



DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND ZONING

Sent via E-mail

January 21, 2023

Dear Mr. Curtis,

Thank you for your thoughts and comments regarding how the Alexandria West planning effort can ensure citizen involvement from the range of residents and stakeholders in the area. We certainly appreciate the points you raise and agree that the engagement strategy should bring these diverse perspectives to the table to identify issues, foster understanding, build community, and inform plan outcomes and recommendations.

On the subject of engagement for the Alexandria West project, the approach was in part informed by the demographic profile of Alexandrians within the plan area. Our intent is to ensure equitable access to participation from historically marginalized and non-participatory groups such as renters, recent immigrants, individuals/groups who have traditionally felt uncomfortable participating due to language and/or cultural barriers, as well as established groups, civic/homeowners associations, and large property owners. Traditional engagement strategies have created participation and engagement challenges for many of these groups whose life circumstances do not allow them to participate in these forums; often finding their perspectives overshadowed. With this in mind, the proposed strategy is a combination of high-tech and low-tech engagement tools coupled with large-forum community meetings as well as targeted in-person or small group engagement to engage all perspectives.


Leading up to the process launch, staff spent months researching equitable engagement strategies and best practices, including talking with experts in the field and meeting with local stakeholders. While there are instances where advisory groups are necessary, staff believes that the advisory group/steering committee model would not be the most beneficial engagement tool to serve this planning effort. While resources to support an advisory group and the grass-roots approach is one factor, more importantly, inclusive participation is the primary driver in this determination. Given the size of the planning area and the extent of its diversity, the best outcomes will be achieved if we devote the staff resources we have to engaging as many people as possible through a wide range of engagement strategies. In this instance, creating an advisory group large enough to represent all the diverse voices will likely result in a group that becomes too large to function effectively and efficiently. We are fully committed to making sure that any person or group shares an equal voice and “seat at the table” of this process that an advisory group would have aimed to achieve to shape each phase of the plan and have their voices heard.

The proposed engagement approach for Alexandria West builds on the successes of recent planning efforts in the City that shared similar demographics and engagement challenges. Most

recent planning efforts of Eisenhower East and Arlandria Small Area Plans did not include an advisory group or steering committee and focused engagement to include a wide range of community stakeholders. These engagement tools for these efforts were “broad and deep” ensuring participation from traditionally non-engagement groups such as renters, non-English speakers, communities of color, as well as civic groups, homeowners associations, and property owners. Through a variety of in-person engagements, community events, pop-ups, open houses, listening sessions, and virtual community meetings, every participating individual and group was able to share in the development of each plan. Staff will continue to analyze participation through each phase of engagement for Alexandria West to evaluate the effectiveness of approaches and refine as necessary. We are also committed that as issues arise and trade-offs are discussed that there will be active and transparent discussions with and among the community.

Our engagement approach is intended to reflect the fact that the input you’ve provided is critical to the planning process, and our "broad and deep" engagement approach will ensure that your perspectives are heard, understood, and help inform the final outcomes. Moreover, the process will allow groups such as SWCA to also learn the concerns and interests of everyone in the plan area so that those can be considered and inform how the plan should respond to them. We look forward to SWCA’s continued engagement and participation as part of this process and look forward to working with you and other groups to create a community vision for the future. We would appreciate the opportunity to meet with your group and others in the plan area on a regular basis to ensure that the lines of communication remain open, and you are informed about and participate in the process each step of the way.

Sincerely,



Karl Moritz
Planning Director