



May 29, 2024

The Hon. Libby Garvey
Chair, Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22201

Mark Schwartz
Arlington County Manager
2100 Clarendon Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: Stop and Rethink the Taking of 1802 Columbia Pike

Dear Chair Garvey and Mr. Schwartz,

NAACP Arlington Branch (the “NAACP”) demands that Arlington County immediately stop all efforts to take an elderly and disabled Black woman’s long-time family home at 1802 Columbia Pike. We further urge the County to consider alternative designs for streetscape improvements that would not require taking the home but would still accomplish the County’s safety goals.

The house at 1802 Columbia Pike was built 1929, decades after the closure of Freedman’s Village forced Black residents to relocate to other areas of Arlington. One of those areas was Johnson’s Hill, now known as Arlington View, an historically Black neighborhood that includes 1802 Columbia Pike. The property is owned by Karen Newman, a Black resident of Arlington who grew up in the house and inherited it when her parents died. Ms. Newman’s cousin, Sandra Fortson, has become her conservator, working diligently to renovate the home and make it available to Black households in the future.


On March 16, 2024, the County Board voted to authorize the County Manager to offer to purchase 1802 Columbia Pike and, if the offer is rejected, to take the property by eminent domain. The authorization came at the recommendation of the Department of Environmental Services (“DES”), which proposes bulldozing the house and paving over much of the property in order to reconfigure the intersection of Columbia Pike and South Rolfe Street. This latest proposed reconfiguration has, to our knowledge, not been approved by the Board. In fact, the reconfiguration that the Board did approve in late 2022 would not require taking the property. Worse still, the offer price was merely \$627,000, an insultingly low sum that is barely over half of the average assessed value for single-detached houses in Arlington. The Board relied on a

low-ball appraiser's figure despite the Board's acknowledgement of "appraisal bias," which unfairly disadvantages Black homeowners in predominantly Black neighborhoods.¹

The County cannot claim to be fighting the monster of systemic racism while continuing to feed it. At the March 16 meeting, Chair Garvey stated that she had been "thinking about systemic racism" and acknowledged that Johnson's Hill was founded after Black residents of Freedman's Village were forced to leave their homes. But Chair Garvey and her colleagues voted to authorize taking the property anyway, framing the question as a choice between "two injustices" and insisting that a taking was necessary to improve safety at the intersection where the property sits. This is a false choice. By DES' own admission, the original proposed reconfiguration of the intersection, as approved by the Board less than two years ago, would "make it easier and safer for drivers" while allowing the County to "reinstate a crosswalk."² While it might result in longer waits for drivers and pedestrians than the current proposal, the County has not adequately explained how the two designs would differ in terms of safety. Nor has DES proposed any compromise designs that could create a consolidated intersection like the current proposal, but with only an easement or partial taking that allows the house to remain standing.

Taking the home of anyone against their will—not least a home in an historically Black neighborhood, owned by generations of a Black family for almost a hundred years—should never be anything more than a last resort. There are other options for accomplishing the County's safety goals that the County has not explored or exhausted. We therefore demand that the County put an end to their attempt to take the home at 1802 Columbia Pike. Instead, the County Manager instruct DES to propose alternative designs for the intersection of Columbia Pike and South Rolfe Street that would not require taking the full property and destroying a home that has been held in Black hands for almost a century.

Sincerely,



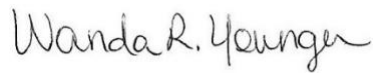
Michael Hemminger
President, NAACP Arlington Branch

¹ Metropolitan Washington Regional Fair Housing Plan, Arlington County (July 2023), *available at* <https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/housing/documents/approved-arlington-county-regional-fair-housing-plan-may-2023.pdf>. At the March 16 meeting, staff stated that the tax assessed value of the property exceeded the appraised value as determined by appraisers engaged by the County. If the opposite had been true, and the appraised value exceeded the tax assessed value, then state law would have required the County to offer the higher amount. *See* Va. Code § 25.1-417.

² Arlington County Department of Environmental Services, *1802 Columbia Pike at 3* (Mar. 16, 2024), *available at* <https://meetings.arlingtonva.us/CountyBoard/Documents/ViewDocument/2%20-%20Item%20Attachment%20-%20STAFF%20PRESENTATION%20-%2026685817.pdf>.



J. Wells Harrell
Chair, Housing Committee



Wanda Younger
Branch Secretary

cc: Members of the County Board
Greg Emanuel, Director, DES
Samia Byrd, Director, CPHD
Anthony Fusarelli, Jr., CPHD Planning Director
Anne Venezia, CPHD Housing Director
Sara Steinberger, Chair, Planning Commission
Kellen M. MacBeth, Chair, Housing Commission
NAACP Arlington Branch Executive Committee & Members