



# County of Fairfax, Virginia

## MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 24, 2011

**TO:** Board of Supervisors

**FROM:** Stella Koch, Chairman *Stella M. Koch*  
Environmental Quality Advisory Council

**SUBJECT:** EQAC opposition to a proposed Public Facilities Manual amendment addressing public street design requirements

The Environmental Quality Advisory Council has continued to consider this subject and the position that we took as stated in my letter to you on May 4<sup>th</sup> (attached). At our regular meeting on May 11<sup>th</sup> we had a lengthy discussion with Battalion Chief Carlton Burkhammer from the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department and Judy Cronauer from the Department of Public Works and Environmental Services. We continue to be impressed with our fire safety officials in the county and support their objectives that drove this proposed change. However, we reaffirm our position in my May 4<sup>th</sup> letter on this subject and urge the Board of Supervisors to consider a wider range of solutions than mandating 36 feet wide streets in new neighborhoods, with all of the associated negative impact to the environment, land use, and public safety.

We understand that there are considerable fire safety concerns associated with typical residential construction in Fairfax County. Much of our new residential construction is based on composite wood products and plastic that burn much faster and hotter than solid wood and brick of older residential construction. Fires in this type of structure require much more water to extinguish. Large townhome and apartment complexes often have multiple structures in close proximity to one another, without any barriers that would prevent the rapid spread of fire between buildings. These problems are not unique to Fairfax County, but they do highlight the need for actions to reduce the risk and severity of fires. We commend county staff for being proactive in its identification of this concern but are hopeful that a broader consideration of response options would be considered prior to seeking a solution of wider subdivision streets.

One promising option to reducing the risk and severity of fires could be through the mandating of sprinkler systems for all residential construction. A residential sprinkler system is an extremely effective fire safety feature, but Fairfax County does not require sprinklers in residential structures with heights under 50 feet. Therefore many new complexes are being built, to a height of 49 feet 11 inches, using extremely flammable material. Both Prince Georges County and Montgomery County require sprinklers in new residential construction.

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Why shouldn't similar requirements be established in Fairfax County? The argument that sprinklers would increase cost of construction doesn't make much sense considering that the cost of construction and additional land required of wider streets would substantially offset the cost of the sprinkler.

We also do not understand an approach to improved fire safety that would affect, in total, only a small proportion of the county's land area (perhaps somewhere around 10%), considering how much land is already developed. The provision of wider streets within limited areas of the county would not affect the county's ability to fight fires in the larger portion of the county that would not be developed or redeveloped with new streets in the foreseeable future; however, a more comprehensive approach affecting all residential construction (including infill residential and single-lot redevelopment) would likely have a greater impact. As we consider historic communities in the United States and in Europe with extremely narrow roads and exceptional fire safety records, we find that they have fire retardant construction and sprinklers. Large, multi-dwelling fires in these environments are rare because the fire spreads slowly and is extinguished quickly.

We understand that the recommendation is for a standard of 20 feet of clearance plus 8 feet for on-street parking on both sides, for a total of 36 feet. We believe that clearance is a good metric for establishing this dimension of a fire safety for Fairfax County. However, establishing a county policy of on-street parking on both sides of all streets is not appropriate. If adequate off-street parking is available, then establishment of no-parking for one or both sides of the street could substantially reduce the street-width requirement. Developers should also be held accountable for the cost of additional storm water management if the wider street option is chosen. The county should also consider reducing the 20 feet clearance requirement if the neighborhood development uses more fire-retardant building materials or especially if they install sprinklers. We believe that this approach would be supported by our county firefighters.

Applying these fire-safety measures are likely to be considered by insurance companies for reduced fire insurance and would be considered a desirable feature when the home is sold. Giving developers options with financial incentives that encourage a more comprehensive fire safety approach would be beneficial to everyone.

For these additional reasons noted above, EQAC does not support the proposed PFM Amendment for an increase in street width.

SMK:nhk

Attachment: As Stated

cc: Fairfax County Planning Commission  
Anthony H. Griffin, County Executive  
David Molchany, Deputy County Executive  
James W. Patteson, Director, DPWES  
Battalion Chief Carlton Burkhammer, Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department  
EQAC file, May 2011