

The Council Connection

your connection to City Council by:

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Alexandria, Virginia

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Events/Updates

Windmill Hill Park Bulkhead Replacement

The first community meeting for the long-awaited replacement of the [Windmill Hill Park Bulkhead](#) will be on Monday January 12th at 6:30 PM.

2015 is already off to a great start, with First Night Alexandria offering a perfect way for residents and visitors alike to ring in the New Year.

As Council enters the third and final year of this term, I'm excited about the decisions before us. From budget to land-use to youth services, these next 12 months will allow the community to help set a course for decades to come.

2015 is also an election year for the Mayor and the six members of the City Council. There will be more than enough time over the next several months to talk with residents about that, but for now I simply wish you Happy New Year!

Please let me know how I can be of assistance. [Contact me anytime.](#)

 Council Portrait

Council Initiatives

Shaping the Future of the West

A year and a half ago, the City Council made the decision to proceed with [the Eisenhower West Small Area Planning process](#). [The plan area](#) is bounded by I-395 on the north, the City borders on the west and the south, and Holmes Run on the east.

The City's small area planning efforts are nothing new. Over the past decade, collaboration between the community and its policymakers has led to the adoption of new small area plans in nearly every corner of the City.

However, Eisenhower West is unique for other reasons. In many ways it was a "greenfield" from the planning perspective. It can be argued that there were less constraints, less preconceived notions, and less timing pressures on the plan adoption than the others that preceded it.

This meeting will be held in City Hall and will begin the process of shaping the goals, objectives and details of this important project.

TC Planetarium Shows

On January 27th, the TC Williams High School Planetarium continues its monthly evening shows.

The free shows are available for family members of all ages and are guaranteed to educate.

[Registration opens for the January show on Monday and be completed online](#) or by phone at 703-824-6805 (extension 6300).

Nominate Notable Trees

The City maintains a [Register of Notable Trees](#) to recognize trees within the City that are exceptionally large, exceptionally old, a unique species, or a historical significance.

If you know of a significant tree in our City, [take the time to complete a nomination form today](#).

Christmas Tree Recycling

[Starting Monday and continuing through January 16th, residents receiving City trash service may leave a Christmas tree out for recycling.](#)

The tree must be placed in your normal trash collection location on your regular collection day.

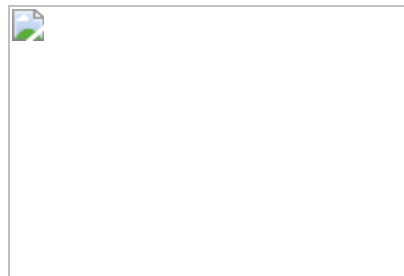
Remove all ornaments, tinsel and stands.

All trees will be ground into mulch and made available to residents in the spring.

eNews Re-Launched

[The City's eNews system was relaunched and is now available for new users to sign up.](#)

Since this summer, there have been a series of community meetings to shape the future vision of the plan area. Those exercises have now lead to four different high level visions for the area, each of which include site for a potential new school:



Option A (New Neighborhoods): This option focuses on the creation of new neighborhoods, and new retail.

Option B (Recreation and Natural Resources): This option includes new mixed-use development while creating new park land and open space.

Option C (Great Street): This option develops Eisenhower Avenue as a boulevard with mixed-use throughout. This also creates a new stormwater handling feature.

Option D (Incubator/Employment Center): This option attempts to preserve many of the industrial and warehouse uses in the plan area today, while focusing on the creation of new job centers.

Until January 18th, the City is actively soliciting your opinion on the different options. [Review the details of each option and offer your feedback using the AlexEngage system.](#)

The Steering Committee meets on Monday, January 26th at the Cameron Station Clubhouse (200 Cameron Station Blvd) at 7 PM.

The next community meeting is Monday, February 9th at Beatley Central Library (5005 Duke Street) at 7 PM.

Let There Be Light!

In November I wrote about the City's efforts to improve the reporting and availability of street lights.

We were successful in working with Dominion Virginia Power to [create a new web form to allow residents to report street light outages](#) without waiting on the phone.

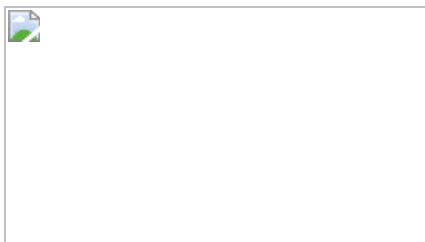
Additionally, in the adoption of the current year budget, the City Council chose to set aside money to perform two assessments of outages. These are to facilitate reporting to Dominion Virginia Power.

The City recently completed the first of those assessments and found 433 non-functioning streetlights around the City. Those outages have now been reported to Dominion Virginia Power for restoration.

Protecting Public Safety in Tough Budget Times

As years of constrained budgets have taken their toll, the City has been forced to look at areas of public safety for spending reductions.

Last year, one of the more controversial proposals in the City



Manager's proposed budget related to the shifting of staffing from one fire engine on the east end of the City to a newly opening one on the west end. While that proposal was not accepted by the Council, it is clear the City's revenue

The system provides regular e-mail updates on City events and occurrences across a variety of categories that you select.

Anyone who was previously registered on the old system is required to again sign up for the new system.

reality compels closer scrutiny of all areas of spending, including public safety.

In October, following the [arrival of our new Fire Chief](#), the [he and the City Manager came to the Council to present a package of reforms](#). These were designed to both improve the City's fire suppression and emergency medical services, as well as provide these services with greater efficiency.

The end result of this reconfiguration provides for a department that will have an additional staffed fire engine (giving us 9 total) and employ a minimum staffing of 4 firefighters for each fire engine and ladder truck. Our current staffing is three per apparatus, which is below the regional standard.

These changes are important as they will provide improved service to Alexandria's residents in need. For patients, their first contact with a medical provider will occur in less time.

The key component in implementing this vision is cross-training the City's 73 existing emergency medical providers to be firefighters as well. At the conclusion of the 2-3 year implementation process, the City will have a corps of dual role firefighter/medic providers that can staff fire apparatus or medic units throughout Alexandria.

While these changes have focused on the personnel side of how we provide fire suppression and emergency medical service, we have additional pressures on the infrastructure side of those services. The City's approved Capital Improvement Program includes \$47 million to repair and rebuild four of our fire stations.

Additionally, the City has \$11 million in required developer contributions coming over the next several years to build the new Fire Station 211 on the west end.

Last year's budget process showed the need for obtaining reliable and consistent data around emergency response. With that in mind, the City will be kicking off a new station location study, led by the City's Office of Performance Accountability.

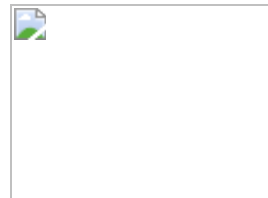
This study, along with other reform efforts will improve the delivery of these life-saving services in an efficient manner.

New Waterfront Parks and Flood Mitigation

In June, City Council approved the [Phase I Landscape and Flood Mitigation Plan](#) for our Old Town waterfront. The Olin Group concept, inspired by the approved Waterfront Plan and improved by the input of many residents, brings to life the vision of a more active and sustainable waterfront.

In approving the concept, the Council asked our staff to return with an implementation schedule and funding plan.

Last month a public meeting was held to [present the implementation schedule and funding options](#) to the community and the City's Waterfront and Parks and Recreation Commissions.



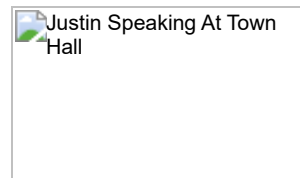
These are not insignificant expenses and will take many years to achieve, but if implemented, will provide our residents and visitors with the type of accessible, sustainable, and active waterfront that has inspired the planning process from the beginning.

The schedule and funding options will go to both commissions formally this month and come to the Council at our second legislative meeting.

[Let me know your thoughts!](#)

Host a Town Hall in Your Living Room!

My regular series of Town Hall Meetings continue!



You supply the living room and a bunch of your friends and neighbors. I will supply a member of the Alexandria City Council (me) with the answers to any of your questions about our City.

Just [drop us a line](#) and we'll get a Town Hall on the calendar! Thanks for the interest!

Upcoming Issues

More Debt?

The City Council is on the verge of making some of the most significant decisions of this Council term.

In November the City's [AAA/Aaa bond rating was reaffirmed](#) by both Moody's and Standard & Poor's. The City has held these ratings for 22 years, and it might be easy to dismiss this as business as usual.

[As our neighbors in Fairfax County may teeter on the edge of a downgrade](#), we should never take for granted the fiscal stewardship required to maintain these ratings. These high ratings allow the City to borrow at rates lower than most jurisdictions in the country. Last month, the City did just that, [issuing \\$36 million of new General Obligation bonds](#) at one of the lowest rates in modern history. This saves millions for the taxpayers of tomorrow in the cost to service that debt.

Last year, the Council adopted our [10 year Capital Improvement Program](#), covering fiscal years 2015 - 2024. Over the 10 year period, the program calls for \$1.459 billion in capital investment throughout the City. Fully 60% of those funds go to new investments in transportation and education infrastructure.

Our capital budget is funded primarily through a mix of debt and current year funding, also known as "cash capital." If you think of your home mortgage, the cash capital is the down payment. We also pay interest each year on the debt that was issued in previous years.

Alexandria is very conservative with our use of debt.

For example, Arlington County limits its debt to 4% of its Fair Market Real Property Value. Both Fairfax and Prince William Counties limit their debt to 3%. Alexandria's self-imposed limit is 1.6%, and this budget year we achieved 1.45%.

The median for other similarly rated and sized jurisdictions is 2.42%.

Last year in the [budget guidance](#) the Council asked the City Manager to present a budget that preserved the current cash funding level for our Capital Improvement Program. Said another way, we refused to take the easy alternative of simply increasing debt to make it through a difficult budget.

In the current fiscal year, the City is spending \$18 million of current year tax dollars towards our capital budget. We are then borrowing another \$30.9 million.

During the low points of the recession, it was a far different picture. In 2010, we spent \$4.4 million of then current year dollars towards the capital budget. We then borrowed \$54 million. The year before, in 2009, we spent \$2.1 million and then borrowed \$47 million.

That brings us to the important decision that is now before us. The combination of the interest we pay on the debt and the cash capital contribution to our capital budget is increasing. It is crowding out spending in our operating budget. This year 12.6% of our tax dollars went to this combination. It will rise to nearly 14% over the next 5 years.

We are already facing a gap in next year's budget due to stagnant revenue growth. The City staff has proposed capping the impact of our capital budget on our operating budget at 12%. In other words, they have proposed allowing debt to increase slightly (but remaining under our existing self-imposed constraints) to free up money for our operating budget.

This proposal was presented last month and the Council had a [significant discussion on this proposal that you can watch online](#).

In the end, as I stated that evening, I have discomfort at increasing our debt level, despite our capacity to pay. If we were to do so, I would want to see the City make a commitment to a minimum annual cash contribution to our capital budget.

I continue to believe our City under invests in our basic infrastructure. Whether we fund it with debt or cash, I will continue to push to increase that commitment to our infrastructure, not decrease it. If we are to increase our debt, I would like to see a portion of that debt increase go instead toward paring down our list of deferred capital projects.

I will always believe that to be a better investment for the City in the long run.

Who Will Stop The Rain?

Early in this Council term, the members grappled with the challenges that the City faced from Federal environmental regulations that govern how we handle sewage from homes and businesses. Those efforts culminated in the adoption of the [City's Sanitary Sewer Master Plan](#).

Our federal environmental obligations do not end with waste water. The City also has significant obligations to protect waterways from polluted storm water. The [City's MS4 Permit](#) spells out specific pollutant reductions that the City must meet over a 15 year time period.

There are [a variety of ways the City can meet these obligations](#).



Redevelopment can help, in that it can convert impervious surfaces into areas that can handle stormwater. For example, [a residential project in the Eisenhower Valley](#) that was approved by Council in 2013 will create a new pond. That pond alone will account for half of our stormwater obligations until 2018.

In the end, meeting these obligations will be expensive. Current estimates have the costs at \$65 - \$100 million dollars over the next 15 years.

[In 2008, the City Council appointed a citizen group to review the costs and funding mechanisms available to address the City's](#)

[responsibilities](#). In the spring of 2010, the City's previous Manager proposed the creation of Stormwater Utility Fee to fund these obligations.

As proposed in 2010, the fee would apply to all property owners (regardless of their taxable status) and be assessed based on the impervious surfaces on their property. Essentially the fee would be structured to be a user fee for the City's stormwater handling.

In adopting the budget in 2010, the Council instead chose to simply raise the real estate tax, and dedicate a portion (a half cent) of the rate to stormwater projects. Essentially, the decision was to fund stormwater management based on the value of properties rather than the amount of stormwater runoff they create.

That funding has proven insufficient to cover the City's obligations. The current budget spends an additional 0.7 cents beyond the dedication, for a total of 1.2 cents on the City's current real estate tax rate.

The question now before the Council is whether to again explore the creation of a Stormwater Utility Fee, and reduce the real estate rate accordingly. Alternatively, the Council could increase the real estate tax dedication to continue funding these costs using that mechanism.

There are pluses and minuses of both approaches.

With the current real estate tax funding approach, 50% of the costs are today paid by single family residential tax payers, 15% by multi-family residential taxpayers, and 35% by commercial tax payers.

Given it is a component of the real estate tax, it is also tax deductible on federal and state income taxes.

It is also much simpler and easier for taxpayers to understand.

If the City were to create a Stormwater Utility Fee, that cost burden would shift. In that scenario, single family residential taxpayers would pay 23% of the costs, multi-family residential taxpayers would pay 25%, commercial tax payers would pay 42%, and most significantly, tax-exempt property owners (schools, non-profit, hospital and churches) would now pay 10%.

The fee would be assessed on the impact the property has on stormwater runoff in the City, as opposed to simply the valuation of the property.

For many property owners, this will reduce their cost.

At a work session last month, the Council directed our Staff to continue exploring the creation of a Stormwater Utility Fee. There is still much work to be done to determine if this is right for Alexandria, but it does hold promise.

[Let me know your thoughts](#) on the different options.

New Leadership For the City

The City Council has three employees that work directly for the Council: the City Manager, the City Clerk and the City Attorney. All City government agencies fall under these three leaders, with most of the departments under the City Manager.

One of the things that attracts applicants for these positions is the opportunity to be in the DC Metro area, with all of the visibility that entails. One of the downsides to this visibility is that other entities frequently recruit from our ranks.

One former City Manager (and City Attorney prior to that) is currently the [Vice President and General Counsel of the Metropolitan](#)

[Washington Airports Authority](#). One former City Manager is currently the [County Manager of the second largest county in North Carolina](#).

Just after Thanksgiving, [Mayor-Elect Muriel Bowser announced that Alexandria's City Manager Rashad Young will be the new City Administrator for the District of Columbia](#).

While it is difficult to lose a successful City Manager after only 3 years, [I understand the unique opportunity that this offer presented](#). I believe that Rashad leaves an important series of accomplishments that we can build on for the future here in Alexandria.

The Council unanimously [appointed Deputy City Manager Mark Jinks as the Acting City Manager effective today](#). I have every confidence that Mark can continue moving our City forward during this time. He is deeply experienced and knowledgeable. He has been involved in the City's most strategic initiatives for many years.

The Council will make announcements shortly about the process to choose the next permanent City Manager.

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