

Early Planning Progress in Arlington County, Virginia To 1945

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Arlington has a relatively long and active history of planning as compared with other Virginia counties. One might say its early beginning resulted from a special Act of the State Legislature in 1911 giving those counties having a population of greater than 300 persons per square mile (then only Alexandria County—Arlington's name at the time) the same rights as cities, thereby permitting the County to control the subdivision of land. Thereupon, on June 9, 1914, the County adopted its first subdivision control ordinance. It required prior approval by the County Engineer before development could begin to assure coordinated layout of streets and sewers. The County's population then was about 13,000.

Then, as the County proceeded to develop, it became evident to the farsighted and civic-minded citizens that some control was needed to prevent the indiscriminate mixture of incompatible land uses throughout the County. During this period a number of municipalities throughout the country were adopting zoning ordinances to control such abuses, aided no doubt, by the publication of model enabling Acts by the Advisory Committee on City Planning and Zoning of the U.S. Department of Commerce. Closer to home, the District of Columbia and parts of the Maryland area had adopted such ordinances.

After much effort on the part of Arlington's representatives, the Virginia State Legislature set up the procedure by the adoption of a special Act (Chapter 15, Acts of Assembly) in 1927 permitting Arlington County to adopt Zoning Ordinances. A Zoning Commission was appointed charged with the duty of preparing the County's first Zoning Ordinance. This Commission first met on July 11, 1927, in the Arlington Chamber of Commerce rooms. Its membership was composed of: Major E. W. Cushing, John R. Harding, William F. Sunderman, Miss Florence E. Ward, and A. J. Webb. To illustrate the interest shown at the time, the Chamber of Commerce underwrote the expense involved in the undertaking. Finally, the County itself defrayed part of the cost.

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As the Zoning Commission's work progressed and after various changes in the Commission's membership, technical advice was sought and the firm of Allen J. Saville, Inc., was engaged to assist in the work. Mr. Saville attended his first meeting with the Commission on May 6, 1929. The Commission completed its task and submitted its report to the County Board of Supervisors on February 14, 1930. The Commission went out of existence at that time. After the required hearings, the Board, on April 29, 1930, adopted the County's first Zoning Ordinance. It set up only limited categories for land use. The population of the County then was about 26,600.

However, during the period of developing the Ordinance, it had been necessary on October 10, 1927, and on May 15, 1929, to adopt interim ordinances controlling the construction of commercial buildings to prevent their indiscriminate placement in areas which were under consideration for other uses.

Recognizing the need and the logic of gearing the Zoning Ordinance and Map with the over-all physical development of the County, the Saville consultants prepared a general plan and report to guide or give direction to orderly County development. This general plan was submitted in February 1930. Accordingly, letters were sent, generally, to all attorneys, engineers, surveyors and real estate firms advising them, that subdivisions of land would be controlled by the Saville Plan.

While the foregoing zoning and planning proposals were progressing, it should be stated that the installation of sewer and water utilities was well underway, thus laying the groundwork for the explosive physical expansion to come. Legislation had been adopted, agreements had been reached to purchase water from the District of Columbia, bond issues passed, and construction started on the County-wide water system by the spring of 1927. The over-all sewerage system construction was begun in the fall of 1934. Earlier, small sewerage systems had been put in in a few limited areas by private developers.

During this period, apparently, the planning mood had been growing in various parts of the State. The City of Roanoke had engaged a consultant to devise its plan. Alexandria had engaged Irving C. Root, a nationally known planner to prepare its City Plan. These Plans had to do with Virginia cities. But it took until the year 1936 when the State Legislature adopted an enabling Act, to permit Virginia counties to engage in the planning function. That Act furnished the spark which was the creation of the Arlington County Planning Commission on June 29, 1937, the first in Virginia. That Act permitted counties to make, create, suggest, and recommend to their governing bodies, actions to promote the well-being of their counties.

The County Board (by then operating under the County Manager form

of government) appointed on its first Planning Commission: Col. Christopher B. Garnett, a prominent attorney, as its Chairman; Gabriel C. Harmon, a nationally known land planner; Judson Reamy, local realtor, highly regarded as an early proponent of the planning idea; Basil DeLashmutt, staff member of the County Engineering Department as Commission Secretary; and Frank C. Hanrahan, County Manager, as an ex-officio member of the Commission as required by law.

The Commission in its work needed map and statistical material. In 1937, Daniel M. Maher was engaged as its first employee. At that time, the work of the Planning Commission was placed under the supervision of the County Engineering Department, the first hint in the State of acceptance of the planning function as a daily governmental activity. As its duties expanded, in March 1938 there was established a Planning Division of the County Engineer's Office, under the direction of Mr. C. L. Kinnier, County Engineer, to organize, program, and direct a full-scale program of all the phases of planning in Arlington as a daily function of County government. The population then was about 51,000.

A thorough review of the then-existing Saville Plan and the physical plans of the Arlington environs including those of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, revealed a lack of recognition of the common planning objective to be achieved in the regional scene. The review involved land subdivision practices, zoning regulations, utility system plans, park and playground land acquisition limitations, and traffic circulation.

At the outset, priorities were defined to direct (and in some cases, to curb) the then present practices; to revise and enforce pertinent ordinances. The primary effort, however, was that of informing citizens, developers, attorneys, financial institutions, and the Federal Housing Authority that the planning process was in full operation and legally enforceable.

The first thing to be done was the preparation of a preliminary Thoroughfare Plan for those areas of the County lying in the path of imminent development. That plan was submitted to the County Manager and Planning Commission on June 28, 1938. That plan was the result of much field and office investigation and cooperation and assistance of all pertinent County Departments.

Next followed the revision of the land subdivision regulations. These were designed to enforce the preliminary Thoroughfare Plan, to streamline the plat approval process, to delete all mention of lot dimensions, and to refine technical requirements. An Ordinance was then prepared and adopted as a mate to the subdivision regulations which required the installations of all utilities and street improvements in new developments according to County specifications. This curbed the tendency to over-subdivide raw land, to speculative lot sales, and relieved the County of excessive capital improvement costs.



FAIRFAX DRIVE looking west from Clarendon Monument.

This photograph, taken in 1938, illustrates the projections of the Major Thoroughfare portion of the Arlington Master Plan. The railroad tracks have been removed, the Drive has been constructed. The building on the right remains, although under a different name.

The Zoning enabling Act permitted regulations to control the density and distribution of population and to relieve congestion in the streets. Neither of these elements were incorporated in the then-existing Ordinance. Consequently, for the first time, regulations were adopted requiring off-street parking in all apartment and housing projects, minimum land area standards were devised for each type of residential land use, and the then prevalent, and growing wave of row-house construction was stopped. Arlington did not want to be another Washington or Baltimore. It may be obvious at this point that these changes did not come about without severe pain. Herewith is a reproduction of a handbill and news item on the row-house issue.

At about this time (1938-40), the Federal WPA program was gradually running out. Through the efforts of the Virginia State Planning Board and its Director, Hugh R. Pomeroy, Arlington was successful in establishing in 1940 its first and only WPA project, that of securing technical assistance in the collection and analysis of basic data needed in the preparation of fundamental elements of a Master Plan. The timing of this project was fortunate in that it coincided with the 1940 Census whereby good population data were matched with land use types and traffic generation. Arlington's population was then 57,040.

All Sections of Arlington County Threatened

BY

Row Houses

Are YOU Willing that Your County
be Developed as a Row House
Community?

THE CIVIC FEDERATION is holding a Public Meeting at the Lyon Park Community House Wednesday, August 10th, at 8 p. m., to consider this problem.

YOUR COUNTY BOARD is passing on 21 Applications for Row Houses Saturday, August 13th, at 9 a. m., at the Court House.

MR. CITIZEN, it is up to you to Protect Your Home and Interests by attending both of these meetings and registering your protests.

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ROW HOUSES CONDEMNED

CIVIC FEDERATION MASS MEETING
DEMANDS THAT THEY BE STOPPED

Colonel Garnett's Broadside Is Applauded
By Monarchs, Lions, Rotarians, Kiwanians

In 1941 the formal Thoroughfare Plan was adopted by the Planning Commission. This paved the way for more adequate control of land subdivisions whereby most of Arlington's present highway system came into being. These include George Mason Drive, Walter Reed Drive, Williamsburg Boulevard, Patrick Henry Drive, and John Marshall Drive. Others mapped in advance include Henry G. Shirley Memorial Highway and Fairfax Drive, most of the latter now the location selected for Interstate Route 66. Even then, as now, the indecision of the Federal Government in determining its areas of expansion in employment as well as its bridge locations made highway location decisions most difficult.

In 1942, using data secured previously, a Comprehensive Zoning Plan was adopted. The fundamentals laid down in that plan stamped the pattern for Arlington's development. Further, that Zoning Plan formed the basis upon which a comprehensive plan of storm drainage was prepared by Chester Engineers in 1943.

Concurrent with the other elements in the planning process at about that time, the park and playground system plan was taking shape. Much preliminary work had been performed when a Park and Playground Advisory Committee was created by the County Board on November 13, 1943. The original appointees were: Leo C. Lloyd, Chairman; Basil M. DeLashmutt, Edmund D. Campbell members of the County Board; Fletcher Kemp, Superintendent of Schools; Jackson W. Ross, Chairman of the School Board; Mrs. Lucy G. Bussey, member of the School Board; W. A. Richardson, Recreation Director; Frank C. Hanrahan, County

Manager; and your writer, Secretary to the Committee. The duties of this Committee were specified by the County Board to advise on matters of policy and to recommend sites. Many of the sites proposed by this Committee and the Planning Commission in its report to the County Board dated June 22, 1944, are now in operation. A few may be mentioned: Greenbrier Playfield; Cherrydale, Washington-Lee High School expansion, Rocky Run, Lubber Run, Fort Scott, Jennie Dean, and Barcroft.

On the basis of this plan and report, the development of many of the sites was postponed by developer's pending acquisition negotiations. Others were acquired by donation such as the greater part of Lubber Run Park in the development of Arlington Forest by Monroe Warren during 1939 to 1944. But long before this, Glencarlyn Park, now a major part of the Four Mile Run and Long Branch Park system was donated by General Samuel S. Burdett in 1892 for the use of Glencarlyn residents. Subsequently, this area was deeded to the County.

This rather sketchy review of planning efforts going back to 1911 does show how the ground work was laid for the increasingly detailed and sophisticated planning concepts developed in the two decades since 1945. During a relatively short span—as history goes—much of the County's form and character was indelibly stamped; it must be said that the planning effort was but a small part. The most important element in the whole undertaking was the will and the means of all of its citizens from the very beginning to shape the environment in the way in which they wished it to become. The population in 1945 was about 120,000.

The able assistance of Mr. William H. Kennedy, Zoning Administrator, in the preparation of this article is gratefully acknowledged.