



Joint Comments from Fairfax Healthy Communities Network on Fairfax County's FY25 Budget

April 15, 2024

Dear Chairman McKay and Members of the Board of Supervisors,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on and recommendations for the FY2025 Budget. The eighteen undersigned organizations, as part of the **Fairfax Healthy Communities Network**, envision a Fairfax County where people can live, work, and play in connected communities that are healthy, sustainable, and inclusive. This vision recognizes that the intersections of equity, housing security, walkable and bikeable neighborhoods, transit-oriented communities, clean air and water, access to green space, and food come together in one word: health.

Healthy communities do not exist in a vacuum. They are composed of a myriad of environmental and social factors, all of which intimately intersect with the services the county provides. Our budget comments below reflect our Fairfax Healthy Communities Platform¹ and our interest to achieve a healthier, more resilient, Fairfax County.

We acknowledge that FY25 is a tough budget year. We appreciate the challenges faced by the County Executive and Board of Supervisors in proposing and passing a balanced budget that does its best to achieve equitable investments to address the diverse needs across the County.

1. Prioritize an Equity Lens for Final Budget Decisions

Fairfax County's One Fairfax policy dictates that the County must consider equity when determining budgets. The budget process is where our County's priorities are reflected. Please ensure that budget decisions, across all sectors of the budget, contribute to advancing equity and reducing disparities in outcomes for our residents.

¹ <https://www.fairfaxhealthy.org/platform>

2. Housing for All

The importance of affordable housing stands on its own - a compassionate society and community ensures that people from all social classes and income levels can afford to live and work together. However, *housing policy is also climate policy*. When people can afford to live closer to where they work and near transit, they spend less time commuting, drive less, and produce fewer transportation emissions. In addition, close-in affordable housing will help us save more of our natural areas by reducing sprawl. Furthermore, energy efficient affordable housing will proactively move the County towards achieving the net zero 2050 commitment. Fairfax County needs to reduce both sprawl and emissions to meet its climate and resilience goals.

Thank you for proposed investments supporting affordable housing

We thank the Board for their continued commitment to providing 10,000 new affordable homes by 2034. Achieving this goal is a crucial step in creating a more equitable county and there are just ten years remaining to do so. Continued budget investments, even in tight budget years, are needed to help us reach this goal and support our most vulnerable populations.

We appreciate the following proposed investments and ask that the Board please support them:

- **Approve the five additional positions in the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD)**

We appreciate the inclusion of these five additional positions in the FY25 budget, as they are critical and help ensure the County's success in meeting the goal of 10,000 units by 2034.

- **Approve the proposed contract rate increases for health and human services providers**

Social and economic disparities persist in our community, and our most vulnerable residents continue to struggle with rent increases, inflation, food insecurity, and high costs of living. These additional funds are needed in order for service providers to keep up with demand for services.

- **Strongly urge the Board to avoid *additional* cuts to Housing or Human Services**

We appreciate that budget cuts were found in the Health and Human Services department that did not negatively affect their support for residents. As the budget is finalized, please avoid *additional* cuts in these areas. These departments serve our most vulnerable residents who would suffer serious consequences if their services were cut.

Explore all possibilities to add recurring resources and one-time funding for affordable housing

We appreciate the investments in affordable housing during a tight budget year, and we continue to encourage the Board to invest in this area, both as much as possible for FY25, but also in upcoming quarterly reviews, in FY26, and beyond. A sustained dedication to providing adequate funding is critical to achieving the County's short- and long-term housing goals.

We ask that the Board:

- **Invest in a higher baseline of local funding to support new affordable housing and preservation of affordable housing**

The proposed budget for building and preserving affordable housing is about \$32M, equivalent to one penny on the tax dollar. It is instructive that this is the same rate that it approved when Gerry Connolly was Chair of the Board, over 15 years ago. While we appreciate that the value of one penny from the Real Estate tax was restored (after cuts in FY10) to Fund 30300 in FY23, we recognize that the County's housing needs require additional investments.

As we move toward the declared goal of 2 cents on the tax rate, increasing the FY25 baseline amount continues to be an important step to give our affordable housing partners the assurances that there will be local support for projects coming through the affordable housing pipeline. Having that 2 cents on the tax rate no later than FY27 in the budget guidance will be a critical investment to meeting the County's pre-COVID commitment to provide \$60M in county funds for affordable housing in the Department of Housing and Community Development budget.

- **Prioritize contributions to Fund 30300 (Affordable Housing Development and Investment)**

Increased baseline funding will ultimately be critical to support this fund. However, we also recognize that the Board has other opportunities to contribute to this fund, and we ask the Board to prioritize contributions to this critical fund via the add-on package and/or quarterly reviews.

Provide supportive services related to housing

In addition to investments directly allocated to affordable housing, we also ask that the Board invest in providing supportive housing services. In particular, we ask that the Board:

- **Support temporary emergency homeless shelters**

Fairfax NAACP conducted surveys of unsheltered people, a majority minority population, in the summers of 2022 and 2023 and found that, particularly on high heat days, these residents suffered considerably and had escalated health issues. While the County has made some services and communications improvements, we urge the County to investigate a pilot program with temporary portable shelters that could be repurposed once new permanent facilities have been built, as other cities in the U.S. have done².

- **Collect data on housing instability to be used to address needs**

Keeping people housed is generally cheaper than sheltering them and getting them rehoused. We ask that the Board direct the Health and Human Services department to monthly monitor eviction rates, calls to the help hotline and front-line providers to determine when additional rent relief and legal aid support is needed throughout the year. Trends in

² Pallet (<https://palletshelter.com/results/>) is a Public Benefit Corporation building dignified shelter villages and The Springboard Collaborative in Delaware <https://www.the-springboard.org/> is one of their projects.

this data should be regularly reported to the Board and the public, and should be used to guide future investments.

- **Ensure sufficient wrap-around services for residents of affordable housing**
The funding for these services, provided by nonprofit partners, has often lagged behind the need. To better address these needs, the County should include the ongoing cost for these services in the initial conversations about developing units and plan for the costs in the appropriate future operating budgets. The recent increase in State funding explicitly included funding for these support services. This approach could be a model for the County during future budget cycles.

3. Sustainable Transportation

With transportation contributing 42% of the carbon emissions in our county³, public transit, along with a comprehensive active transportation network, are critical components of a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

We continue to urge the Board to reprioritize our transportation spending and stop fueling expensive roadway expansion that exacerbates traffic congestion and our climate crisis. Instead, focus investments on fixing our crumbling infrastructure first, taking better care to maintain investments already made in our transportation network, and reorienting funds for new capital projects specifically towards supporting walkable, transit-accessible development and communities.

Thank you for proposed investments supporting sustainable transportation

We appreciate the following proposed investments, and ask that the Board support them:

- **Approve the proposed additional \$10 million for WMATA operating funding**
Fairfax County's success in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and spurring economic development rests on a strong Metro transit system. Metro is going through changes, exacerbated by the pandemic, that have affected its budget. All of the member jurisdictions must step up to the plate to support the system that supports our regional economy and our efforts to address climate change.
- **Approve the proposed increase of \$2.15 million for Fairfax Connector bus service**
The Fairfax Connector's costs are increasing due to inflation, and we urge the County to support this increase to keep pace with costs. We appreciate the Board's added support for supplemental one-time credit for users of the Transit Ridership Incentive Program during the recent Fairfax Connector strike and for Chairman McKay's request for the assistance of a federal mediator to help resolve the contract discussions in a timelier manner.

We urge the County to support potential additional funds for improved compensation and

³https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/environment-energy-coordination/sites/environment-energy-coordination/files/assets/2020-03-31%20cecap%20task%20force%20virtual%20presentation_final%20web.pdf#page=26

benefits for Fairfax Connector's staff. Many workers who power the county's economy and other commuters depend on Connector service. Without a fairly compensated workforce, the system will not be successful.

- **Approve the proposed Park Authority's trail maintenance funding request**

We appreciate the inclusion of funds for trail maintenance for the Park Authority and we urge the Board to fully support this proposed budget item and funding request. The cost of trail maintenance continues to exceed the current funding, and we appreciate the Board's support of maintaining the infrastructure we have.

We further urge the Board of Supervisors to provide guidance to increase the number of Park Authority employees dedicated to trail planning, operations, and maintenance in FY26 budget to keep pace with the needs of maintaining what we have already invested in building.

Provide a dedicated funding stream for active transportation projects

We appreciate and applaud the Board's recent commitment of \$100 million for active transportation projects over a six-year period. These types of investments are critical to the on-going support of our ever-growing active transportation needs.

While one-off funding sources can help achieve the County's goals, we more practically need a *dedicated* source of funding for active transportation projects so that these critical projects can continue in a sustainable way.

Fund the Safe Streets for All Program

The Safe Streets for All Program was unanimously endorsed by the Board of Supervisors in May 2022, nearly two years ago. Despite its endorsement, the program remains unfunded in the FY25 budget. As the County aims to reduce transportation emissions through alternative modes of transportation while also supporting residents who do not own or rent their own vehicle, it must create a safe system in which these alternative modes of transportation can exist.

While we applaud the Board's *endorsement* of this program, without funding, there is not sufficient support for this program, and its goals and benefits will not be fully realized. Without funding, the County is less able to address systemic transportation safety issues for people walking, biking, and using other forms of active transportation. It is critically important that the Board include funding not only for staff to run the Safe Streets for All program, but also for implementation.

Ensure our streets are safe and accessible for non-motor vehicle users

In addition to funding the Safe Streets for All program, there are other opportunities to fund initiatives that ensure our streets are safe for all.

We urge the Board to:

- **Ensure schools have the crossing guards that they require**

We appreciate the County seeking alternative solutions to the challenges of crossing guard staffing and the pressure on the Fairfax County Police Department (FCPD) to fill in as backups when crossing guards are not available. Fort Belvoir and Herndon have agreed to cover two crossing guard locations in question, but as of mid-March, there was still not an answer to who would staff nine locations in the Town of Vienna if FCPD steps away. We urge the County to not make changes to crossing guard support without a solution in place to keep pedestrians safe during critical parts of the school day.

- **Fund next steps following speed camera pilot**

Last year, Fairfax County completed a 6-month speed camera pilot program, and the County set the expectation that that a countywide implementation plan would follow in two phases: Phase 1 in RY2024 to include 50 cameras in school and work zones and Phase 2 in RY2025 to add 30 cameras for school zones. Please ensure that the proper support is provided for the rollout of this program so that the implementation schedule stays on track.

4. Climate Mitigation, Resilience, and Green Spaces

The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change⁴ report made crystal-clear what we already knew: Tackling the climate crisis is *the* challenge of this century, and will interact with all other challenges, from ecological to economic to social. Fairfax Healthy Communities' housing and transportation comments above are components of tackling the climate crisis, and this section includes comments more directly related to climate mitigation, resilience, and green spaces.

Thank you for proposed investments supporting environmental initiatives

We appreciate the following proposed investments and urge the Board to support them:

- **Support for proposed sustained funding of the Office of Environmental and Energy Coordination (OEEC)**

We appreciate the proposal of sustained funding of OEEC. As the County's primary department leading cross-organizational development and implementation of environmental and energy policies, goals, programs, and projects, OEEC must continue to be staffed and funded in order to achieve the aggressive goals needed to reduce emissions.

- **Support proposed funding across many initiatives for the Park Authority**

We appreciate the proposed budget minimizing cuts to the Park Authority. With only 0.6% of Fairfax County's General Fund budget supporting the Park Authority, additional cuts would have had an outsized impact. The proposed FY25 budget includes funds that will help support management of natural resources including addressing growing forestry needs and bamboo removal, Zero Waste pilot in six parks, and the mobile nature center in support of the One Fairfax policy.

⁴ <https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/>

- **Support proposed increase in funding for Invasive Management Area (IMA) program**
The Park Authority's IMA program continues to provide the highest return-on-investments to date in combating invasive plants in Fairfax County. We appreciate and ask for the Board's continued support of key components of this program through Fund 30015 (Environmental and Energy Program).

Increase funding to address growing problem of stormwater runoff

In the face of stronger and more frequent storms, the problem of damaging and polluting stormwater runoff continues to be a challenge for Fairfax County. And yet, the stormwater tax remains flat again this year. While the increase in real estate taxes means additional funds are collected even when this fee remains flat, the funds are not sufficient to support the cost of the program, such as maintaining our stormwater infrastructure.

We ask the Board to explore options for increased support in addressing this growing problem of stormwater runoff. A nominal increase in the tax each year by just 1/4 of a penny to 0.035 per \$100 of assessed value would help substantially. But there may be other alternatives such as moving to a Stormwater Utility fee based on the amount of impervious area on a property, such as in many Virginia cities, counties such as Chesterfield and Prince George, and more recently, Arlington.

Invest in conservation and expansion of the County's healthy, native tree canopy

While we await additional state authority for some additional tools to further support our county's native tree canopy, we ask the Board to continue to identify ways to further invest in conservation and expansion of the county's native tree canopy. As noted below, invasive plants, such as vines, or invasive trees, such as Callery Pears which displace natives, are an ongoing threat. Development pressure also removes trees. And while some new trees get planted, there is a substantial reduction in benefits (e.g. stormwater runoff reduction, energy conservation, improvement of local air, soil and water quality, reduction of atmospheric carbon dioxide, wildlife habitat) when large stature mature trees are replaced with smaller trees, some of which can take decades to be restored. The Center for Urban Forest Research calculates the benefits provided by smaller stature trees to be up to eight times less than that of large stature trees.(page 3 <https://dallas-tx.tamu.edu/files/2019/03/Benefits-US-Forest-Service-The-Large-Tree-Argument.Houser.pdf>). And, ecological benefits are further reduced when more-ecologically-rich forest stands are converted to disconnected landscaped trees.

Further investments could be funded via the Tree Preservation and Planting Fund or through a portion of the funds earmarked for trees in OEEC's budget. We encourage the Board to consider ideas for investing in a healthy, native tree canopy, and that urge the Board to:

- **Establish an ongoing budget line item for tree maintenance, tree planting, and tree education projects across various entities.**
There are a myriad of departments, agencies, and non-profits, such as Urban Forestry Management Division, Fairfax County Park Authority, Earth Sangha, and others that work

on tree plantings and tree care. More centralized, strategic coordination with dedicated funding is needed.

- **Establish a tree replacement policy across all county agencies.**

While the County may have less control on private lands, the Board could partner with staff internally (for Board-owned land) and with the Boards of the Public Schools and Park Authority to establish a strong tree replacement policy.

Increase support to address growing problem of invasive plants

In lieu of being able to turn off the proverbial spigot of invasive plants from the landscape trade, the tools at the County's disposal are education of residents and funding support for initiatives such as bamboo removal, water chestnut eradication, and support of the IMA program. We ask that budget guidance be given for FY26 and beyond about how the County budget can further address this growing problem of invasive plants threatening our native tree canopy and biodiversity. Some ideas could be to:

- **Allocate additional General Fund support for the IMA program**

While we appreciate IMA's funding in Fund 30015 (Environmental and Energy Program) each year for contractors, supplies, and temp and non-merit positions, an additional permanent full-time position in the General Fund would better sustain and grow this program. Not only would additional staff better support the training and ongoing oversight of current IMA leaders, more capacity would remove a years-long bottleneck of would-be IMA leaders who cannot get accepted into the IMA program until capacity is increased.

- **Create a centralized position to strategize invasive work across all departments and agencies**

Currently, separate entities, such as FCPA, the Department of Public Works and Environmental Services, and Fairfax County Public Schools, all have separate ways of handling this issue. A more cohesive approach to invasive plant management would guide broader decisions in the county.

Support more equitable and sustainable funding for the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA)

We continue to ask that FCPA's General Fund support be restored to at least 1% of county revenue, and ensure there is adequate, stable funding for forestry, maintenance, and invasive removal in the annual baseline parks budget, rather than relying on quarterly reviews. FCPA's General Fund support decreased from about 3% in 2008 to 0.6% today, with 2008 emergency budget cuts unrestored.

The County's current natural resource protection policies have been slow to evolve in response to the climate crisis, and as such, one of the few tools we have to preserve natural resources and the health of the environment is FCPA's natural resources and parks. We must not allow our urban forests and green spaces to be fragmented or destroyed, such as is planned with the Shirley Gate Road Extension. As the county's largest landowner with more than 23,000 acres held in the public trust, the Fairfax County Park Authority is an essential partner in that endeavor.

We know that FCPA's fee-based model is unsustainable from a natural resources' perspective, but also in aiming to ensure residents have equitable access to parks and their amenities. Expecting FCPA to make activities more affordable and accessible to all, while at the same time expecting it to self-fund its ambitious mandates through user fees does not work. It disproportionately penalizes low-income communities, ignores natural resource management and disregards the true monetary value of ecosystem services provided by those natural resources.

Summary

We continue to face a long-term housing crisis and the twin crises of climate and loss of the biodiversity that supports humanity. Please be bold in addressing these crises and putting the County on a path to health and resiliency. Urgent action in housing, transportation, energy, land use, and environmental policies is needed to support the One Fairfax, CECAP, Resilient Fairfax, and Net Zero goals. Fairfax Healthy Communities supports a budget that reflects these interrelated policy goals to help ensure an equitable and healthy future for all residents.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments and recommendations. If you have any questions, please contact Fairfax Healthy Communities Co-Chairs **Sonya Breehey** (sonya@smartergrowth.net) or **Renee Grebe** (renee.grebe@natureforward.org).

Sincerely,

Audubon Society of Northern Virginia, Tom Blackburn, Advocacy Committee Chair
Chesapeake Climate Action Network, Zander Pellegrino, Virginia Field Manager
Citizens Climate Lobby, Fairfax Chapter, Rose Hendricks, Chapter Leader
Coalition For Smarter Growth, Sonya Breehey, Northern Virginia Advocacy Manager
Cornerstones, Amanda Caughran, Director, Advocacy and Public Policy
Fairfax Alliance for Better Bicycling, Joy Faunce, Board President
Fairfax Families for Safe Streets, Chris French, President
Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions, Christopher Topoleski, Executive Director
Friends of Dyke Marsh, Glenda Booth, President
Friends of Holmes Run, Whitney Redding, Primary Conservator
Lewinsville Faith in Action, John Clewett, Co-Lead
Nature Forward, Renee Grebe, Northern Virginia Conservation Advocate
Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance, Jill Norcross, Executive Director
Sierra Club Great Falls Group, Susan Bonney, Chair
Virginia Clinicians for Climate Action, Samantha Adhoot, MD, Chair
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