

Joint Comments from Fairfax Healthy Communities Network on Fairfax County's FY23 Budget

April 12, 2022

AUDUBON NATURALIST SOCIETY • CCAN ACTION FUND • COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH • FAIRFAX ALLIANCE FOR BETTER BICYCLING • FAITH ALLIANCE FOR CLIMATE SOLUTIONS • FRIENDS OF HOLMES RUN • FRIENDS OF HUNTLEY MEADOWS PARK • NORTHERN VIRGINIA AFFORDABLE HOUSING ALLIANCE • SIERRA CLUB, GREAT FALLS GROUP • SOUTH COUNTY TASK FORCE • VIRGINIA LEAGUE OF CONSERVATION VOTERS • WASHINGTON AREA BICYCLIST ASSOCIATION

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

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on and recommendations for the FY2023 Budget. 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 and bikeable neighborhoods, transit-oriented communities, clean air and 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. 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 at least the current bond funding levels to prevent underinvestment in capital projects

Bonds are a critical funding source for county amenities. While the county is retaining or increasing capacity for bond funding in areas such as schools, Metro, and libraries, it is proposing to cut capacity for others, such as for parks, community development, and human services.

For example, the current proposal to lengthen the bond cycle from every 4 years to every 6 years would result in:

- A disastrous loss of funding for Fairfax County Park Authority's Capital Improvement Program for essential priorities such as maintenance and repair projects to address the \$500 million backlog in infrastructure and facilities repairs and maintenance needs.
- Further delays in approval for critical county facilities like homeless shelters and permanent supportive housing.
- Inability to fund carbon-reducing actions on county properties, such as investing in solar installations.

This is not the time to cut bond funding. Instead, we urge the county to understand and *address* the underlying issues driving the proposal to change the bond cycle for a subset of county amenities.

2. Provide additional and sustainable local investment for affordable housing

We applaud the investments in housing, adding several needed staff positions, making county land available to affordable housing projects, and doubling the goal of new affordable homes to 10,000 by 2034.

However, the FY23 proposed budget does not significantly increase the amount of funding dedicated to affordable housing. While the Board has made it a priority to ensure that all residents have access to safe and affordable housing, this priority must be reflected in the *budget*, especially for an area as costly as Fairfax County.

We urge the Board to increase the Affordable Housing Investment and Development fund to at least \$33 million in FY23 with the goal of \$60 million in the next budget cycle. We recommend these funds be used to:

a) Develop a strong baseline stream of local funding

A dedicated source of local funds is needed to build and preserve affordable housing for planning purposes and to make sure that funds are available to take advantage of market opportunities to preserve affordable housing. This is especially important for the most vulnerable residents, including those who are homeless, disabled, elderly, and very low income. One-time federal support for housing has been helpful, but those funds should be used to leap forward, not to backfill in lieu of local funds.

b) Preservation of existing affordable housing

The 9,000 units of market affordable housing counted in a 2018 survey are at risk of being lost without closer monitoring and a preservation/acquisition fund. Soaring rents and pressure from development, particularly on the county's 1,700 affordable mobile homes, threaten the affordable housing supply. Unless these issues are monitored and addressed, the county could be losing thousands of affordable units while it is building hundreds.

The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) should continue to accurately track and semi-annually report the amount of market rate affordable housing. We also urge DHCD to track and report progress on advisory committee recommendations accepted by the Board of Supervisors, including those for streamlining processes and planning and zoning changes to make affordable housing construction easier.

c) Increase workforce housing to spur economic development

Fairfax County's recent Housing Symposium made clear the relationship between affordable housing and economic growth as employers seek jurisdictions that can provide housing for all their employees within a reasonable commute. Without a serious committed stream of investment in various levels of affordable housing, the county is endangering future economic growth.

3. Fully fund the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) recommendations

FCPA's general fund support has remained near 2008 levels for the past 14 years, with 2008 emergency budget cuts unrestored. And yet, the importance of outdoor park space and natural areas for physical and mental health of our county residents has never been greater than during COVID-19 health crisis.

Furthermore, FCPA's fee-based model is unsustainable. Expecting FCPA to make activities more affordable and accessible to all, while at the same time expecting it to self-fund its ambitious mandates through user fees does not work. It disproportionately penalizes low-income communities, ignores natural resource management and excludes the true monetary value of ecosystem services provided by those natural resources. To that end, we ask:

a) Fully fund the Equitable Access Program for \$5 million

The Board's One Fairfax policy aims to improve racial and social equity; improving access to parks and recreation has been identified as a vital part of improving health outcomes and quality of life for underserved populations, who often face barriers of affordability and proximity.

While we appreciate the \$500,000 allocated in the current budget for a pilot program, this amount is only 10% of the FCPA recommended funds for increasing its work to ensure park access to residents who are not otherwise able to pay for park programming. FCPA has already been putting their own fee-based funds towards supporting the Board's One Fairfax policy of equitable access for all residents, such as \$1.5 million in scholarship funds. Allocating the full \$5 million will help FCPA do more to ensure programs meant to serve **all** of Fairfax County will be accessible to a larger number of underserved residents.

b) Protect FCPA's natural resources by fully funding the recommendation of \$751,954

Management of the FCPA's natural resources has left many parks and natural areas struggling under the pressures of urban encroachment and in need of more support to fulfill their ecological potential as we face the current climate crisis. This is especially true in neighborhood parks where there is high socioeconomic need such as Justice Park (Mason) and Woodlawn Park (Mount Vernon).

While we appreciate the inclusion of an additional \$50,000 in the current budget proposal for the Environmental Improvement Program (EIP) in support of the Invasive Management Area (IMA) program, this amount ignores FCPA's recommendation for funds to establish a new Natural Resources Sustainability program. Long-term climate action and resiliency goals must involve thoughtful, active management of our natural spaces to mitigate the complex impacts of climate change and urbanization on our communities.

4. Support more sustainable transportation options by investing in public transit, biking and walking

With transportation contributing 42% of the carbon emissions in our county¹, public transit along with good active transportation networks are critical components of a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

We urge the Board to reprioritize our transportation spending and stop fueling expensive roadway expansion that exacerbates traffic congestion and our climate crisis. Instead, focus investments on fixing our crumbling infrastructure first, taking better care to maintain investments already made in our transportation network, and reorienting funds for new capital projects specifically towards supporting walkable, transit-accessible development and communities.

a) Make buses more frequent, reliable, and sustainable

We call on the Board to prioritize funding for our bus system to improve the frequency, reliability, and quality of bus service. Build dedicated bus lanes, and implement signal priority, all-door boarding, mobile fare payment, and other technologies to make service faster and more reliable. Invest in bus shelters and safety improvements for walking and biking to the bus. Adopt free or reduced bus fares to help lower-income residents.

We urge electrification of all public transportation, with a goal of completion by 2035. Electrifying county fleets and school buses must be a priority.

b) Expand funding to accelerate Active Transportation improvements and staffing

We commend the county for maintaining momentum towards developing its ActiveFairfax Transportation plan by approving funding for Phase II and moving with urgency to stand up a Safe Streets for All program.

We appreciate the Board's support for \$100 million over six years, with \$5 million already approved, to address the backlog of unfunded pedestrian and bicycle improvements. However, much more will be needed to address the significant safety and connectivity needs in the county to truly make active transportation safe and convenient.

We support the two proposed FTE positions proposed for the active transportation program. While this is a step in the right direction and will offer additional staff capacity to the program, we believe more capacity will be needed to implement bicycle and pedestrian improvements at the pace and scale needed to expand transportation options for everyone. Without additional capacity, executing on the Board's \$100 million commitment will undoubtedly stagnate.

Ensure adequate funding to support a full-time Safe Routes to School (SRTS) position to ensure the continuation of the program. Fairfax County's successful SRTS program is at risk because the

¹https://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

grant funding supporting this position is ending this year. Please ensure this position is made permanent to support active transportation as an integral part of Fairfax County's school transportation program.

5. Invest in increasing staff support to meet aggressive climate goals

Across the county, many departments will be involved in executing on the county's climate and resiliency goals, which will be important to ensure all communities are liveable and equitable. While we have not learned about the capacity of all relevant offices, listed below are two example areas where we are requesting the county invest in increased staffing.

One Fairfax

An equity lens is essential in tackling the county's climate goals. And yet, the staff currently supporting One Fairfax must also be engaged in every other facet of the county as well. There may not be enough One Fairfax staff capacity to participate meaningfully in helping the county achieve its climate goals.

The Office of Environment and Energy (OEEC)

We appreciate the investment the county has made to OEEC's budget as public demand for serious carbon emissions reduction has increased, as has the Board's commitment to develop goals and cut emissions. Through its Energy Operational Strategy, serious efforts have been made to address the sustainability and efficiency of county-owned buildings.

However, there is significant work ahead to build an effective and measurable carbon reduction program for the private sector. Additional staffing and leadership will be required to drive the county-wide effort to reduce our carbon emissions. Of critical importance is the need for a person trained in climate administration to oversee the significant work of implementing CECAP and Resilient Fairfax.

While the current Carbon-free Fairfax campaign is helpful for awareness, funding and incentives for programs that lead to significant energy efficiency, reduced energy use, and changes in the built environment are required if we are to meet the ambitious goals adopted by the Board and to do our part to cut emissions in the ever-narrowing timeframe to act per the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report.

6. Invest in increasing tree canopy

The Community-wide Energy and Climate Action Plan (CECAP) set a goal for the county to increase tree canopy coverage to 60% overall by 2050. We urge the county to go further, aiming for a minimum of 30% coverage in every census tract by 2030, prioritizing vulnerable communities with the most significant heat islands. In order to effectively measure the county's ever-changing tree canopy, we urge the county to fund and complete an update to the outdated 2017 iTree analysis in 2022.

In addition to their ecological, GHG reduction, and stormwater value, a healthy native tree canopy will be a critical component of the county's smart street designs as well to mitigate the heat island effects of our transportation infrastructure. Furthermore, shade from trees will be necessary for residents using bike lanes and sidewalks, given that, by 2050, Fairfax County could experience an additional month and a half of days above 90 degrees Fahrenheit per year² and hotter temperatures are expected to expand into the late spring and early fall months.

Summary

We continue to face 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 housing, transportation, energy, land use, and environmental policies is needed to support the One Fairfax and Net Zero goals. Fairfax Healthy Communities supports a budget that reflects these policy goals to help ensure an equitable and healthy future for all residents.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments and recommendations.

Sincerely,

Audubon Naturalist Society, Renee Grebe, Northern Virginia Conservation Advocate

CCAN Action Fund, Zander Pellegrino, Northern Virginia Organizer

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

Fairfax Alliance for Better Bicycling, Bruce Wright, President

Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions, Kristin Rosenthal, Advocacy Teams Leader

Friends of Huntley Meadows Park, Cathy Ledec, President

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 League of Conservation Voters, Chris Leyen, Policy Director

Washington Area Bicyclist Association, Jeremiah Lowery, Advocacy Director

² <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/environment-energy-coordination/resilient-fairfax-climate-projections>