

Dear Neighbors,

Caution: if you don't want to read about zMOD, stop reading now.

Well, it's come to this. We are one weekend away from 3/23 when the Board of Supervisors will vote on zMOD. I am squarely against so much of what is in zMOD. I'm discouraged that our citizen voice is being dismissed, that science is being ignored, and that once again, alternative facts are at play and aren't being addressed. I hope that you will read the rest of this post, my current ramblings.

Many (most?) of us support affordable housing, that includes me. You can go onto the county website and see all the promotion of how zMOD is supposedly solving this problem. But here's how I see it: there are over 2million square feet of vacancy in Fairfax County, most of it near or accessible to public transport, and all of it with infrastructure, including parking, in place. Why not start there?

When I was starting my career in the 90s with the 'green dean of architecture' Bill McDonough, adaptable re-use was making inroads. It just made sense and it still does. You have buildings able to be recycled; use them first before destroying more land. But the politicians need a political 'win' to secure re-election, and our homes and backyards are low-hanging fruit. So instead of taking a long-view perspective and vetting impact of various proposals, the County hired a consultant who brushed over our local environment and complexities, and whitewashed Fairfax County with zMOD. If it's good in California, Arizona, South Dakota, it must be OK in Fairfax, right? And if you simply change the code that governs what we build and promote it as "affordable housing" you'll get buy-in from the community and most will be none-the-wiser about the longterm, negative impact of what's really being proposed.

A tenet of green design is, 'first, do no harm'. In a very simple way, the idea is that if you respect the environment, then man-made building is an honor. You are putting something manmade into the environment, and you should be making every effort to ensure the net result is a better or no more harmful for the environment after you build, than before you touched it with your building. By definition, less building is better for the environment. "Touch the earth lightly". Back in the 90s, cutting edge scientists were warning about stresses on our environment, watershed maps were just starting to be drawn, and organic food was still suspect to many. Kudzu was starting to take hold, bamboo as well, and many of us didn't even have invasive plants on our radar as damaging to the environment. Now, almost 30 years later, we know that our environment IS stressed, watershed maps are critical, and organic food is widely accepted as being healthier and more nutrient rich. Invasive species are making it to the top of the list of environmental concerns, and hydrologists and whole communities are coming to grip with the impact on our storm water management system (designed for 100year storms), from 100 year storms that are now occurring multiple times per year. And yet, Fairfax County is not addressing the environmental degradation we see all around us, and further - it is adding to it with zMOD.

I have thought of those early 'environmentally sustainable' days a lot recently, with regards to zMOD. And I have a real problem with how the ALU and HBB and Accessory Structure code is being re-written. I am more interested in science than the political gain of a few politicians. This

is why I continue to share my concerns with my neighbors. And I continue to hope you will visit ACT4Fairfax.net for more citizen-driven concerns about why zMOD should be paused.

A perfect example of the kind of fact-sharing that is at play is the recent news about the harmful water quality in Annandale. Scientists point to chemicals in the water that are harmful to your health, and that even in small quantities can be carcinogenic (they tested for 30 chemicals). But the County doesn't test for those bad chemicals (they tested for only a handful), and so the water is OK, right?

The environmental impact from zMOD is going to be hard to walk back from. In my mind this is largely because it is being ignored. If zMOD were not even in the picture we would still have a huge job to move policy toward respecting and healing the very environment we count on to live, for our health. Instead, the current Board of Supervisors chooses to ignore it wholesale, while shepherding in policies that seem - for all their trendy social engineering vibes - to be woefully outdated from an environmental standpoint (that is to say, void of consideration of the environment). zMOD as currently written puts a stress on infrastructure that our dated infrastructure cannot handle. Most of our utilities, water mains, drainage swales, storm water drains and culverts, network of roads, schools, etc. date back to when Fairfax was still much less developed. zMOD unleashes more impervious surface, creates more run-off, puts more demand on our public services, with no plan for how to address the stress of added use, and no increased budget or staff for enforcement of the current or future codes.

As I make my way through this unwieldy zMOD document, I've recently been stuck on Accessory Structures. I couldn't figure out why those codes needed to be changed. There's a reason we limit sheds to 8' tall, and we limit their footprint - neighbors don't want them to be prominent in the landscape, and they are less impactful on the environment when they are small. It dawned on me that zMOD needs to allow accessory structures to be egregiously large and obstructive because where else will folks put their junk when they clean out their houses to create their ALUs and HBBs? 12' tall sheds 5 feet from the property line? 20' tall sheds that are up to 800SF in the back yard (in our neighborhood, that's almost the size of our average floor plate). These proposed zMOD changes at the hands of a disrespectful neighbor, or one who embodies the, "I got mine" theme that is so trendy these days, will be horrible to look upon. But they will also be horrible for the environment, displacing more ground cover, creating more impervious surface, increasing run-off, removing habitat, removing oxygenating plant material, etc.

How is the BOS getting away with this? If you step back from the politics, it's madness. Off-the-rails madness.

Most of us aren't paying attention because we are overwhelmed with everything else that is going on with the global pandemic, and because in America, when we elect officials to govern us, we expect to retain a voice in the process. Instead, the BOS is ignoring us - it is even ignoring its own Planning Commission! It is allowing a Consultant to lead the charge, one who was publicly reprimanded by a Planning Commissioner for dissing the Fairfax citizenry as unknowing. It is leaving unanswered, questions that experts have taken the time to write. It is moving full-steam ahead with fundamental changes to the laws that govern the built environment we all share, during a pandemic when none of us can take the time to realize what's going on.

If you've gotten this far, thank you. I hope you will take several more minutes out of your day to write to the Board of Supervisors and let them know that you vote, and that this cannot stand. You may send your emails to: clerktotheBOS@fairfaxcounty.gov. The Board of Supervisors votes on zMOD on 3/23. I side with the growing voice of concerned citizens who think that zMOD is half-baked, and not ready for prime time.

For more information on zMOD from the County, you can go to fairfaxcounty.gov and search zMOD. For more information on zMOD from citizens, you can go to ACT4Fairfax.net and check out citizen Responses. (ACT4Fairfax is driven by a bi-partisan group of informed citizens, including planners, lawyers, environmentalists, scientists, architects, community leaders, former county employees, and more, who are all trying to make sense of what is going on in our county.)

Many thanks,
Edith MacArthur