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January 23, 2015

Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Boulevard
Suite 300
Arlington, Virginia 22201

Dear Chairman Hynes,

The Arlington Chamber of Commerce respectfully recommends that the Arlington County Board defer final action on the draft Arlington County Retail Plan advertised for a vote at the February 21, 2014 Board meeting. Action should be deferred for 3-5 months to allow for the County Manager and the new Economic Development Director to utilize plan revision guidance provided by the County Board.

Additional time is needed to evaluate and recalibrate retail policies and strategy for the future.

High compliments are owed to the many members of the business community that have participated in the work of the Retail Task Force as members and industry resources and the Arlington County Economic Development staff for their time, effort, and expertise to prepare this draft plan.

The plan provides a necessary framework for considering retail policies, strategy and action options to address future challenges and opportunities. The deferral provides additional time to clarify or revise the text to mitigate issues. Many of the issues listed below were raised by County Board Members at the recent retail plan working session with the County Manager. Others have been raised by business stakeholders.

1. Consider putting all the intended guidelines, principles, and policies in one list for adoption. Clarification is needed on what is actually being adopted for guiding retail placement.
2. Increased flexibility should be a stated goal and reflected in the retail policies, definitions, any retail maps, special exception process, Zoning Ordinance, and other administrative processes: reconsider the plan's prescriptive and restrictive elements.

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3. Retail Nodes rather than Retail Streets: Consider focusing retail at key nodes (main and main street or retail centers). Remaining area and streets are “retail eligible,” not mandated. Designation of entire streets and four different retail street types is too prescriptive.
4. “Limited Lobby Presence” requirement that restricts building amenities (entertainment, conference, or exercise rooms, leasing office) on the street frontage: reconsider and evaluate the issues created for building developers, owners, and tenants that include limited flexibility to customize ground floor frontage to accommodate market-driven needs of the building’s tenants and loss of income-generating office or residential units displaced by this requirement.
5. “Hybrid Street” criteria for retail services or retail equivalents: Reconsider the cost-benefit of the additional time and expense requirement for new and previously approved site plans to comply with open-ended criteria.
6. Retail Plan Street Maps: The Retail Plan should not affirm outdated retail elements of the Metro Sector and other area plans. Update outdated retail elements directly in those plans.
7. Required ground floor retail build-out with no temporary alternative use: recheck assumption: consider flexible building design to allow use for current market demand (office, residential) and be “retail ready” for future retail markets.
8. Provide a new, less costly, and time-consuming process to amend previously approved site plans that have vacant retail space: to allow for conversion to office, residential or retail equivalent uses.
9. New special exception requirements: cost-benefit of adding new retail related requirements: impact on competitiveness with other jurisdictions.
10. New requirements for standard site plan conditions: cost-benefit of adding new requirements and effect on competitiveness with other jurisdictions.
11. Review implications for time, expense, and ease of implementation of the proposed Zoning Ordinance

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amendments for short-term uses to include temporary or pop-up uses: make this process more efficient.

12. An education plan is needed to educate and train the staff, community, and business stakeholders in any new retail policies, special exception process, Zoning Ordinance amendments, and other administrative changes. For example, the signage Ordinance was amended some two years ago, and efficiently obtaining signage permit remains difficult due to a lack of well-trained participants.

Conclusion

The County Board should defer action on a final plan for 3-5 months to a date determined by the County Manager and the new Economic Development Director after completing an evaluation review utilizing guidance from the County Board.

The draft plan is a significant starting point for the County Board, the County Manager, and the new Economic Development Director to develop an evaluation framework of next steps to double-check assumptions, principles, policies, implementation actions and recalibrate a strategy and actions to incorporate into a final plan.

The Chamber looks forward to collaborating with the County to finalize the Arlington County Retail Plan.

Sincerely,

Kevin Shooshan
 Chair

Kate Roche
 President & CEO

CC: Arlington County Board members Jay Fiset, Libby Garvey, Walter Tejada, John Vihstadt