

## **Opposition to Proposed New Policy for Public School Facilities** (Comprehensive Plan Amendment 2016-CW-1CP)

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### **1. Introduction**

The Fairfax County Planning Commission has prepared a [Comprehensive Plan amendment](#) that would change the facilities policy for all public schools. The new policy promises inferior school facilities in the future and should not be adopted for the reasons cited herein. This paper urges residents to email or write the Board of Supervisors opposing the commission's proposed new policy.

The Planning Commission approved their policy proposal at its 29 Sep meeting. The Board of Supervisors hearing is scheduled for 1 Nov.

The county's public school policy describes what residents should expect of their school facilities; it describes what is "normal." The commission's proposed policy would establish a new normal. Their new normal features schools in surplus office buildings, in commercial areas, with outdoor recreational space confined to garage rooftops and school sites reduced in size to the minimums allowed by the zoning ordinance. Any meaningful guidance that Fairfax County schools would comply with Virginia Department of Education *Guidelines for School Facilities in Virginia's Public Schools* would vanish.

### **2. Four Contentious New Policies**

The amendment proposes four policy changes that should not be adopted.<sup>1</sup>

Policy 6a. Proximity of schools to commercial areas: On page 6, the new schools policy proposes to delete the last line of existing Policy "a" under Objective 6 (Policy 6a) that states, "*Proximity of schools to commercial areas should be avoided, if possible.*" Clearly, if possible, elementary and secondary schools should not be located in or close by commercial areas. These schools should be located in residential areas with safe and convenient pedestrian access, including residential areas of mixed-use activity centers. The last line of existing Policy 6a should not be deleted.

Policy 10c. Recreation areas on garage rooftops: On page 8, proposed Policy 10c states in part, "*Provide outdoor recreation areas on converted rooftops and underutilized surface parking lots.*" If, in the future, an opportunity arises to provide a bonus recreation area on a rooftop, nothing in the current policy or the commission's new policy would discourage the option. However, as written, Policy 10c supports, as a normal practice, placing outdoor recreation areas on garage rooftops and old parking lots instead of providing these areas on green space at ground level. The policy should not be adopted.

Policy 8a. School site sizes to be determined by the zoning ordinance: Remarkably, on page 7, proposed Policy 8a recommends that floor area ratios in the zoning ordinance, not Virginia Department of Education guidelines, should govern how large a school site should be. It states, "*Ensure that minimum site size conforms to the Fairfax County Zoning Ordinance F.A.R. requirements. This may*

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<sup>1</sup> The public schools policy is organized into a number of objectives each of which is supported by one or more policies. This document refers to Policy "a" under Objective 6, as an example, as Policy 6a.

*result in the acquisition of sites that do not conform to the state suggested guidelines.”* With the Board’s new zoning ordinance amendment allowing floor area ratios of 5.0 everywhere in activity centers, the policy presumably supports, as an example, putting 100,000 sq ft schools for 700-800 students on lots as small as one-half acre. The proposed policy easily would degrade the quality of our schools and should not be adopted.

Policy 10a. Public schools in converted office buildings: On page 8, proposed Policy 10a states, *“Consider non-traditional school properties such as office or commercial buildings for conversion to education facilities.”* Housing elementary and secondary schools in converted office buildings should be regarded as an optional but not a normal policy/practice in Fairfax County. To exclude these schools from the “education facilities” referred to by the proposed policy, the policy should be deleted and Policy 10b should be reworded to state: *“Consider utilizing and/or repurposing commercial sites to offer auxiliary programs such as Transitional High Schools, Family and Early Childhood Education Program (FECEP)/Head Start, and distance learning.”*

### **3. Mason District Residents Have Experienced the Schools Supported by the Proposed Policy**

Experience has left many residents of Mason District skeptical of the notion that schools in converted office buildings, in commercial areas, with recreation space confined to rooftops would provide the quality learning environments our students need and deserve.

In particular, Bailey’s Upper Elementary School in Mason District is a school that should not have been built. It opened in 2014 in a converted office building surrounded by 2.5 acres of black top on heavily trafficked Leesburg Pike in a commercial district with no useable green space, no gym, no auditorium, and no pedestrian access. This is just the type of school that the commission’s new policy supports, but it should not have been built. A suitable school site was available less than a half mile away in a residential area - the five-acre, county-owned Willston School site. The School Board and residents had been asking for the site for a number of years, but the district supervisor was holding onto Willston for another purpose. In July 2015, the Board of Supervisors designated Willston as a site for a school.

In 2015, the district supervisor announced two proposals for schools on two-acre parcels with the outdoor recreational space confined to garage rooftops. One school proposed was on the SE Quadrant; the current proposal is for a future school at Willston. Both proposals have been strongly opposed by residents.

### **4. Rationale for Opposition**

The purpose of the public schools policy is to provide guidance for cost-effective provision of quality school facilities. The schools policy proposed by the Planning Commission is deficient in that it provides the Board of Supervisors license and latitude to substantially degrade school quality. As described in Section 3, Mason District residents have experienced the inevitable consequences firsthand.

In their 28 July hearing, planning commissioners stated that the intention of their new policy is to respond to the Board’s request for more “flexibility” in providing school facilities. In the four contentious areas, the proposed policy changes are either unnecessary or not warranted for the stated purpose. For example, existing Policy 6a, *“Proximity of schools to commercial areas should be avoided, if possible,”* provides appropriate and sufficient flexibility for locating schools. It says, if

reasonably possible, schools should be in residential areas; where necessary, they may be in or nearby commercial areas. There is no basis for the proposal to delete this policy other than to give the Board license to put schools in commercial areas as a normal practice. (Notably, the construction of Bailey's Upper was a clear violation of Policy 6a. The availability of the Williston site nearby made it unnecessary to build a school in a commercial district.)

Furthermore, proposed Policy 8a, "*Ensure that minimum site size conforms to the Fairfax County Zoning Ordinance F.A.R. requirements. This may result in the acquisition of sites that do not conform to the state suggested guidelines,*" only gives the Board license to disregard state guidelines and squeeze school sites down to the minimums allowed by the same floor area restrictions that the Zoning Ordinance imposes on every building in the county. The policy is unwarranted and endangers the quality of our schools.

The new public schools policy proposed by the Planning Commission should not be adopted.

## **5. Residents Are Encouraged to Oppose the New Policy**

If you are opposed to the new policy, please email or write the Board of Supervisors to express your opinion and consider testifying at the 1 Nov hearing. The email can be formatted as follows

To: ClerktotheBOS@fairfaxcounty.gov  
Subject: Plan Amendment 2016-CW-1CP; Board Hearing Nov1

Dear Clerk to the Board,

Please forward this email to all members of the Board and include it in the record of subject hearing.

Dear Member of the Board of Supervisors,

I am writing to state my opposition to subject plan amendment.

*Add a sentence or more expressing your reason(s) for opposing the amendment, e.g:*

- ( ) The amendment supports placing schools in commercial areas on sites of insufficient size with outdoor recreation areas confined to garage rooftops. These are not the schools I want in my community.*
- ( ) The amendment potentially degrades the future quality of our schools.*
- ( ) The amendment does not clearly state that, if possible, county schools should comply with state guidelines for public school facilities.*

Your name

Your address (Address is needed to demonstrate that you are a resident of the county.)

If you are sending a letter, the address is: Clerk to the Board of Supervisors, 12000 Government Center Parkway, Suite 533, Fairfax, VA 22035.

Thank you for engaging in the dialog on this important issue.

Clyde Miller