



## AURORA HIGHLANDS CIVIC ASSOCIATION

October 2, 2023

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

RE: Crystal House 6 – A minor site plan amendment with a major missed opportunity for effective engagement

Dear Mr. Schwartz,

As the President of the Aurora Highlands Civic Association, I am writing to you today about our concerns with the Crystal House 6 approval process and with our strong recommendation that the County provide mini-SPRC processes to review the rest of the Crystal House projects when these plans are ready for review.

We welcome the much needed, and rarely available, affordable senior housing that Crystal House 6 project offers. We understand the Staff's position that the Crystal House 6 project technically meets the County's zoning requirements for a "minor site plan amendment" and therefore does not need to go through the typical and often lengthy site plan approval process.

But times have changed: The approved site plan for the Crystal House megablock was approved in December 2019, almost 4 years ago. Since the 2019 approval: Amazon HQ2 has arrived – with thousands of new employees and fabulous new buildings and parks in Met Park– just a megablock north of Crystal House; COVID-19 arrived and is still here; our world has changed and our community has changed with it; and the Crystal House 6 project has changed in many significant ways that are not measured by the zoning criteria for a minor site plan amendment.

Some examples, such as the need for PUDO parking (especially for seniors with potentially limited mobility), e-vehicle and e-bike charging stations, the availability of electric adult tricycles, work-from-home space, reimagining underused office space, the ubiquity of smartphones and their ever growing applications, did not exist in 2019 – so plans approved in 2019 and before did not need to address them. The car was still king, and including an overstock of parking spaces was still common. No one thought that all appliances needed to be electric, roofs needed to be green or solar or both, and alternatives to driving needed to be encouraged to combat the growing climate catastrophe. Income disparities grew, and our local population of unhoused and underserved citizens in need of affordable housing and other support services is growing. People are living longer, but with increasing disabilities and concomitant needs that require specific attention for their safety, comfort, and well-being. Our neighborhood population keeps growing, density is growing, and local traffic seems more congested than ever. We need to find creative ways to live together and thrive together. Comprehensive, inclusive, and coordinated site planning is more essential than ever! Unfortunately that has not been the case with the Crystal House 6 effort.

The lack of a more formal plan review meant that the relevant constituents did not get the opportunity to work together to improve the project. Therefore, on July 13, AHCA wrote to Ms. Martin to encourage the

County and applicant to at least provide a mini-SPRC process that would bring all relevant parties to the table to share ideas in a transparent and public process, sponsored by the County, recorded by the County, and posted to the County's project website. The proposed changes to the form and function of the approved site plan were numerous, including a change in density from 63 to 80 units, a shift to affordable senior housing, changes to building entry points, a reduction in parking spaces from 63 to 37 (with only two visitor spots), a revision in façade material to "materials consistent with other publicly financed affordable housing projects in Arlington," a shift from LEED certification to Earthcraft certification, and updates to PUDO arrangements. Instead, the applicant held a series of unrelated, uncoordinated, usually unrecorded, not open to the general public, and unpublicized meetings that were an inefficient use of time, people, and money. These meetings were opaque, uncoordinated, and did not have everyone at the table who needed to participate. We can do better.

We appreciate that the County finally offered one, one-hour meeting on September 27 that was open to the public, was recorded, and then posted to the project web site. But it was far too little and too late in the approval process. Although it included relevant County and developer staff, specific relevant Commissions were not directly invited, such as the Commission on Aging, Disability Advisory Commission, Housing Commission, Transportation Commission, Planning Commission, and Climate Change, Energy, and Environment Commission. We missed their expertise and input and the opportunity for a more synergistic discussion of topics and more holistic review of the overall Crystal House megablock, especially for open space and transportation issues. Without their expertise and with such limited time, we were not able to address many issues adequately, such as the energy sustainability of the building and individual apartments and if the apartments, building, garage and street parking adequately meet the universal design requirements of aging residents with disabilities. Support for visitor and resident bikes and micromobiles and the safety and adequacy of PUDO plans and private street routes, and the overall revised building design could not be discussed fully and productively without the expertise of relevant Commission members. It is thanks to that collegial give and take that good project proposals become excellent projects in execution.

We have participated in several mini-SPRCs for minor site plans in 22202 before, especially for Century Center and Century Center Residential. Through the mini-SPRC process, we made significant improvements to both projects while addressing the concerns of the community and Commission members who participated. We were able to extend protected bike lanes around the corner, ensure safe and adequate pedestrian access throughout both sites, and help redesign an improved landscaped area with seating at the corner.

In conclusion, we strongly recommend that the County arrange for mini-SPRC processes as plans for the rest of the redevelopment of Crystal House move forward. Holding a mini-SPRC process for Crystal House 3 will be especially important as it is a huge building at a critical corner of the megablock with major, still unresolved pedestrian access issues and tremendous loss of tree canopy. Bringing all the relevant groups to the table for a coordinated discussion and resolution is essential to create the best possible design to meet the needs of future residents and the community.

Sincerely,



Cory Jacobson Giacobbe  
President, Aurora Highlands Civic Association

Attachment: July 13, 2023 Letter to Emma Martin, CPHD

CC: Emma Martin, CPHD  
Matt Mattauszek, CPHD  
Danny Ross, APAH  
Assistant County Manager Bryna Helfer  
Director of Public Engagement Sarah Tracey  
County Board