



November 1, 2024

Chair Sara Steinberger
Arlington County Planning Commission
2100 Clarendon Blvd, Suite 700
Arlington, VA 22201

Dear Chair Steinberger,

The Arlington Chamber of Commerce requests the Planning Commission recommend that the County Board adopt the “County Board Policy on the Transformation of Commercial Office Buildings,” and the related Zoning Ordinance amendments. Arlington faces a tremendous challenge in its office vacancy rate, and this policy and related zoning amendments will together be a powerful tool to meet this challenge.

Arlington is contending with a historically high commercial vacancy rate of 23.7%, creating constraints on the County’s tax base. An Arlington Economic Development study stated that a typical office building with a 50% occupancy rate only generates 58% of the total local tax revenue of a 100% occupied building. Losing this revenue hinders Arlington County’s capacity to fully fund important public services such as education, parks, public safety, and human services. These services make our community thrive.

We applaud the County for considering a range of policy options to attract and retain tenants to commercial office space, including creating a streamlined path for commercial property owners to adapt aging or obsolete commercial office space to adjust to market conditions. The Chamber was an enthusiastic proponent of the first phase of the Commercial Market Resiliency Initiative (CMRI), which helped modernize the Zoning Ordinance to better attract and retain businesses of the 21st century. We appreciate the focus on process evaluation and improvement in the second phase of CMRI, which will remove barriers and serve as key tools to ensure that Arlington is tackling the issue of a high vacancy rate and helping maintain the funding of key services.

Adaptive reuse policies, which allow for the change in the primary use of a commercial building, provide property owners and businesses with greater flexibility to adjust their commercial spaces according to market demand. Currently, the uncertainty around both the cost of changing primary use and the time required for the process limits property owners’ ability to secure financing and complete these projects. The policy and zoning amendments would create a streamlined path for adaptive reuse of buildings, encouraging these projects in Arlington. The Arlington Chamber requests that the Planning Commission recommend to the County Board that the final Policy extends eligibility for projects to those initially approved under the Columbia Pike Form Based Code use permits and by right, to ensure the greatest positive impact in Arlington.

The Chamber looks forward to continued conversations on the other policies proposed in the second phase of CMRI, including revisions to major, minor, and administrative Site Plan amendments and flexibility in signage requirements. We also look forward to continued engagement with the County to ensure Arlington’s regulations and processes fit the modern economic landscape, and we commend County Staff for their ongoing efforts on this important policy work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kate Bates". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kate Bates
President & CEO

CC: Planning Commissioners; Director Samia Byrd, Community Planning and Housing Development; Director Ryan Touhill, Arlington Economic Development; Marc McCauley, Arlington Economic Development; Jill Hunger, Community Planning and Housing Development; County Manager Mark Schwartz.