

January 11, 2021

Dear Neighbor:

It has been incredibly difficult to make our communities aware of some really big changes being proposed by the County regarding Land Use (i.e., zoning parameters that establish what one can and cannot build on one's property, by right, without seeking special exception, or a Special Permit). The County is forging ahead with these deeply fraught changes when citizens simply cannot engage. It is disheartening. Many community activists have written to the County urging them to hit pause while we are in the pandemic because we simply cannot engage. It has fallen on deaf ears. What is even worse is that at the beginning of the pandemic, Governor Northam issued an order allowing local jurisdictions to streamline 'essential business' in light of the pandemic. That makes terrific sense when the issue concerns mobilizing to manage the pandemic. But the insidious and maddening thing that we feel is grossly unfair is that our Board of Supervisors has lumped Land Use under the category of 'essential business' which affords it the same streamlining as, say, rolling out the vaccine. It effectively rolls out the red carpet for Developers. We don't stand a chance to engage, become aware, and help shape our communities. All of these changes are sliding under our noses in the name of ***More Housing! Vibrant communities! Affordable dwelling units!***

And who among us doesn't want that?

We are all preoccupied with staying healthy, staying employed, keeping our businesses afloat, caring for elders during a global pandemic, managing virtual learners at home, and watching a deeply divided nation entrench themselves in their positions rather than do the American thing and extend their hands across the aisle.

Unfortunately, our county is taking advantage of this to push an agenda to urbanize Fairfax County. The changes to the Zoning ordinance that are being proposed will grease the skids for alarming development, by right (meaning without going through a public process; without input from citizens) within stable, established neighborhoods. The county is pushing ahead with these changes in a climate where we cannot effectively engage. It is, fundamentally, social engineering without our input, using our tax dollars.

If you are alarmed you should be. I urge you to write, powerfully, and frequently to our Supervisor and copy the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors. Right now, the county leaders, the county staff, developers - all paid professionals - have the upper hand. Knowing that emails do have an impact, we must offset this with a rising critical mass of opposition to negative changes being proposed in zMOD.

Meetings have all been virtual, and the County's position is that this makes them more accessible than in normal times. There have been technical difficulties, and the very thing we depend on to show any solidarity (namely, showing up at meetings *en masse* to show our collective concern) has been stripped away - so there isn't the same impact. Moreover, many citizens have a lot to say and contribute but find it difficult to adapt to the virtual platform, which effectively shuts them up.

Folks, here are just one or two changes you can expect if zMOD is allowed to stand:

1. Every single family home could have a rental unit in it, by right. It would be up to the neighbors to monitor and report issues with renters. Imagine for a moment, double the people in the community, more cars, less knowledge of who is part of the neighborhood at any given time, more stress on infrastructure, from sewage and roads to schools and parks, to the environment and natural habitat.
2. Every residence - owner and renter (so, two per address now that, effectively, duplexes are allowed) - can have a home business. There are some restrictions being proposed, like on number of employees. But imagine foot and car traffic when that becomes more ubiquitous.
3. Every property could have up to 12 square feet of permanent signage, by right. One big 3 foot by 4 foot sign, or multiple smaller ones that add up to 12 square feet, allowed, by right, permanently, on every property's front lawn.

Now think about what you will see and hear and experience on your daily, once peaceful, walk around your neighborhood? And think about the incentive you've just given the developer? Where s/he once could 'only' build a McMansion, now s/he can promote each new build as providing rental income. New builds will intensify to take advantage of this, density will increase, footprints will increase. And there goes all the landscape that makes any neighborhood peaceful to live in.

Established, single family neighborhoods define the character of Fairfax County and have long been held up as a fundamental reason to move to Fairfax County. Current zoning regulations help guard these against negative impact from development. zMOD proposes to strip these rules away. Our neighborhoods won't change overnight. But the negative rippling effect of this level of change cannot be overstated.

These changes are being downplayed. zMOD is being heavily advertised by the county as a 'cleaning up' of the Zoning ordinance. To be sure, a wholesale cleaning up is needed. But what is terrible is the really [negatively] impactful social engineering that is being slipped through, right under our overwhelmed noses.