

# Changing Face of Arlandria

Six-to-one vote approves redevelopment despite opposition.

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The Alexandria Gazette Packet  
December 22, 2011*

Ignoring hours of testimony against a proposed redevelopment in Arlandria and casting aside repeated threats of retribution at the polls this November, a majority of City Council members voted to approve a sweeping new plan for Mount Vernon Village Center that would replace a 1940s-era strip mall with two six-story towers. Councilwoman Alicia Hughes offered the lone dissenting vote, suggesting that a work group be impaneled similar to the one created when council members faced a firestorm of opposition on the waterfront plan.

"Let people come to the table and feel as though they are heard," Hughes said.

The other members disagreed, and her motion failed to gain a second vote for consideration. The majority of council members rejected concerns voiced by many neighborhood residents that they had not been part of the process. Several speakers supported the development special-use permit, but the vast majority of speakers for Saturday's public hearing were against approval or at least calling for a delay. City planners said they went through the same outreach efforts for every other development, and the developer's attorney suggested that delaying approval could have drastically negative consequences for the financial viability of the project.

"There's been a lot of discussion and a lot of input," said Councilman Paul Smedberg, "much more than a lot of other plans over the last decade."

City officials were quick to point out that the developer offered to include 28 affordable housing units in exchange for exceeding the allowable height limit by eight feet. But many speakers remained skeptical that the 450 market-rate units would gentrify the neighborhood by raising rents in the surrounding community, eventually pushing poor and Latino residents out of Arlandria. Several suggested that the affordable housing units weren't really affordable at all because they will be priced at 60 percent to 80 percent of the maximum income limits used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. That would put the units far out of reach for many of the existing neighborhood residents.

"This is a monument to greed and excess," said Hume Springs resident Betty King. "I realize that gentrification of inevitable, but in a city like Alexandria, I would hope it would be more gradual and humane."

THE POLITICS OF GENTRIFICATION created sharp divisions in the race for Alexandria City Council, with three non-incumbent members issuing statements shortly after the vote to weigh in — one in favor and two against the decision. Republican Scott Gordon praised the addition of new affordable housing units to the existing stock and commended the development as "urban revitalization."

"Alexandria is quickly becoming a progressive city and in order to play that role effectively, progress

must be made in areas deemed otherwise lacking fiscal stability, such as Arlandria," Gordon said in a written statement. "I am hard pressed to oppose any development that will strengthen the commercial and residential stability of a struggling economic region."

Democrat Charles Sumpter took a different approach. During a speech to City Council members at the public hearing, Sumpter said he was not necessarily opposed to the development. But he said he was concerned that many Arlandria residents felt as though they had been excluded from the process. After the six-to-one vote, the Democratic candidate issued a statement suggesting that the incumbent members may have had a tin ear to concerns raised by their constituents.

"I am not deterred by the City Council's decision," said Sumpter in a written statement issued Monday. "In fact, I am more motivated than ever to bring to Alexandria a government that listens and responds to the will of its people."

Another potential Democratic candidate, Sean Holihan, also issued a statement taking issue with the council's decision. Although he agrees that redevelopment is needed in Arlandria, Holihan said the city should have engaged in more outreach to community members expressing fears that they may soon be priced out of their own neighborhood. Like many of the speakers Saturday, he questioned the affordability of the 28 units set aside as affordable housing.

"These affordable housing units will be available for those making around \$50,000 a year," Holihan said in a written statement Sunday. "Unfortunately, many residents don't meet that definition of affordable."