

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: MAY 9, 2023

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL
THE HONORABLE MEAGAN ALDERTON, CHAIR, AND MEMBERS OF THE
ALEXANDRIA CITY SCHOOL BOARD

CC: DR. MELANIE KAY-WYATT, SUPERINTENDENT ACPS
JIM PARAJON, CITY MANAGER

FROM: BUDGET AND FISCAL AFFAIRS ADVISORY COMMITTEE (BFAAC)
SCHOOL BOARD BUDGET ADVISORY COMMITTEE (BAC)

SUBJECT: JOINT BUDGET AND FISCAL AFFAIRS ADVISORY COMMITTEE AND
SCHOOL BOARD BUDGET ADVISORY COMMITTEE STATUS REPORT ON
AD-HOC JOINT CITY & SCHOOLS FACILITIES INVESTMENT TASK FORCE
RECOMMENDATIONS

The Budget and Fiscal Affairs Advisory Committee (BFAAC) and School Board's Budget Advisory Committee (BAC) appreciate the opportunity to submit our fifth joint memo to Alexandria's elected leaders. Significant progress has been made fulfilling the recommendations of the [Joint Task Force](#), which BFAAC was charged with monitoring. Examples include "behind the scenes" efforts through the Joint Facilities Management Council; adjustments to the budget calendar; and the daily communication between staffs to improve efficiencies. More visible results to be applauded include the swift re-purposing of Ferdinand T. Day; a new community pool planned for the high school's Minnie Howard campus; and use of schools buildings and personnel, as well as expertise from every agency, in the City's response to Covid.

Our [February 2022 joint memo](#) called on elected leaders (electeds) to assume joint responsibility for revenue needed to meet budget goals for City and schools collectively. In order to accomplish this, we suggest the need to shift the dialogue from process to outcomes. The Joint Task Force called for a "unified and distilled vision for Alexandria's future" to both "guide and empower staff" and to "allow civic engagement among a public that can become well informed champions of city-wide issues, while providing input on specific projects." Shared vision is critical to support and validate future spending, and to maximize efficiencies. Collected revenue is not designated, and it is critical that our residents, employees and business partners understand the outcomes that drive allocations, and even more importantly to have full faith in the commitment of its elected leaders to support Alexandria as an interconnected community.

To achieve this, ***we recommend that Council and School Board convene each year outside the budget process, beginning this summer with a facilitated session.*** There remains a need for both

elected bodies to better understand, respect, and embrace each other's perspectives and concerns, and to operate with more transparency, collaboration, and efficiency. Alexandria needs to move beyond the concept that City and ACPS are in competition. We recommend the following outcomes for a **Joint Leadership Summit - Summer 2023**:

- Identify A Shared Community Vision
- Establish Parameters for Engagement between School Board and Council
- Identify Outcome-Driven Priorities and Shared Next Steps
- Identify Collaborative Opportunities
- Empower Staff to Deliver Outcomes
- Assume Joint Responsibility for Financial Planning

In addition to attending multiple Council and School Board meetings, BFAAC and BAC members have met over the past several months with members of our respective committees, members of City and ACPS staff, and elected leaders to inform our recommendations. We strongly believe that Alexandria is at a critical juncture with modernization and capacity needs across the City that must be balanced in terms of timing, funding and execution. At the same time, we are concerned that the stress facing these challenges while emerging from the pandemic is at times undermining dialogue. Below are some considerations to support each suggested outcome.

Identify A Shared Community Vision

The culture of Council and School Board, and the nature of discourse both on and off the dais, set the tone for our community and impacts its trust in our leaders' ability to advance critical issues. A shared community vision will be a powerful tool to guide deliberations among electeds, staff and members of our community. A shared vision might include:

- Values we model and want reflected in our approach to delivering services.
- Emphasis on equity of access and opportunity in a diverse, vibrant community.
- Commitment to establishing a joint culture of transparent communication promoting respectful community engagement.

Establish Parameters for Engagement between School Board and Council

Independently elected bodies – Council and School Board – delineate core competencies but should not create an obstacle for efficiency. Collegial engagement around the unified Vision will enhance confidence among citizens and employees and illustrate the possibilities when government is not divided and can be achieved by focusing on the following areas:

- Openly and honestly address and define roles and responsibilities of each elected body as it relates to areas of joint work and planning so that expectations are clear.
- Remove the word “sides” from the lexicon.
- Recognize and support staff working every day to improve and align processes.
- Identify differences in approaches and calendars and their impact on joint efforts/discussions.
- Coordinate budget guidance annually for operating and capital budgets.
- Better utilize existing structures, including City/Schools Subcommittee and other joint meetings, by planning purposeful meetings with agendas focused on fidelity to shared

Vision and priorities and defined outcomes established during summer visioning; agendas should delineate the fundamental questions and key decisions electeds need to discuss and resolve during the meeting to move joint work forward.

- Improve ongoing horizontal communication after sub-group meetings, and among elected leaders in-between meetings to avoid surprises and ensure that electeds have background information on core activities that inform or drive joint decisions.
- Continuously refer to guidance of [Joint Task Force and Long Range Educational Facilities Plan](#).

Identify Outcome-Driven Priorities and Shared Next Steps

One could argue that all major priorities should be shared – *both School Board and Council are elected by the same people*. For example, class size and school staff compensation might be seen as a “schools concern,” but how we balance our growing capacity needs and attract employees is part of defining our community’s culture. Similarly, City housing policy impacts enrollment and affordability for all residents and employees. In order to be more outcome-driven, electeds should work to develop a set of shared next steps that are consistent with the work defined above so that staff is guided for execution. Outcomes should be **Specific – Measurable – Achievable – Realistic – Timely**. Some considerations include:

- Shared priorities should reflect looming pressure points – and outcomes match with priorities
- Every segment of City government should be at the policy table for discussions around zoning for housing initiative and neighborhood plans – with schools recognized and utilized as neighborhood hubs
- Recognize the role of public education in a strong community, and the status of students as stakeholders.
- Remember what we learned during the pandemic about underserved in our community and utilize all sources to increase and target service accessibility

Identify Collaborative Opportunities

Recognize progress already made, and encourage growth in those areas, especially around services for at risk individuals and families. Staff is looking to electeds to define the next areas and to identify where we can remove obstacles to maximizing core competencies and free up resources by increasing efficiencies and eliminating unnecessary duplication. Suggestions include:

- Transportation
- Legal
- Office space
- Back office functions (e.g., procurement).
- Project management systems and processes.
- Collective Bargaining – this might be our big case study and stakes are high.
- Identify options that are “off the table” (at least for now) to avoid stress.

Empower Staff to Deliver Outcomes

Create an environment where staff are valued for expertise and can offer opinion freely on how to achieve broad goals in “real time,” recognizing that the culture created by electeds will be mirrored

by staff – and significantly impact their feelings of agency. New opportunities or challenges should be fully and freely discussed and vetted by City and school staff together before reaching the policy level.

- Include staff from all segments in discussions around service delivery and efficiency and empower them to promote cross-functional abilities and needs.
- Ask staff what decisions they need electeds to make in order to move their work forward (e.g., middle school vision; living wage and other compensation issues).
- More policy guidance is needed on methodology in project planning and monitoring expectations on timing and completion of projects.
- More policy guidance is needed on the purpose and use of contingency accounts.
- Leverage and share outside resources including lobbying, legal, and cost estimating expertise to enhance the abilities of all staff and better coordinate efforts.

Assume Joint Responsibility for Financial Planning

A rigorous capital plan is in place, arguably adding to stress in interactions among both electeds and staff. Joint ownership of revenue and spending goals is critical to gaining confidence and support among all stakeholders. Consider constraints on bond indebtedness; cash capital contribution levels; capital project appropriation/cash flow methodology; and staff capacity to manage projects.

- Set clear expectations for CIP development, to include budget constraints, and establish transparent and immediate communication channels to discuss potential deviations from the 10-year plan.
- Regularly revisit slated projects to ensure they remain necessary and properly prioritized and to seek new efficiencies.
- Engage the community in a continuous dialogue about the broad impact of funding capital projects – be specific about spending allocations in out years and engage community stakeholders to strategically support revenue needs.
- Affordability must be a year-round topic when discussing every project or operating line item in terms understood by the community, identifying impact on revenue streams, tax rate and other priorities, especially when considering new or expanded capital investments. Also include an assessment of whether we can afford *not* to pursue certain projects (i.e., cost of deferring/delaying).
- Strategically leverage new opportunities with current partners and potential future alternative revenue sources to fund joint priorities (P3 staff City and schools must work together to achieve this).

The **Joint Leadership Summit** is a critical next step toward the “Targeted New Reality” defined by the Joint Task Force. We urge Council and School Board to ***establish a common path that you can follow collectively and independently***. The above recommendations are made with full knowledge that questions will not be answered in one day, but in hope that by establishing a unified vision and embracing shared priorities electeds will be better positioned to guide staff through the changes and challenges ahead.