



Neighborhood Complete Streets Commission
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June 23, 2021

Hon. Matt de Ferranti, Chair
Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Blvd. Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: Neighborhood Complete Streets Program -
Requesting Board Decision re: Fire Code/Street Width Issue

Dear Mr. de Ferranti:

On behalf of the Neighborhood Complete Streets Commission (NCSC), I am requesting two actions from the County Board:

1. An expedited decision from the County Board and/or the County Manager on the County's approach to/policy regarding enforcement of the street width provision of the [Virginia Statewide Fire Prevention Code](#) (SFPC); and in the interim,
2. Guidance from the County Board on the direction of the Neighborhood Complete Streets (NCS) program in light of continued challenges the Commission faces identifying projects that do not conflict with fire code regulations as they are currently enforced in the County.

Background: The Master Transportation Plan (MTP) permits narrowing residential streets as a calming method. It allows for "yield streets" with parking on one or both sides, that are 22 to 32 feet wide, with a minimum 14-foot travel way or "clear width."¹

By contrast, the [Virginia Statewide Fire Prevention Code](#) (SFPC) calls for a minimum 20-foot clear width, which would indicate a 34-foot street including parking on both sides.² It does not

¹ Master Transportation Plan, Streets Element, pg. 31: <https://arlingtonva.s3.dualstack.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/04/October-2016-Amended-Streets-Element.pdf>.

² The SFPC incorporates the street width requirement by reference to the model fire code published by the International Code Council, Inc. In the 2021 International Fire Code, Section 503.2.1 provides that "Fire apparatus access roads shall have an unobstructed width of not less than 20 feet (6096 mm), exclusive of shoulders. . . ." Section 502 defines "Fire Apparatus Access Road" as "A road that provides fire apparatus access from a fire station to a facility, building or portion thereof. This is a general term inclusive of all other terms such as fire lane, public street, private street, parking lot lane and access roadway." <https://codes.iccsafe.org/content/IFC2021P1/chapter-5-fire-service-features>.

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permit "yield streets." As you know, many/most of Arlington's existing neighborhood streets do not meet this minimum requirement and it would be impractical or impossible to enforce that regulation throughout the county.

However, the situation we are seeing is inconsistent enforcement of the street width portion of the fire code on new transportation-related work on neighborhood streets. As projects are developed, they are subject to review by fire officials in the County, usually at the later stages of design. The Commission has been informed of at least one instance where a project developed under the Neighborhood Conservation Program was rejected at the last minute by fire officials in the County based on the street width portion of the fire code.

Most of the highest ranked projects on the NCS list will require building a sidewalk in order to make the street more complete; as such they will inherently run into street width considerations. As we have considered projects on the NCS list that involve changing street width, County staff have recommended, and the Commission has agreed, to pause consideration of at least one of the projects due to concerns about street width. At this time, we are hesitant to move forward with public engagement and development of the highest ranked projects on the NCS list without clearer direction from the County Board. As a result, the public funds the Board have allocated to the NCS program are currently not being utilized or are utilized for lower ranked projects on the list, which doesn't live up to the spirit or purpose of the program.

The [Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development \(DHCD\)](#) website clearly notes that enforcement of the SFPC is at the option of local governments. We have been informed that the County Manager and staff are working on a resolution to this issue, which the NCSC first raised as early as November 2020. Our understanding is that this issue has been discussed at the highest levels of the County government and the issue sits with the County Attorney for further review. We appreciate the action that has been taken so far, but strongly request an expedited resolution and/or updated policy so that we may continue to address important safety projects around the County.

In the interim, the Commission will work on identifying projects on our list that will not involve altering street width, which are generally ranked lower. While we remain dedicated to making Arlington's neighborhood streets as safe as possible for all users, ignoring the highest ranked projects on the NCS list – which are those with the most safety concerns – does not adhere to the program guidance and mission the County Board approved for the Commission. Therefore, we request any interim guidance the Board can provide about the Commission's work, especially if it differs from our proposed plan to work on projects that do not involve altering street width.

I would be happy to respond to any questions or concerns.

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Respectfully Submitted,

/s/ Elisa Ortiz

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Neighborhood Complete Streets Commission

cc: Katie Cristol, Vice Chair
Christian Dorsey, Member
Libby Garvey, Member
Takis Karantonis, Member
Mark Schwartz, County Manager
Members, NCSC