

Comments from Audubon Naturalist Society for Northfax West



May 11, 2020
Mayor and City Council Planning Commission
Fairfax City Hall
10455 Armstrong Street
Fairfax, VA 22030

Dear Mayor Meyer, Members of the City Council, and Members of the Planning Commission:

I am writing to you today on behalf of the Audubon Naturalist Society (ANS), Washington, D.C. region's oldest independent environmental organization. In our long history of work in Northern Virginia we were instrumental in saving Dyke Marsh, ensuring good stormwater management in the Tyson's Corner redevelopment, pausing the development in a flood plain property in the Mount Vernon District, and more.

Today I am submitting preliminary comments in advance of this week's Planning Commission and City Council work sessions on the Northfax West development proposal by the Northfax JV LLC to redevelop over 11 acres with 56 townhomes and 200 senior living units via an 8-story building.

The parking lots currently on this site present a strong opportunity for significantly improved land use and stormwater management. I commend the City of Fairfax for working with the developer to help achieve the vision of the Northfax Activity Center set forth in both the 2035 Comprehensive Plan and beginning to take shape through the Small Area Plan process. We support denser, transit-oriented development in Activity Centers, but we oppose piping a stream and paving the Resource Protection Area (RPA) to do so – this is a false choice. In fact, the pandemic is showing, yet again, the importance of well-planned and protected natural spaces, especially near denser developments.

As we researched the details of this development proposal, we oppose the current plan to bury 1,600 linear feet of the North Fork of Accotink Creek in a culvert and remove its associated 4 acres of RPA as well as the Special Exception for disturbance of Resource Protection Area to build the new culvert. This is simply a poor environmental and ecological decision and doing so is inconsistent with what other locales in the region are doing, such as in the Alexandria area where Ecological Spines and the daylighting of streams has been included in the Richmond Highway redevelopment vision¹.

This proposed redevelopment also violates the purpose and intent of Section 4.16 City's Zoning Ordinance² based on the following criteria not being prioritized:

- The disturbance of any wetlands is minimized;
- The development will not result in significant disruption of the hydrology of the site;
- The development will not result in significant degradation to aquatic life;
- The development will not result in unnecessary destruction of plant materials on site;

While we understand the value to the City of rezoning underutilized property such as car lots to a planned development use (PD-M), the City at the same time clearly has a responsibility and commitment to protect streams and RPAs. PD-M districts are also specifically required to consider “the effectiveness with which the proposed planned development protects and preserves the ecologically sensitive areas within the development.”³

The Small Area Plan outreach done thus far highlighted “Connection to nature”⁴ as a significant desire of the City’s residents, yet the presence of a stream and over 4 acres of forest and the opportunity to make it part of the City’s assets to residents was not presented. In fact, at the Small Area Plan meetings for Northfax, residents were presented a singular Northfax West vision: with the North Fork of Accotink Creek buried and all of the forested stream area removed⁵. Participants left these multiple outreach meetings without knowing there is currently a living stream and habitat on the site that could provide the desired connection to nature.

ANS respectfully requests that alternative proposals be pursued to preserve the RPA and forested area. For example, the Major Water Quality Impact Assessment (MWQIA) identifies “the back-water flooding associated with the historic trolley bridge would still be a limiting factor for developable land.”⁶ As the City and developer work with Brown’s Mazda with their redevelopment, this impediment could be removed to improve the amount of developable land. The MWQIA also notes threatened or endangered species nearby and recommends “coordination with DCR’s Department of Natural Heritage as the project is located within 2 miles of a documented occurrence of a state or federal threatened or endangered plant or insect species and/or other Natural Heritage coordination species”.⁷ ANS recommends a site assessment be done by an independent third-party ecologist.

As the country and the world deal with the current and long-term effects of the current pandemic, ANS is hopeful the City will not move forward in June with the Planning Commission and City Council public hearings. Doing so now does not allow the City or its residents to best understand what development will be most successful here in the new future that we face.

Furthermore, as soon as this application is approved, the applicant could proceed with stream destruction and clearing of the woodland even as the economy may delay or effectively shelve any development. The owner of the property has every financial incentive to turn the stream into buildable land even if, with more community involvement and more time, the City would be able to achieve its Comprehensive Plan Commitments which satisfy both its environmental goals and land use goals.

Thank you for the consideration of these preliminary comments. I look forward to providing a more robust set of comments in the coming weeks.

Sincerely,
Northern Virginia Conservation Advocate
Audubon Naturalist Society

¹ P. 68 <https://www.fcrevite.org/sites/default/files/Assets/Documents/Richmond-Highway/RichmondHwyDDGFullDocument.pdf>

² P. 202-203 of <https://www.fairfaxva.gov/home/showdocument?id=7891>

³ P. 238, Section 6.6.8 (L) <https://www.fairfaxva.gov/home/showdocument?id=7891>

⁴ P. 5 of <https://www.fairfaxva.gov/home/showdocument?id=14684>

⁵ <https://www.fairfaxva.gov/government/community-development-planning/planning/current-studies-projectsplans/northfax-community-meeting-january-30-2020>

⁶ P. 56 <https://www.fairfaxva.gov/home/showdocument?id=14722#page=56>