



Joint Comments from Fairfax Healthy Communities Network on Fairfax County’s FY24 Budget

April 11, 2023

Dear Chairman McKay and Members of the Board of Supervisors,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on and recommendations for the FY2024 Budget. The above fifteen 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. Our budget recommendations also match our recently-released 2023 Fairfax Healthy Communities Platform.¹

1. Housing for All

Provide additional and sustainable local investment for affordable housing

The importance of affordable housing stands on its own - a compassionate society and community ensures that people from all social classes and income levels can afford to live and work together. However, *housing policy is also climate policy*. If people can afford to live closer to where they work, they will spend less time commuting and will produce fewer transportation emissions. In addition, close-in affordable housing will help us save more of our natural areas by reducing sprawl. Fairfax County needs to reduce both sprawl and emissions to meet its climate and resilience goals.

To do so, the Board needs to fund its commitments. Pre-COVID, the County’s goal was to provide \$60M in county funds for affordable housing in the Department of Housing and Community Development budget. This commitment included the equivalent of 1 penny on \$100 tax rate for

¹ <https://www.fairfaxhealthy.org/platform>

new affordable housing and 1 penny/\$100 for preservation of affordable housing, including financing purchase of apartments and mobile home parks. The Board targeted this amount in its budget guidance for FY24 but did not deliver it (FY23 held this amount at the equivalent of 1 penny/\$100), and we are not on track to meet the County's goal of 10,000 affordable homes by 2034.

There has been some growth and improvement, but not enough to meet the scale of the housing crisis. Last year's budget added several needed staff positions, and this year a new 1 FTE for the position of Manufactured Housing Coordinator is budgeted, which we strongly support. Also this year, the Board passed the Preservation of Affordable Housing Amendment to the Comp Plan for multi-unit dwellings, and is actively working on a preservation strategy for manufactured homes. Finally, we continue to appreciate one-time funding to fill the gaps: \$45M of ARPA funding has been allocated to previous affordable housing initiatives, and funding of \$10M is proposed as part of FY23 3rd quarter review, but is not part of the FY24 budget.

The Board should prioritize budget items which will produce measurable benefits to addressing the affordable housing crisis. These include:

- **Support for Manufactured Housing:** Approve and fund the proposed 1 new FTE of Manufactured Housing Coordinator. A significant proportion of the remaining Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing in Fairfax County is in the form of mobile and manufactured home communities, but these communities require unique protection strategies given their ground-rent finance structure. A specialist in this role can help advise communities of their rights, provide them with options as rents increase, and help foster partnerships between the county and nonprofits interested in purchasing parks.
 - The best way to preserve Mobile home parks is to purchase them in league with a nonprofit. This will allow for more stable land rents and will remove the land from the path of developers. **We need an affordable housing preservation strike force fund of \$30M (half of the proposed \$60M) this year to be ready to take advantage of opportunities especially for endangered parks.**
- **Support for low-income homeowners and fair housing enforcement:** A recent fair housing study found that the county is becoming more segregated and less equitable in terms of income. Two ways to improve equitable development are to step up a program for low-income homeownership by increasing the supply of for-sale homes through proffers and the use of factory built housing, and to investigate and enforce fair housing laws with discriminatory mortgage lenders.
- **Protect low-income tenants and unsheltered people from climate variability:** The Resilient Fairfax report found that those most vulnerable to increased variability in temperatures and storms are the county's low-income residents. They have the greatest chance of being harmed and the fewest resources to adapt or recover. Put more funds into efforts to provide relief from extreme heat to unsheltered people and to provide cooling devices and utility support to low-income residents. Prioritize more permanent supportive housing to help end homelessness. Increase rent relief efforts to keep tenants housed during crises.

2. Sustainable Transportation

With transportation contributing 42% of the carbon emissions in our county², public transit along with a comprehensive active transportation network 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.

Commit to making our streets safer for all users

On May 10, 2022, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors unanimously endorsed the Safe Streets for All Program, a comprehensive initiative to address systemic transportation safety issues for people walking, biking, taking transit, and driving. Included in the recommendations is a call for roadway infrastructure changes to slow traffic on our community's streets. Unfortunately, the County has not yet dedicated staff or funding to begin executing the program, and the ramifications are dire: in 2022, the County saw its highest-ever number of traffic-related pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities. The delay in meaningful action cannot continue.

- **Fund Safe Streets For All Program Manager FTE:** We urge the Board to fully stand up its Safe Streets for All Program beginning with the inclusion of the program manager FTE at FCDOT to coordinate the efforts.
- **Fund the expansion of the automated speed enforcement program to every school and major construction site in the County.** State regulations limit use to only these two site categories, but the County could still make a meaningful effort to curb speeding by maximizing its ASE usage.

Act on the ActiveFairfax Transportation Plan recommendations

The ActiveFairfax Transportation Plan - the County's most significant overhaul of its bicycle, pedestrian, and trails plans - is expected to be finalized this year. The plan's recommendations address critical safety needs for residents who already walk and bike and also make improvements to allow more residents to walk and bike conveniently and safely for daily needs. Realizing the Plan's vision will require substantial, dedicated, and consistent funding starting *now*.

²https://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

- **Continue prioritizing and making ad hoc funding available for the County’s 6-year, \$100M emergency sidewalk repair program** to address the backlog of unfunded pedestrian and bicycle improvements.
- **Enter into formal negotiations with VDOT:** We are cognizant of the uncertainty regarding maintenance responsibility for facilities along many VDOT-managed roadways. Clarify maintenance roles on ALL County roadways so as to provide FCDOT with a clear mandate and comprehensive scope for its maintenance budget. At the same time, we call on the Board to identify a permanent funding solution for trails, sidewalks, and bikeways maintenance.

Make buses more frequent, reliable, and sustainable

Public transit is the backbone of a sustainable, equitable transportation system and a thriving economy, and Fairfax County has admirable plans to expand its bus rapid transit (BRT) network to ensure fast, frequent, and reliable service for residents.

- **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.
- **Electrify all public transportation.** Electrifying county fleets and school buses must be a priority.

3. Climate Mitigation, Resilience, and Green Spaces

Provide the funding needed to tackle the climate crisis

The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report made crystal-clear what we already knew: Tackling the climate crisis is **the** challenge of this century, and will interact with all others, from ecological to economic to social. Leaders who boldly act to reduce and prepare for climate impacts have the opportunity to truly preserve and create a better world for ourselves and our children. This starts with reducing our greenhouse gas emissions. The Community-wide Energy and Climate Action Plan (CECAP) established a goal of carbon neutrality for the Fairfax County community by 2050, with interim goals of 50% greenhouse gas emissions reductions by 2030 and 75% by 2040. Another critical climate plan that needs funding is Resilient Fairfax, which among other things points out that the variable impacts of climate change will fall most heavily on the most vulnerable people in the county, who also lack the resources to be resilient. To reach the goals of these climate mitigation and sustainability plans, the county requires strong and effective management, actionable implementation, accountability using metrics and monitoring, effective communications and sufficient funding to address the current challenges. We have just seven years to reach the first 2030 goal.

We ask that the Board should prioritize budget items which will produce measurable benefits to addressing the climate crisis. These include:

- **Climate Action Plan implementation:** Approve and fund the proposed 3 new FTEs (\$300,000 in addition to available funding for a total of \$1.7M supporting climate action implementation) for Charge Up Fairfax and CECAP. We need skilled staff to implement these important programs and priorities.
- **Resilient Fairfax implementation:** The Board should add funds for at least 1 new FTE to support Resilient Fairfax, adopted in Fall of 2022. We have heard from staff that they requested at least 1 new position, but it was not included in the submitted budget. Sufficient staff and budget is critical to implementing the entire plan, but one example of a priority need is providing relief to unsheltered and low-income people during summer extreme heat events and more frequent storms and floods.

Support more equitable and sustainable funding for the Fairfax County Park Authority

Taking better care of the natural resources we have left is essential for both climate mitigation (CECAP) and climate resiliency (Resilient Fairfax) measures to be successful. As the county's largest landowner with 24,000 acres held in the public trust, the Fairfax County Park Authority is an essential partner in that endeavor. And yet, FCPA's general fund support has decreased from about 3 percent in 2008 to 0.6 percent today, with 2008 emergency budget cuts unrestored. For the sake of all residents, restore the level of funding for FCPA to at least 1% of county revenue, and ensure that adequate, stable funding for forestry, maintenance and invasive removal gets added into the annual baseline parks budget rather than relying on third quarter review. If we allow our urban forests and green spaces to be fragmented or destroyed, if we overbuild our road systems, if we build housing that is not energy efficient or trails and sidewalks that are not shaded, if we cannot provide more tree canopy in vulnerable areas with heat islands, we will not succeed.

As you know, 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. It also requires advocacy groups such as ourselves to "ride to the rescue" each year and make a last-minute case to fund work that should be a standard, accepted part of the County's baseline budget. Last year, the Board of Supervisors provided funding to FCPA for a consultant to help rethink the current funding model, for which we are grateful. In the interim, however, this year, we are "riding to the rescue" in particular support of unfunded but essential equity-focused initiatives.

To that end, we ask that you:

- **Fully fund a mobile nature center** for \$229,279 to bring nature to communities who need it.
- **Fully fund new “activation staff”** for \$314,000 to help parks be more engaging and welcoming to all visitors, particularly those in areas which have suffered divestment.
- **Fully fund essential interpretation and translation** for \$50,000 to ensure equitable access to park signage, meetings, or outreach efforts in languages of people commonly served for those parks.
- **Begin funding the Park Ranger Pilot Program** for \$500,000 to allow the Park Authority to safely respond to many incidents with education rather than police involvement.

We do appreciate that in response to our advocacy last year, the Board made a \$752k addition for baseline funding for natural resource management. And we appreciate the \$57k baseline addition in the FY24 annual budget proposal, plus a one-off \$500k in Third Quarter Review to address the significant backlog of forestry needs. These needs won't go away, and the County and the Board must work together to develop a sustainable, baseline funding model for the stewards of our natural resources and places of outdoor enjoyment.

- **Support ecological stewardship by funding FCPA's zero waste efforts:** Begin funding zero waste efforts for \$500,000. FCPA is an important partner organization participating in Fairfax County's Zero Waste plan. Additional funding is required for FCPA to achieve the long-term goals in the plan, in properly dealing with recycling and reducing trash, but none of the requested \$2.9M was included in the budget.

Ensure County environmental agencies have the capacity they need to design, permit, and oversee projects on public and private land

We understand that Supervisors have requested a limit to the number of new positions in the FY24 budget as a cost-control strategy. While we understand the need to control costs, staffing can be a critical component of meeting the County's many important goals. For natural resources management, for example, we understand that the Stormwater division in the Department of Public Works requested a landscape architect position for their maintenance program but the position was not approved. As the manager of multi-million dollar stream restorations, pond retrofits, and other significant capital projects, having skilled staff such as landscape architects and restoration ecologists is essential. Currently, the Department often relies on consultants for expertise in such areas as site assessment, restoration design, implementation, and maintenance; but they conduct so many such projects in all the County's Districts that it makes sense to have some or all of this expertise on staff. In addition, some key staff in important positions will be retiring in the near future.

We ask that you:

- **Fund a position for landscape architect in the Stormwater Division's maintenance program.**

5. Food Security

The Fairfax County budget addresses food security singularly in terms of services provided to marginalized residents who receive SNAP, WIC and TANF. We are concerned that the county doesn't have a more visionary and holistic view of food security, especially given how quickly the fates of many residents changed for the worse during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In its March 2023 report, the IPCC again sounded the alarm about how climate change is already disrupting food production globally. A domestic example is California, which produces one-third of the US' vegetables and three-quarters of its fruits and nuts. A fall 2022 report on the drought's economic impact estimated that California's farmland shrank nearly 10 percent between 2019 and 2022.

We urge the Board to pro-actively fund an expansion of its food-security focus in the following two ways, rather than wait until forced to react in a crisis.

Investigate increased local commercial food-growing

The county is seeing a small increase in commercial operations that are growing food in technologically innovative ways, including indoors via hydroponics and aquaponics. Facilitating more urban agriculture entrepreneurship could bolster the local food supply, address the county's 17% office vacancy rate, and diversify employment opportunities. Neighboring jurisdictions have already adopted policies and regulations to foster this type of enterprise, and we would encourage the county to study which could be applied in Fairfax County. We would ask the Board to

- **Provide \$18,000 in matching funds to support and participate in a local food production strategic planning process.** The Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District plans to launch a multi-entity urban agriculture strategic planning initiative in September 2023 to examine local obstacles to local food production and successful regional urban agriculture policies and incentives.

Commit to equity in community gardening

The documented benefits of sustainable community gardening are many: improved nutrition and physical health; environmental protection and conservation; stronger, safer communities, and autonomy over the food one eats and how it is produced. We applaud the Park Authority for its plans to add two more community gardens, especially the ADA-compliant and walkable Hogge Park, which is near Bailey's Crossroads and Seven Corners. However, the wait list for the county plots can be several years, and Hogge Park gardeners will only be allowed to hold onto their plot for one year. To this end, we ask you to:

- **Fund the expansion of community gardens in food-insecure communities.** A 2019 community garden map created by the Fairfax Food Council's Urban Ag Work Group showed the inequities of the Park Authority community gardens, which are located in middle-income neighborhoods and require transportation to access. We strongly urge that

the county prioritize safely walkable sites in Herndon, along Route 1, and in the Culmore area of Bailey's Crossroads south of Route 50. We also urge the county to charge for the plots on a sliding scale or to provide scholarships for those who can't afford the annual fee.

- **Provide the necessary modest funding for annual maintenance of established community gardens at Neighborhood and Community Services sites.** Several community centers have created community gardens, which in turn provide programming and hundreds of pounds of fresh produce to youth and seniors. However, a lack of garden budgeting means that the community center staff now must rely on the generosity of non-profit partners for volunteers, equipment, tools, and soil amendments.

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

Thank you for your consideration of our comments and recommendations. If you have any questions, please contact Fairfax Healthy Communities Co-Chairs **Sonya Breehey** (sonya@smartergrowth.net) or **Renee Grebe** (renee.grebe@natureforward.org).

Sincerely,

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Chesapeake Climate Action Network, Zander Pellegrino, Northern Virginia Organizer
Coalition For Smarter Growth, Sonya Breehey, Northern Virginia Advocacy Manager
Fairfax Alliance for Better Bicycling, Bruce Wright, President
Fairfax Families for Safe Streets, Mike Doyle, Board President
Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions, Andrea McGimsey, Executive Director
Friends of Holmes Run, Whitney Redding, Primary Conservator
Hands On Harvests, Amanda Stamp and Terri Lamb, Board of Directors
Lewinsville Faith in Action, John Clewett and Jack Calhoun, Co-leads
Nature Forward, Renee Grebe, Northern Virginia Conservation Advocate
Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance, Jill Norcross, Executive Director
Sierra Club, Great Falls Group, Ann Bennett, Douglas Stewart
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