

## DRAFT EPC Letter of Support: Zoning for Housing

Dear Mayor and City Council, Planning & Zoning, and Planning Commission,

On behalf of the Environmental Policy Commission, we write to **express our support for all eight City-staff recommended Zoning for Housing/Housing for All proposals**. There are immense sustainability benefits that come with density, and these are important to help our City address the climate crisis in a responsible and meaningful way.

We are in a climate crisis. Our City Council passed a climate emergency declaration in 2019. Our Environmental Action Plan (EAP) 2040 sets carbon emissions reduction goals and our Energy and Climate Change Action Plan (ECCAP) emphasizes the need for action to achieve these goals. As our Mayor has emphasized, we are focused on climate actions that “move the needle”, and we see the city’s Zoning for Housing/Housing for All proposal poised to encourage a modest amount of infill housing that results in a win for equity, transportation, and climate change.

Density allows communities to thrive. Our city’s communities are prospering through compact, walkable, and efficient neighborhoods – and the changes proposed by Zoning for Housing/Housing for All enable more of this urban planning and smart growth. Expanding housing opportunities in single-family zones enables increased density. Analyzing industrial zones to apply for residential multifamily (RMF) zoning enables increased density. Finally, analyzing further opportunities for expanded RMF zones enables increased density. Revising lot, bulk, open space, and parking requirements to allow for small scale residential development in zones that permit townhouses enables increased density.

The key climate benefits of density from infill include (sourced from the Rocky Mountain Institute “Urban Land Use Reform” report):

- **Shortened distances between housing and people’s daily needs**, which enables more trips to be made by active and shared transportation modes such as walking, bicycling, public transit, and micro- mobility, thereby reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT). The remaining car trips would also be shorter. Multi-use infill development also increases access to people’s daily needs, furthering a reduction in VMT.
- **Reducing building energy use and water consumption** by allowing attached and multifamily housing types, as well as integrating them with denser commercial buildings in compact urban forms. Benefiting from shared walls, more efficient use of floor space, and common green space, these building types have lower demand for heating, cooling, and water. They also save materials and construction emissions, both in the buildings themselves and in their associated infrastructure.
- **Curbing sprawl and preserving land** to serve other needs and functions such as farming, forestry, wilderness conservation, and carbon sequestration, while avoiding the need for housing development in vulnerable areas such as floodplains and wildfire zones.

We especially commend the City’s proposed initiatives and recommendations in Zoning for Housing/Housing for All to expand **transit-oriented development (TOD)** by analyzing current barriers that limit TOD and identifying future ways for small area plans to better support densities near high-capacity transit. The City’s ECCAP strategy supports land use changes focused on redistribution of future growth to activity centers and areas better served by transit; the strategy notes that this can be supported through land use change policies, allowing for more dense housing infrastructure, encouraging the development of mixed-used neighborhoods, supporting TOD efforts, and/or reducing or eliminating parking minimums in specific areas.

Elements of Zoning for Housing/Housing for All regarding investigating incentives for building reuse and conversions also bring great climate benefits to the city. By avoiding the embodied carbon emissions associated with demolishing a building, **office-to-residential conversions** support our City's climate goals and enable increased housing in our City.

It is worth also noting the importance of **climate justice and racial justice** amends being made through Zoning for Housing/Housing for All. Addressing the long-standing inequities from redlining and single-family zoning in certain neighborhoods of our City is important when considering equity and environmental justice potential. The City's proposal increases social and economic diversity through the right density and justly addresses longstanding housing inequities. The City's ECCAP further supports equity assessment indicators and actions that support social and other quality-of-life benefits (e.g., reduced traffic congestion and increased opportunities for socioeconomic mobility) and suggests that the City promote a job/housing balance by focusing on-site affordable housing units near transit, jobs, and amenities.

Density and infill allow for increased resident access to jobs, transportation options, and, with the right other policies/investments (e.g., commitment to multi-modal, investment in solar, etc.), lower the impact cost per user for those investments (buses, bike lanes, alternative energy). Enabling residents to live near where they work would improve their quality of life and reduce their carbon footprint.

Increased density has a measurable reduction on emissions. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reported in the "Urban Density and Climate Change Report" that doubling the average neighborhood density is directly linked with a decrease in per-household vehicle use of 20%-40%, with a corresponding decline in emissions. Similarly, the University of Michigan's Center for Sustainable Systems reported in the "U.S. Cities Factsheet" that doubling urban density reduces CO2 emissions from household travel by 48% and residential energy use by 35%.

The EPC is also cognizant of the sewer overflows and stormwater flooding that our City experiences. We appreciate that the City studied the infrastructure and public facilities' impacts of the Zoning for Housing/Housing for All proposal, and that they fully account for them in the City's long-range public facility plans.

The EPC also recognizes that infill development may result in some tree removal. We encourage the City explore and adopt appropriate policies that preserve and expand the City's tree canopy in alignment with the EAP2040 goals, in conjunction with added housing made possible through Zoning for Housing/Housing for All. This is important to reduce existing and future impacts of urban heat island effects, preventing stormwater runoff, mitigating air pollution, sequestering carbon, and reducing the use of air conditioning/electricity. Alexandria has already proven to successfully increase tree canopy and population concurrently: according to Alexandria's 2014-2018 Tree Canopy Analysis, the City's canopy had a relative increase of 22.4% (5.9% absolute change) at a time when the population increase was 5+%.

We advise City Council to pass these incremental recommendations that enable increased density in our city. The modest increase in infill units is a step in the right direction to enable Alexandria to be a thriving, equitable, climate-conscious city into the future.

Sincerely,

City of Alexandria Environmental Policy Commission