

April 29, 2016

Mark Schwartz  
Arlington County Manager  
2100 Clarendon Blvd.  
Arlington, Virginia 22201

RE: Expanded Exceptions, Creating New Default Width for Sidewalks on  
Low-Density Residential Streets

Dear Mr. Schwartz:

The Pedestrian Advisory Committee (PAC) is writing regarding the process and the outcome concerning the minimum width requirements for newly constructed sidewalks on low-density streets where certain exception conditions exist. Our full membership is unanimously requesting that you:

- 1) Table your February 22, 2016 memo on this issue; and
- 2) Initiate a review of the issue that solicits and considers meaningful input of advisory bodies created by the County to provide advice on a scope of issues relevant to this one, and then takes action, as merited.

Arlington Transportation Director Dennis Leach submitted to you a memo, also dated February 22, on the topic. It referred to formally approved County policy on width of sidewalks in low-density residential areas:

**Master Transportation Plan: Pedestrian Element** (adopted July, 2008 and amended April 2011); **Sidewalk Design** - Discussion of sidewalk width (page 14 of the approved document)

"Whenever feasible, sidewalks in low-density residential areas should be at least five feet wide to better accommodate two people walking side-by-side or people traveling in opposite directions to safely pass each other. Sidewalks can be reduced to four feet in width when there is insufficient right-of-way or to minimize impacts to significant trees, slopes or structures." In April, 2011, the document was amended to also permit sidewalks to be four feet in width when needed to preserve existing on-street parking. Additional language was included in the MTP to emphasize consideration of neighborhood character in street design.

The Neighborhood Conservation Advisory Committee (NCAC), by a vote of 14-13, decided to send the County Board a letter on the issue, dated September 14, 2015, despite being deeply divided. It said, in part, "We suggest Arlington County consider a 4 foot wide sidewalk as a baseline in residential neighborhoods, increasing the width as on site conditions permit." The debate held by the NCAC, as illustrated by the attached minutes, illuminated questions worthy of discussion by the PAC and other advisory bodies. Between last September and March, we never knew of the NCAC letter sent to the County Board and no one sought our input on what was proposed in the letter.

**Committee Members**  
Dennis Jaffe, Chair  
Pam VanHine, Vice Chair  
Ellen Armbruster  
Rosemary Ciotti  
Jim Feaster  
Eric Goodman  
Tom Korn  
Eric Goldstein  
Christine Ng  
John Armstrong  
Dan Foster  
Collin Weber

Mr. Leach wrote in his February 22nd memo:

Staff's recommendation is to not change the existing standard, but instead to adjust application of the existing standard's waivers to allow for greater flexibility and also provide greater clarity as to when the "right-of-way" waiver would be applied. As proposed, all streets with right-of-way of 40 feet or narrower would now be eligible for the first standard waiver. The other waiver for trees, structures, slopes and parking would be applied for an entire block rather than past practices of spot location application.

According to his calculations, 56% of all local streets without sidewalks have 40 or fewer feet of right-of-way, exempting them under his proposal from the five foot width standard.

Your memo, issued the same day as Mr. Leach's, endorsed his proposal to exempt from the five foot standard a substantial number of proposed sidewalks. It additionally directed staff to adopt a new "**default**" or **baseline** which "shall be a 4-foot width for the block frontage where one or more exception conditions exist on a low-density residential street." You wrote, "This new practice for exceptions should be applied by staff automatically, without any request by the relevant neighborhood organization or affected residents."

There are questions that we do not see the process having addressed. Among them: What is the rationale to make the sidewalk narrower on an entire block because of, for example, one tree that might well pose an obstacle to constructing a five foot sidewalk for only part of the block? What implications would there be to exempting streets with 40 or fewer feet of right-of-way? In order for us to pursue the mission you have tasked us with, we need to be consulted on changes of such magnitude as those proposed in Mr. Leach's memo and those outlined in your memo. We haven't been.

As County Manager, you have charged us with advising you "on issues that impact the quality of pedestrian life in Arlington County." When you appointed us to the committee, you reiterated that our purpose was to advise you "on the implementation of the pedestrian element of the Master Transportation Plan." Clearly, this issue is fundamentally relevant to the responsibilities you outlined for us.

Prior to your memo, the *Master Transportation Plan Pedestrian Element* specified a standard as well as allowed exceptions to that standard. While there has been discussion of modifying the allowed exceptions to that standard -- to provide more flexibility -- your memo rewrote what happens when exceptions are met. Currently, the *Pedestrian Element* still states that sidewalks *can* be reduced to four feet under these circumstances. Your memo serves to supplant language in the *Pedestrian Element* by directing staff to "automatically" apply a new standard or "default." We would expect that County officials would openly discuss such a consequential change and seek advice from the bodies charged with providing advice on the relevant area.

Additionally, while staff recommended that the five foot standard be relaxed to four feet upon the request of a neighborhood when exceptions are met, your memo imposes a *hurdle* for a neighborhood to get a five foot sidewalk under such circumstances.

*The Arlington Way* can get bogged down by too much talk – and too little action. At its best, *The Arlington Way* provides the opportunity for the community’s collective voice to be constructively articulated and then responsibly considered by those making decisions affecting our community.

Our input was never solicited on either the consequential changes proposed by Mr. Leach or the consequential new directive announced in your memo. The PAC is obligated to seek, and to attempt to provide, greater illumination of what implications may result from proposed changes. We do not believe, nor accept, that our role is to read about significant changes relevant to our area of scope after they’ve been adopted.

Out of respect for the thoughtfulness with which you perform your job and the seriousness with which we approach our responsibilities to advise you on the quality of pedestrian life in Arlington, we respectfully call upon you to: Table the February 22nd memo; Initiate a review of the issue that solicits and considers meaningful input of the relevant advisory bodies established by the County to provide advice; and then Take action, as merited.

We commit to honoring, with this issue and in the future, the stated reason for your appointing us to serve. We ask of you the same commitment.

Sincerely,

*Full membership of the Pedestrian Advisory Committee*

Dennis Jaffe, Chair  
 Pamela Van Hine, Vice Chair  
 Ellen Armbruster, Member  
 Rosemary Ciotti, Member  
 Jim Feaster, Member  
 Eric Goodman, Member  
 Tom Korn, Member  
 Eric Goldstein, Member  
 Christine Ng, Member  
 John Armstrong, Member  
 Dan Foster, Member  
 Collin Weber, Member

cc: Chief of Staff to County Manager; Deputy County Manager, Arlington County Department of Environmental Services; Pedestrian Advisory Committee Members (separately); Chair, Bicycle Advisory Committee; Chair, Transit Advisory Committee; Chair, Neighborhood Complete Streets Commission; Chair, Neighborhood Conservation Advisory Committee; Chair, Disability Advisory Commission; Transportation Director Dennis Leach; Bicycle & Pedestrian Program Manager David Goodman; Bicycle and Pedestrian Planner David Patton