants are a vital source of funding to jumpstart capital projects that help preserve, protect and restore these natural resources. However, for the projects to be successful in the long term, a greater longer-term financial commitment by the County is required for *maintenance* of these good works after initial funding has been invested.

9. Support Funding for Implementation of JET Recommendations

We commend the County for continuing to pursue implementation of the recommendations from the Joint Environmental Task Force (JET), particularly with the goal of zero waste for government and schools by 2030. This sort of aggressive goal will require funding to ensure these goals can be achieved.

We support the \$100,000 for development of a zero waste plan. Concerns of reusable items in light of the COVID-19 is certainly a component to be addressed, but the Board has an opportunity to start with easy and significant wins in this arena to help move the County forward.

¹⁶

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/sites/parks/files/assets/documents/naturalcultural/nrmp-01-29-14.pdf#page=14>

The County can draw inspiration and implementation actions from the Commonwealth's own executive order to eliminate non-medical single-use plastic and expanded polystyrene objects in state agencies by 2025¹⁷.

Summary

We have too many overlapping crises right now – not only COVID-19, but a long-term housing crisis and the twin crises of climate and loss of the biodiversity that supports humanity. We must be bold in addressing these crises and putting ourselves on a path to health and resiliency. Urgent action in transportation, housing, energy, land use, and environmental policies is needed to support the One Fairfax and Net Zero goals. Fairfax Healthy Communities believes that a budget that supports these policy goals will help ensure an equitable and healthy future for all residents.

Thank you for consideration of our comments and recommendations.

Sincerely,

Audubon Naturalist Society, Renee Grebe, Northern Virginia Conservation Advocate

Coalition For Smarter Growth, Sonya Breehey, Northern Virginia Advocacy Manager

Fairfax NAACP, Lydia Lawrence, Environmental & Climate Justice Chair

Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions, Meg Mall, Executive Director

Friends of Holmes Run, Whitney Redding, Primary Conservator

Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance, Michelle Krockner, Executive Director

Sierra Club, **Great Falls Group**, Ann Bennett, Douglas Stewart

South County Task Force, Mary Paden, Chair

Virginia Clinicians for Climate Action, Krupal Shah, MD, Vice-Chair for Community Outreach

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<https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/executive-actions/EO-77-Virginia-Leading-by-Example-to-Reduce-Plastic-Pollution-and-Solid-Waste.pdf>