



Arlington County, Virginia
Joint Facilities Advisory Commission

Gregory Greeley, Chair
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**Recommendations for the Arlington Public Schools’
Capital Improvement Plan (CIP)**

June 10th, 2020

Planning Process and Enrollment Capacity

The Arlington Public Schools’ CIP planning process has reinforced the understanding that there are enrollment capacity shortfalls of 700 seats for middle school students and 800 seats for high school students over the next decade. Now that the Career Center estimates have come in substantially over budget, the location of those high school seats is once again in question. Several ideas worthy of consideration have been brought forward in recent CIP discussions. This follows several years of creative ideas put on the table starting with the [Superintendent’s Master Planning process](#) in 2015, through the [Community Facility Study recommendations](#) and those of subsequent working and advisory groups. We need to look at these ideas through the lens of the economic realities stemming from our current crisis. Now is the right time for Arlington Public Schools (APS) to employ fresh, bold thinking to meet facility needs and stretch every CIP dollar. We must not let this crisis pass by with us believing we will return to business as usual in the next few months. Instead, we should seize this opportunity to chart a new, fiscally sustainable course when it comes to meeting capacity needs through facilities planning and delivery.

It should come as no surprise that the Chairs of a Commission charged with planning for facility needs would strongly endorse the recommendation to add planning funds to the current CIP. As we look around us, the impact of the pandemic has created general and long-term economic uncertainty. At the same time, it has given us a “bootcamp” of knowledge and experience in providing distance learning. We are also disappointed that the public Career Center processes failed to deliver a plan that could be built within the funding available. With all this, it seems prudent that we take a pause to re-assess the APS capacity needs and how those needs can best be met in the near- and long-term.

As the Chairs of the Commission, we recommend that the School Board direct staff to craft an agile and time-bounded planning process for meeting capacity needs. This process should leverage the existing commissions and advisory committees, joined with a diverse set of stakeholders, to review existing recommendations along with new ideas. The planning process should consider the letter from the County Manager [list County-owned sites](#) to help address school enrollment capacity needs. This process should also include a review the just-published results of APS’ fourteen [Design Studies](#) undertaken per School Board direction last December. “Big picture, visionary thinking and providing a forum where fresh and creative ideas can be discussed freely” is stated in the [charge of the JFAC](#), and we encourage APS to leverage our

Commission as needed to move this work forward, provide a forum for public input throughout the process, and help craft recommendations that both align with APS needs and are informed by Arlington County's plans and principles.

If those recommendations include the need for siting new school facilities, we encourage APS to start the siting process, as outlined in the Community Facilities Study, to site a facility or facilities that can provide this needed enrollment capacity.

Any good planning process provides for after-action assessments to identify improvements for the next process. In this way, projects learn from and do not repeat past mistakes. The Commission recommends that an after-action process be taken to assess the Career Center BLPC and PFRC process to determine how a project with a known cost ceiling resulted in a design that could not be built within that ceiling. While this is not the first time we have had challenges keeping to cost ceilings, the Career Center planning produced the largest gap between expected and final estimated costs. A report on how this occurred for the Career Center process can inform the assumptions and expectations, and result in process improvements for the next project.

Other Capital Projects

Commission members advised that the kitchen renovation needs should be substantiated, and those plans should be put in the larger context of school kitchen needs overall. These questions are similar to the School Board's concerns listed under CIP Question #3. It appears that the answers to Question #3 do provide substantiation for the kitchen needs and the larger context of kitchen renovations.

Commission members also highlighted that COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on the use of distance learning. This change led to questions around whether this increased use of distance learning could have longer-term impacts on the overall APS seat needs. The current CIP plans do not appear to consider this potential impact.

Questions were raised around the fact that the CIP does not appear to consider green spaces, apart from playing fields, to be part of the APS infrastructure. Commissioners advised that, especially with Arlington County's biophilic commitment, APS should consider doing explicit green infrastructure planning and bring that investment in the CIP.

Commissioners raised questions around APS' planned changes for the Trades Center. Were the APS changes planned in concert with the County's space utilization plans for the Trades Center? From the website, the planning appears delayed. Will this plan be moving forward? In which CIP year will this work be reflected?

The proposal in the CIP for bus parking and the access road on the Kenmore Campus is relatively new. Commissioners asked for details on the broader plans for bus parking on the Kenmore Campus, and we note this was part of the Design Studies undertaken at the direction of the School Board and recently published on the APS website. Commissioners asked if those plans have been discussed and shared with the broader community, and if not, we recommend engagement with the neighborhood if those plans move forward.

Background

The Joint Facilities Advisory Commission (JFAC) was created as an advisory body jointly appointed by the Arlington County Board and the Arlington County School Board, based on a recommendation from the 2015 Community Facilities Study. The Commission has been charged with reviewing the APS CIP prior to its adoption and making recommendations to the School Board on the adoption of the CIP.

Our Commission was not able to have a public meeting due to the current restrictions on meeting during the COVID-19 emergency. Rather, Commissioners observed the School Board Work Sessions held on May 27th, May 28th and June 2nd to review the APS CIP, and provided their thoughts to the Commission Chairs for this recommendation. As a result, this letter is from the Chairs, rather than from the entire Commission, but it was informed by Commissioners' comments.

This letter summarizes the Commission Chairs' recommendations to the School Board and is intended to provide input to the School Board on the CIP for APS.