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# The Council Connection

*your connection to City Council by Mayor Justin M. Wilson*

September 1, 2021

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## In This Month's Edition:

- **New DASH Routes**
- **Flooding**
- **City Manager Hiring**
- **Vaccine Mandate**
- **Alexandria's Population**
- **Voting Starts Soon**
- **Municipal Fiber**
- **Potomac Yard Metro**
- **King Street Pedestrian Zone**
- **Plastic Bag Tax**
- **Next Campaign**



## Quick Links

[E-Mail Me](#)

[Past Newsletters](#)

[City of Alexandria Website](#)

[Pay City Taxes Online](#)

[Review Real Estate Assessments](#)

[Crime Mapping & Statistics](#)

[Alex 311](#) (Submit Service Requests to City Agencies)

[Board & Commission Vacancies](#)

[Real-Time Traffic Data](#)

In a few days, the City Council ends its summer recess and returns to a steady calendar of business. As the summer ends, we are straddling both a return to normalcy and the remaining chaos of the pandemic.

Next weekend, [the Old Town Festival of Speed and Style](#) will return to the streets of Old Town.

While we hope to continue efforts to bring our City back together, in-person, we have a bit more work to do to put the pandemic behind us.

[Alexandria Health Department](#)  
[Restaurant Inspections](#)  
[Report Potholes](#)  
[Schedule Child Safety Seat Inspection](#)  
[Smoke Detector Installation Request](#)  
[Real Estate Tax Receipt Calculator](#)  
[License Your Dog or Cat](#)  
[Report a Street Light Outage](#)  
[Report a Traffic Signal Outage](#)

**Last month, the City began administering [third doses of COVID-19 vaccines to residents who are moderately or severely immunocompromised.](#)**

**Later this month, [we expect that we will be able to administer third doses to all residents who have been fully vaccinated earlier in the year.](#)**

**As of yesterday, 101,951 Alexandrians have received at least one vaccine dose, which is 71.6% of the eligible population of those 12 and older.**

**[Of those, 88,353 Alexandrians are now fully vaccinated.](#)**

**While these are the official numbers from the Virginia Department of Health, they do not include Federal doses and out-of-state doses, which likely bring our numbers up further.**

**[ANYONE who is aged 12 or older is eligible to be vaccinated and we have a dose waiting for you.](#)**

**For those who have already been vaccinated, [you may now download your vaccination record from the Virginia Department of Health.](#)**

**After reaching the lowest transmission rates, hospitalization rates and deaths that we have seen, we are now unfortunately seeing an uptick in new COVID cases.**

**As a result, [the CDC has issued new guidance recommending masks be worn in indoor spaces in communities where transmission is high. That includes Alexandria.](#)**

**Notable, however, is that those new cases are not accompanied by new hospitalizations and deaths. The three vaccines work!**

**While there has been much attention paid to the purported prevalence of "breakthrough" cases, it is important to focus on the data.**

**[As of a week ago, a little over 4.7 million Virginians have been fully vaccinated](#)**

**against COVID-19. Of those, 0.2% have developed a breakthrough COVID-19 infection. 0.009% have been hospitalized and 0.0017% have lost their life due to COVID-19.**

**The ACT Now COVID-19 Response Fund was re-branded as the Alexandria Resilience Fund, which is distributing money into our community to support the many needs this crisis has created. Please join me in supporting this fundraising effort.**

**The latest updates will continue to be posted regularly on the City's Coronavirus website.**

**The Virginia Department of Health posts data daily online regarding positive tests, hospitalizations and deaths.**

**The Virginia Hospital & Healthcare Association is posting daily updates regarding hospital capacity and capabilities.**

**I continue my monthly Virtual Town Hall meetings on the first Thursday of each month.**

**You can watch last month's Town Hall online and please join me at this link this Thursday at 8 PM to watch and participate live.**

**Volunteers are needed throughout our community. Please refer to Volunteer Alexandria for opportunities to give back to those in need.**

**We are still actively recruiting volunteers to join our Alexandria Medical Reserve Corps. Medical Reserve Corps volunteers, both with and without medical training, have been critical to our efforts throughout this pandemic.**

**Contact me anytime. Let me know how I can help.**

## Initiatives and Updates

### The New DASH Launches This Weekend

This Sunday, September 5th, the new route structure for Alexandria's DASH bus system goes into effect. [Learn more about how your existing route will change and how you can get around our community in the future.](#) This is the most significant rethinking of our DASH route structure since 1984.

Prior to COVID, on an average weekday, about 14,500 people board Metrorail at one of our four stations (Braddock Road, King Street, Eisenhower Avenue and Van Dorn Street). It is certainly an important part of transportation in our City.

Yet our four Metrorail stations (soon to be five) serve only a small portion of our 15.5 square miles. On an average weekday, almost 24,000 people board a bus, either [DASH](#) or Metrobus.

The tool our City has used for decades to serve the transit needs of most of our neighborhoods has been the bus.

[The Alexandria Transit Vision Plan](#) is the City's effort to rethink our buses. At the end of 2019, [DASH approved this significant "re-imagination" of its route structure.](#)

The route structure approved has a short-term vision and a longer-term 2030 vision. This restructuring is designed to:

- Increase the number of Alexandrians near frequent transit (a bus or train arriving every 15 minutes or better) from 27% to 79%.
- Increase the number of jobs in Alexandria near frequent transit from 40% to 75%.
- Increase the number of jobs accessible by transit (within 45 minutes) to Alexandrians by 18%.
- Increase the number of residents in poverty near frequent transit from 29% to 89%.
- Increase the number of seniors near frequent transit from 23% to 74%.

[To coincide with the implementation of this new route structure, City Council unanimously approved my proposed for DASH to become the first transit system in the DC area to eliminate fares.](#) Free transit will expand ridership by an estimated 23%, bring riders back to transit following the pandemic, help achieve the City's environmental goals and [disproportionately benefit our lower-income residents.](#) With ridership depressed due to the pandemic, the initial cost to implement this change is dramatically reduced.

Earlier last year, DASH celebrated 35 years of serving Alexandria. What started with 17 buses and served less than a million passengers, today serves over 4 million passengers with 85 buses. While new

routes have been added, and existing routes tweaked at times, the basic construct of DASH's route network has largely been unchanged.

Communities around our nation have done the difficult work of rethinking their bus route networks to improve frequency of service, reduce route duplication, and ultimately serve more riders. [Houston's overnight route network transformation helped spur growth in ridership at a time when transit ridership was dropping elsewhere.](#)

Our effort is similar, designed to re-imagine our bus routes and ultimately increase ridership and route efficiency.

To provide a factual basis for this effort, [a "Transit Choices Report" was developed.](#) This report is a compendium of data on our existing transit network, designed to support this significant undertaking.

Throughout the two-year process, DASH incorporated public input to shape the final recommendations. Changes were made to accommodate concerns voiced about changes proposed to the existing AT-3, AT-4 and AT-2 routes.

While the largest implementation is this week, the planning effort informed the service enhancements that were made to the AT-1 and the AT-9 last year.

This is an important step forward as we create a transit system that serves more of our community with more efficient and relevant service.

## **Flooding in Alexandria**

During the early morning hours of August 15<sup>th</sup>, Alexandria residents throughout our community again experienced devastating flooding. It is heartbreaking to watch residents of our City suffer enormous financial loss, damage, risks to their health and intense anxiety.

The City recently installed new rain gauges and stream gauges. These devices are intended to give City residents and our staff real-time information about the intensity of these storm events. This new equipment showed that a gauge at George Mason Elementary School measured a total of 5.47 inches of rain, with a peak intensity at one point of 8.04 inches per hour!

This is now the fourth time in two years that the City has experienced a storm that FAR exceeded the design capacity of our storm sewers.

For over 3 decades, [Alexandria has designed and planned for our storm sewer system to withstand a](#)

**"10-year" storm event.** Said another way, a storm that is expected to have a 10% chance of happening every year, is the designed capacity of our system.

For Alexandria, a 10-year storm event constitutes one that will drop 2.28 inches of rain over a 60-minute period or 4.81 inches over a 24-hour period. This is a capacity that is at, and in many cases above, that of neighboring jurisdictions.

In the face of storms with an ever-growing intensity and frequency, this is just not sustainable.

Over the last several months, the City Council has worked to accelerate efforts to address chronic flooding issues, this time due to more frequent and more intense rain events. These storms are causing our residents and businesses to suffer significant financial loss due to damage from flooding and sanitary sewer backflow.

Addressing this challenge requires immediate and sustained action in the following areas:

- Infrastructure Investment and Maintenance
- Financial and Technical Assistance to Residents
- Development Policy Reform

Earlier this year, the City Council unanimously adopted an **an ordinance to double our Stormwater Utility Fee** to significantly increase the resources available for investments in our storm sewer infrastructure. This increase will cost a condo owner an additional \$39 annually, a townhouse owner an additional \$58, a small single-family homeowner an additional \$140 and a large single-family homeowner an additional \$233.

The Stormwater Utility Fee revenue, paid by all property owners in the City (including non-taxable properties), will allow for an acceleration of major capacity projects and "spot improvements," an increase in channel maintenance, new "state-of-good repair" investments, property owner grants and new staffing in support of these projects and the system.

**Recently enacted state legislation**, sponsored by Senator Adam Ebbin at the City's request, gives the City the flexibility to use these resources to address all of the challenges facing our residents.

This increase will bring in an additional \$8.5 million annually and **support a newly accelerated 10-year program of investments**. While these funds will **address many smaller "spot improvement" projects**, this funding will allow the City to undertake 11 of the top priority storm sewer capacity projects over the next decade:

- Commonwealth & Glebe: \$34 million

- Ashby & Glebe: \$16 million
- Hooffs Run Culvert Bypass: \$60 million
- Edison & Dale: \$13 million
- Dewitt Avenue: \$15 million
- East Mason Avenue: \$1 million
- Notabene & Old Dominion: \$4 million
- Mount Vernon, E. Glendale, E. Luray & E. Alexandria: \$10 million
- E. Monroe & Wayne: \$3 million
- Russell & W. Rosemont: \$6 million
- Russell & W. Rosemont (south): \$8 million

In addition to these locally-funded infrastructure initiatives, **[the City Council voted in July to allocate \\$5.8 million of our American Rescue Plan funding to address maintenance and investment in our Storm Sewers.](#)**

On Monday the City launched **[our new "Flood Mitigation Pilot Grant Program."](#)** This new program will provide matching reimbursement grants to property owners making flood resiliency improvements. This is one of the components of our comprehensive approach to addressing the flooding that has impacted our community for decades.

The newly constituted **[Ad Hoc Stormwater Utility and Flood Mitigation Advisory Group](#)** met last month and you **[can review the meeting online.](#)** This new committee will help advise the Council and our staff as we work to implement our flood mitigation plans.

In November, the City Council **[received the initial output from our recently-formed interdepartmental team](#)** working to address these challenges. You can **[watch the full worksession online.](#)**

Alexandria spends a significant amount of money on infrastructure designed to manage water. **[In May, the City Council approved a \\$2.6 billion, ten-year Capital Improvement Program.](#)** Of that, over \$320.5 million is to address stormwater and sanitary sewer infrastructure. **[Alexandria Renew Enterprises](#)**, the City's sewer authority, **[plans another \\$593 million of capital investments over the next decade](#)**, primarily the RiverRenew project to remediate the Combined Sewer (sanitary and stormwater) system that serves Old Town.

Together, nearly a billion dollars is planned for water investments. This spending dwarfs planned investments in schools, transportation and other major priorities. Only a decade ago, **[planned investments in water infrastructure were less than 10% of this total](#)**, but addressing these challenges will require a sustained increase in that investment level of a long period of time.



The investments required in our Sanitary Sewer system are funded by maintenance fees paid by existing customers (on the Alexandria Renew Enterprises bills) and by connection fees paid by developers. Last month, our staff released a draft update to our Sanitary Sewer Master Plan designed to guide new investments in this portion of our basic infrastructure.

In 2016, the City conducted a comprehensive Storm Sewer Capacity Analysis. This exhaustive study looked at each of the City's eight watersheds (Backlick Run, Cameron Run, Four Mile Run, Holmes Run, Hooff's Run, Holmes Run, Potomac River, Strawberry Run and Taylor Run) and identified problem areas where current capacity does not meet our 10-year storm design standard.

The study identified 90 separate deficiencies in the system, and estimated \$61 million of construction costs required to address those deficiencies (construction costs are approximately half of expected budget costs). Over half of these deficiencies are concentrated in the Hooff's Run and Four Mile Run watersheds. The reports of flooding from our residents during these most recent events align closely to these deficiencies. It is that study that has informed the list of priority capacity projects listed earlier.

From the maintenance perspective, it is also clear that we have work to do. The City recently completed a \$2 million effort to clear approximately 7,000 feet of the Hooff's Run Culvert. This 70+ year old urban culvert is designed to be "self-cleaning." After the July 2019 flooding event, the City commissioned a firm to do a robotic assessment of the condition of the culvert. That assessment showed an average of 5% obstruction across the culvert and some areas of 15-20% obstruction. The clearing of the culvert commenced last year and it does not appear to have been done before, certainly not in recent memory.

For development, whether large-scale, mixed-use development or a small residential addition, Alexandria's stringent stormwater requirements stipulate that conditions after development to be the same and oftentimes better than they were. As a consequence, the flooding we have experienced in the City is typically in established neighborhoods, areas of our City where we have not seen new development (aside from infill) in decades. Yet, there may be options to further strengthen these existing requirements. We have sought additional authority from the General Assembly for these expanded requirements.

A climate-resilient City requires investments and potentially new policies to ensure that residents of our



City do not suffer devastating damage with such frequency.

Putting in place the infrastructure that can support a changing climate will be a significant undertaking for our community. It will involve a large commitment of new resources and possibly private property impacts. I am pleased that the City has made these new investments. Now we must explore every option to accelerate this work.

## City Manager Hiring Process

In June [we learned that our City Manager, Mark Jinks, will be retiring at the end of the year.](#) We will have the opportunity later this year to properly recognize Mark's dedicated and impactful service to our City, but at the moment this leaves a significant task before the City Council. We must make the most important personnel decision in City government: selecting our Chief Executive Officer.

Two months ago, [the City Council formally launched a national search for our next City Manager](#) and we want your input in this process. [There is an online survey posted seeking feedback.](#) On Wednesday September 22<sup>nd</sup>, at 7 PM the City Council will hold a public hearing at Patrick Henry Recreation Center (4653 Taney Avenue) to collect public input on the upcoming hire. We'd love for you to join us either in-person or virtually that evening.

Our goal is to have a new City Manager selected later this year so that we may have an appropriate transition.

[If you know the right person to help lead our City government through the incredible opportunities and challenges that face our community, please encourage them to apply prior to the September 17th deadline.](#)

## Vaccine Mandate

Today, over 71% of residents of Alexandria eligible to be vaccinated against COVID-19, have received at least one shot. We suspect that number is even higher once gaps in the data is addressed.

Yet, we still have unvaccinated individuals in our community who are contracting the virus, transmitting it to others, becoming hospitalized and dying. It does not have to be this way. We have a safe and effective vaccine. It is now time for every eligible resident to receive this vaccine.

To ensure that the City and its workforce lead by example, [the City Manager and the Alexandria City](#)

**Public Schools Superintendent announced new vaccine mandates for employees of both organizations.**

It is my hope that private employers will follow suit and impose similar requirements to ensure that the resiliency within our community continues to strengthen.

## **Census**

Alexandria's population is 159,467. This is an increase of 13.9% from a decade ago. **That is the headline of the release of the 2020 Census data for our City.**

Beneath that top line number **lies a treasure trove of data, as our City has changed dramatically over the past decade.**

Our City has grown more diverse, with our white population falling below 50% for the first time ever. Our Hispanic or Latino population saw dramatic growth, rising over 30%.

The City's average household size grew slightly, to 2.11 persons per housing unit, while the number of housing units increased by 8,103.

While Alexandria's growth was nearly double the growth of the Commonwealth of Virginia, the growth around the region was much more varied. Loudoun County saw 34.8% growth over the decade, while Prince William saw 20% growth over the same time. Our neighbors in Arlington experienced nearly the same growth as Alexandria, with their population rising just about 15%.

Yet, Virginia's largest locality, Fairfax County, grew only 6.3% during this time.

The Census not only determines political representation, but also the distribution of billions of dollars of Federal and State funding. The City achieved an extremely high Census participation rate this year. Our 2020 Census Complete Count Committee was led by Councilman Canek Aguirre. His leadership, along with the hard work of the committee, community partners and staff, has led to this full enumeration.

## **Voting Starts This Month**

Early voting for our November election will begin this month.

On November 2<sup>nd</sup>, Alexandria voters will elect a Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, members of the Virginia House of Delegates, Alexandria Mayor, Alexandria Sheriff, Alexandria Commonwealth's

Attorney, all six members of the Alexandria City Council and all 9 members of the Alexandria City School Board.

On Tuesday November 2<sup>nd</sup>, all City polling places will be open from 6 AM until 7 PM for the General Election.

**[Sample ballots are now available for your review online.](#)**

Last year, Virginia introduced "no-excuse" early voting, so voters have three choices to vote this November:

1. **[You can request a ballot by mail online now.](#)** Ballots will be mailed out beginning on Friday September 17<sup>th</sup>. The ballot can be mailed back or dropped 24/7 at the drop-box located in front of 132 N. Royal Street.
2. **[You can vote in person at the Alexandria Registrar's Office, Monday - Friday from 8 AM until 5 PM.](#)** Saturdays and evenings, as well as alternate locations will begin in October.
3. You can vote in person **[at your precinct](#)** on the General Election day of November 2<sup>nd</sup>.

I'll see you at the polls!

## **Municipal Fiber**

Last week, City Council gathered on Eisenhower Avenue to have a **[formal groundbreaking for the build of our municipal fiber network.](#)**

Almost **[8 years ago, I proposed that the City develop a broadband plan to help bring true competition to Alexandria's broadband market.](#)**

It has taken far too long, but the City is finally moving ahead on an effort to bring new broadband capacity to our community.

**[In December, the City issued a revised solicitation to select a vendor to construct a municipal fiber network to serve City and School facilities around our community. A few months ago, a contract was awarded to Jones Utilities Construction, Inc to perform this work.](#)**

With a vendor selected, the City will soon work to solicit proposals from the private sector to use this new resource.

Over 6 years ago, the City issued a Request for Information (RFI). This RFI solicited concepts from the private sector for partnership with the City in expanding broadband options, availability, and capabilities. We received 10 responses from potential private partners

and those responses shaped the approach the City is now taking.

For years, Alexandria has sought new private investment in broadband infrastructure. For most of our residents, we have one company providing Internet connectivity and television. With new [Verizon FIOS deployment plans shelved](#) around the country and [Google Fiber largely dead](#), the investment in broadband infrastructure must fall to local governments. Regardless of the performance of incumbent providers, technological innovation and reliability thrives on competition.

This is an issue that impacts not only residents but also our businesses and the ability of our community to attract new investment.

Concurrent with the FY 2017 budget process, the City completed the [initial financial estimates for the first phase of the infrastructure build-out](#). The plan is designed to replace the City's existing connectivity agreement for City facilities with a City-owned fiber network.

By [leveraging E-Rate funding from the FCC](#), achieving operating savings from the costs of the existing agreement, and the potential for private leases of our infrastructure, the effort may be able to pay for itself.

In the fall of 2016, [the Council unanimously took the next step](#) in this important process, as we requested that the City Manager formally solicit for new providers to partner with the City.

One of the core components of the original proposal I made was that the City [adopt a "Dig Once" policy](#). Essentially that's a policy that makes the City more efficient by leveraging existing underground infrastructure work to add conduit and other infrastructure at the same time. With hundreds of millions of dollars of sewer and transportation work scheduled over the next decade, we should sequence and combine that work to be the most efficient.

This is an exciting project and one that gives the City the best chance to leverage its assets to bring new broadband services to our residents and businesses.

## Potomac Yard Metro Delays

[For a quarter of a century, the City has been working to bring an inline Metro Rail station to Potomac Yard. Just before the end of 2019, we broke ground and formally began construction of that station.](#)

The station had been scheduled to open in April of next year. Unfortunately, **WMATA announced an error that they believe will lead to a 5 month delay in the opening.** WMATA's contractors are now working to correct the specifications for the Automatic Train Control capabilities in our new station. During this time, our staff is working closely to ensure that every opportunity to accelerate this process is pursued.

There will be time to figure out what led to this error, but at the moment our focus is to work closely with WMATA and their contractor and finally get this station open!

**You can review an update of construction activities, including photos on the City's website.**

Given the history of this project, it seemed somewhat unsurprising that we would experience one final hurdle. On the front page of the **Final Environmental Impact Statement** for the Potomac Yard Metro Station are the seals of four entities: Federal Transit Administration, Department of the Interior, WMATA and the City of Alexandria. Later in the report there is additional input from the US Army Corps of Engineers, the US Environmental Protection Agency and the National Capital Planning Commission.

The breadth of the entities involved clearly demonstrates the complexity of the project. This project is deeply complex and has been challenging to bring to reality for decades.

One of the trade-offs associated with this project was the impacts of the construction efforts on wetlands adjacent to the construction site. **In May we learned that due to careful management of the construction project, the permitted wetland impacts have been able to be significantly reduced.** While the permit that the City sought allows temporary impacts of just over 2 acres of property, the City now believes that the temporary impact will only affect just over 1 acre. This is a significant accomplishment that further reduces the environmental impact of this important project.

**The Potomac Yard Metro project will facilitate the creation of up to 26,000 new jobs and will bring up to \$2 billion of new tax revenue to the City (over 30 years). It removes thousands of vehicles from one of the most crowded corridors in our City. It promotes the creation of the kind of walkable community our City has long desired in Potomac Yard.**

In 2008, along with then-Councilman Rob Krupicka, I proposed a new start to efforts to bring Metro to Potomac Yard. **We included language in the City's Transportation Master Plan** explicitly calling for a new

station at Potomac Yard. We also tied the construction and funding of Metro to the development occurring in the Yard.

The result is [a funding plan for Potomac Yard Metro](#) that not only leverages the development activity in Potomac Yard, but also does so without requiring the contributions of General Fund taxpayers.

The total project budget is \$370 million:

- \$200 million is being derived from tax revenues generated in Potomac Yard
- \$70 million is regional transportation revenues provided by the [Northern Virginia Transportation Authority](#)
- \$50 million is [financing from the Virginia Transportation Infrastructure Bank \(VTIB\)](#)
- \$30 million was provided by the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation to support the new southwest entrance
- \$20 million was provided as part of Federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement (CMAQ) to support the new southwest entrance

The largest environmental, [economic development](#), and transportation initiative in our City's history is being accomplished using [one of the most innovative funding mechanisms used anywhere in the country](#).

I am excited to see this project come to reality.

## King Street Pedestrian Zone

Fifteen years ago, [the City spent a summer experimenting with a closure of King Street to vehicles on weekends](#). By giving the road space over to pedestrians, the City attempted to replicate numerous cities around the world who have created new vitality from asphalt.

A little over two years ago, [Councilman John Chapman and I proposed](#) that the City prepare a new recommendation for a pedestrian zone in the unit, 100-block and potentially 200-block of King Street in Old Town. We suggested that with a newly expanded Waterfront Park, new public art, active programming and adjacent businesses, it was the ideal time to bring back this idea.

Our staff brought recommendations to the Alexandria Waterfront Commission and the Alexandria Transportation Commission for feedback and review.

As we neared a decision, the pandemic began and changed everything. Once the Commonwealth lifted the stay-at-home order and dining outdoors became possible, the closure of King Street not only became desirable, but it became essential to the survival of our businesses. It was quickly advanced as a pilot program.

The pedestrian zone on King Street became one of many adaptations the City implemented during COVID, including expanded outdoor dining, curbside loading zones, space for retail and recreation uses, and more.

As we near the moment when the pandemic will be behind us, the City is working to determine the future of these adaptations. Many of these changes have become very popular, with little of the negative impacts that were feared.

**To help inform future decisions, the City is conducting a survey on these changes and we would like your input.**

Many of these changes not only supported the commercial activity of our central business district, but also provided new vitality. Please share your opinion so the City Council can make an informed decision about the future of these changes

## Plastic Bags

During the 2020 Virginia General Assembly session, **Senator Adam Ebbin sponsored legislation that gave local governments to authority to enact a 5 cent tax on plastic bags.**

This legislation provided that local governments who imposed this form of taxation would be required to use the proceeds to fund environmental clean-up as well as the provision of reusable bags to lower-income residents.

Later this month, our staff will bring to the City Council a formal proposal to impose this new fee tax as a manner to both reduce the amount of plastic bags that are littered in our City as well as provide new revenue for environmental clean-up efforts.

As proposed, the tax would only apply to grocery stores, convenience stores and drug stores.

**Next Wednesday, September 8th, our staff will be hosting an information session to provide more information and receive feedback in advance of Council consideration.**

## New Campaign



I try to keep politics out of this monthly newsletter.



**In January, I did announce that I will be running for re-election as Mayor this year.**

**In June, I again received the Democratic nomination and I will be on the ballot for re-election this November.**

If you have not been receiving my campaign updates and you wish to receive information on this new campaign, **please drop my campaign a line** and we'll get you on the list for the campaign.

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