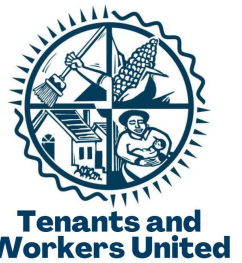




**AFRICAN  
COMMUNITIES  
TOGETHER**

**LEGAL AID  
JUSTICE CENTER**



**Tenants and  
Workers United**

January 30, 2023

*Via Email*

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**Re: Alex West Small Area Plan**

Dear Alexandria Department of Planning and Zoning and Office of Housing :

We write to follow up in our ongoing conversation with the City of Alexandria around community engagement in the Alexandria West Small Area Plan planning process. Thank you for meeting with us and considering our perspectives on the community engagement that is vital to this process. We appreciate City staff's significant work on this process.

We share the City's goal that community input from our most vulnerable and marginalized neighbors, the working-class people of color and immigrant families in the West End, is critical to the process. Without it, the Plan will not meet their needs. As member-based organizations in the West End, we consistently work with our members to understand what they need and what barriers prevent them from advocating for their needs with the City. The West End is majority renter, and many residents are Limited English Proficient, low-income, and work multiple jobs. For West End residents to advocate for their needs and fight for a future in the community they love, the City must take significant steps to confront the barriers to participation they face.

We advocate for dedicating the necessary time, resources and funding to make sure that the community engagement is equitable. We agree with the City that we cannot miss this critical moment and allow the West End to launch into major change without its residents' needs being reflected in that planning. Especially in terms of affordable housing, Alexandria must plan for and meet the housing needs of its least affluent residents.<sup>1</sup> The City's racial equity commitments and duties under the Fair Housing Act also require it to take meaningful action to address systemic racism and disparities in housing needs and opportunities.<sup>2</sup> Equity extends to every part of the process: Equitable community engagement requires proactively reaching out to residents who are excluded and isolated, and giving them the tools necessary to participate in their neighborhood planning. And, equity means much more than community members voicing their needs. Rather than participation without power, equitable engagement means that community members will have the power to change their future when they participate.

We hope that Alexandria can continue to invite equitable community engagement by:

- Ensuring transparency about the scope, constraints, and opportunities of the planning process, including the degree of influence participants can have

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<sup>1</sup> City of Alexandria Housing Master Plan at p. vii, 131; Virginia Code § 15.2-2223(D), 15.2-2283.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/manager/equity/ALLAlexandriaResolution2974.pdf>;  
[https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/FHEO/images/Frequently\\_Asked\\_Questions\\_7\\_14-21.pdf](https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/FHEO/images/Frequently_Asked_Questions_7_14-21.pdf).

- Anticipate and address inequities and barriers to participation before community members are discouraged or forced to advocate for themselves
- Engaging in one-on-one conversations with many community members, including through door-knocking
- Increasing resources for dedicated outreach to marginalized West End residents
- Monitoring which community groups are not represented in the process and adjusting outreach strategies
- Avoiding tokenism in community engagement by not singling individuals out based on their perceived identities, inviting participants based on their interest and unique perspectives from all their identities and experiences, proactively reducing barriers to engagement, and ensuring authentic and accountable engagement
- Engaging with community members as experts in their needs and goals for their future home, and making sure they have the tools and resources needed to give their expert opinions to the process. This includes the information necessary to understand the process, and compensation for their time, transportation, child care, meals, and other resources.
- Acting on community feedback to shift the policies and recommendations in the Plan to better meet community needs, and reporting back to community members on how their input has shaped the process

In the Alexandria West Small Area Plan process, Alexandria has the opportunity to create a more equitable future for West End residents. We would not like this plan to be a risk of displacement, rather a preservation for the working class families in this community. We hope you can take into consideration our recommendations in this critical moment.

Sincerely,

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