

## Our View

# Going with the flow will not fix flooding

By now most Alexandria residents have seen the photos: cars with water halfway up the sides, murky floodwater leaving stains and bacteria across swaths of the city, basements with two feet of water.

One resident said he saw what looked like raw sewage spraying up from manhole covers during last week's "100-year" flood event, like a geyser in a national park – except this was dangerous filth being spewed instead of pure underground springwater.

Whereas flooding in Alexandria used to be mostly limited to streets near the waterfront in Old Town, in the past couple of years it's become a city-wide occurrence.

Roadways are as likely to be flooded in parts of Del Ray and Parkfairfax as in Old Town, and basements in Rosemont and Seminary Ridge are taking repeated hits. Water rescues are now more common from cars on city streets than in the Potomac River.

Few things are more demoralizing than dealing with repeated water damage in one's home, and residents are rightly upset. And yet, while this is not what those with soaking wet basements want to hear, patience is also needed.

There is wisdom in many old sayings, and the "Serenity Prayer" by American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr is one of those: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

Taking these one at a time, there are facets of this flooding that are beyond anyone's control and fall in the "things I cannot change" category.

Global warming is almost certainly behind disruptive weather patterns that are dumping unusually large amounts of rain on this region in exceptionally short periods of time. It's as if the whole D.C. Metro region is periodically being plopped down in the Caribbean and pounded with rainfall usually seen on tropical islands or in lush rainforests.

It's weird. And yes, we as a city must react and adapt, but this is impossible overnight or even quickly.

What can we change about this situation?

Our city leaders are cognizant that this is urgent and, to their credit, are pursuing several productive avenues simultaneously. First, per city enews bulletins, they're sending out crews to check culverts, clean up debris and assess drain openings. Flooding was discussed at last Saturday's City Council public hearing, and a special session with public input is scheduled for Sept. 22. Council and city staff are apparently looking for ways to expedite the existing sewer remediation plans and to speed up scheduled cleaning of the city's sewers.

In addition, a recalibrating of what constitutes a "100-year flood" is also apparently underway, a needed change as it's ludicrous to keep referring to the new normal of deluge-type rain events as if they're rare or unexpected.

These are needed and appreciated steps. However, they fall in the category of necessary but not sufficient actions. They are more than band aids but fall well short of what's needed.

Rather than simply discuss short-term remediation steps that are being taken, the larger issue – the proverbial elephant in the room – simply must be tackled as well: the impact the city's aggressive pursuit of densification is having on flooding.

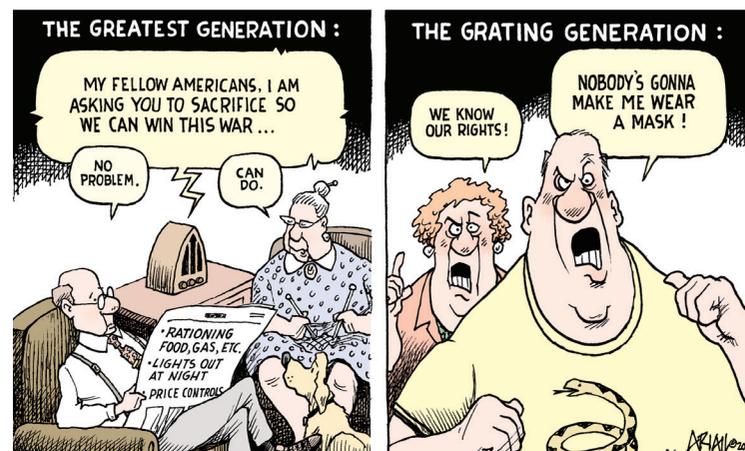
There are two distinct but related facets to this problem. The first is continued destruction of Alexandria's extremely limited open space, mature trees and wetlands. Our continued chipping away at our city's natural environment is leaving nature unable to absorb unexpected rainfall.

The second facet is continued shoehorning of oversized housing projects throughout the city. The notion that because developments must come with a stormwater management plan means there won't be ill effects defies logic.

# Opinion

"Where the press is free and every man is able to read, all is safe."

- Thomas Jefferson



## Your Views

### In defense of Alexandria's police

To the editor:

Over the last few months, the role of law enforcement within the community has become a frequent topic of discussion. The death of George Floyd during an encounter with the Minneapolis Police Department, and several subsequent high-profile incidents, have created public scrutiny of law enforcement as a whole and a re-evaluation of the profession, including the duties and responsibilities of our law enforcement officers and the standards and practices of the agencies that employ them.

Immediately following the Floyd incident, the Alexandria City Council voted to create a community police review board, much to the surprise of the hundreds of Alexandria police officers. Such a board is typically created after a police department suffers from questionable uses of force, an increase in crime or officer complaints or a lack of accountability or transparency in dealing with the public.

The Alexandria Police Department has long been a beacon of honor, respect and accountability to the residents and visitors of the city. It is vital that Alexandria residents and council members have a thorough understanding of the high-quality

work that the men and women of the police department provide daily so they may make an informed decision on the scope of the proposed board.

We invite City Council to attend the police citizens' academy and participate in the department's ride-along program to gain firsthand insight into this unique profession. This significant decision should be based solely on facts and be absent of emotional influence of outside events or prejudice toward the profession of law enforcement itself.

In calendar year 2019, Alexandria Police Officers responded to 80,928 calls for service and arrested 4,316 subjects, just 28 of which required some level of force. That means just .0003% of the calls for service resulted in a use of force. After each use of force incident, the department's Office of Professional Responsibility, an internal police unit staffed by veteran investigative supervisors, completes an investigation to determine if the force was justified.

Each of the 28 incidents in 2019 was deemed appropriate. More information about these incidents are available on the police department's website and are shared

SEE POLICE

| 23

The opinions expressed in letters and columns are those of the writers only and do not reflect the views, nor receive the endorsement, of the Alexandria Times.

## Requiem for the Witness Tree

*To the editor:*

Above the Port City  
in a rarefied air,  
there stood a noble oak tree  
at once luminous and fair.  
For seven score and 10 years long,  
the solitary oak was true and strong  
and forever with an indomitable will,  
it would there give witness  
on Seminary Hill.  
to promises broken  
to soils laid bare  
by the winds of inequity  
and by seasons of despair.  
The tree was a giver of hope,  
a refuge under threatening skies,  
And too soon it was taken

without fanfare or goodbyes.  
And there was no requiem given,  
nor a single church bell;  
there was nothing noble in that farewell.  
And if trees could dare speak,  
what might this witness say  
of battles overcome  
and dreams of better days.  
In its final splendor  
might it then reveal  
that the soul of a true witness  
can never yield,  
and it's spirit dwells forever  
there on that golden hill,  
it reaches out and guides us still.

-Nora Donovan,  
Alexandria

## Planned Belleview redevelopment is wrong

*To the editor:*

We are writing to register our opinion about the proposed development in the Belleview Shopping Center.

We are dismayed that plans are underway to change the whole character and purpose of the Belleview Shopping Center. It makes no sense to us on any level. Here are a few of the concerns that have come to mind:

- The development will take place in a flood plain with all the environmental ramifications that entails. I am thinking back to Isabel.
- The ruination of the ambiance and aesthetic of an historic neighborhood dating back to the middle of the last century.
- The negative impact such a development will have on surrounding property values.
- The nightmare traffic will become unbearable given that since BRAC consolidation it has become

a two-hour rush “hour” down Fort Hunt Road.

- The loss of retail space on which many, especially the elderly, depend in our area, forcing them to find a way to distant shopping stores by public transportation if they are not able to drive themselves.
- The surfeit of rental units on Rt. 1 already. The complex at Beacon Hill upon which we have heard the design of these units will be based is cheap and ugly.
- The fact that rebuilding the rec center across Fort Hunt Road will take years, meaning it will be happening simultaneously for at least part of the time.

These are the main reasons we stand firmly against the project that is currently on the drawing board for Belleview shopping center.

-Cassie and Michael Arnold,  
Belleview Terrace

### OUR VIEW

FROM | 22

Constructing a new development project that houses, say, 150 people where around six people previously lived – such as what’s proposed for Seminary Road near Fire Station 206 – means that about 25 times more water and sewer waste will be generated from that site and fed into Alexandria’s already over-capacity and outdated sewer system.

This type of infrastructure over-

load is another type of unhelpful new norm in Alexandria.

Common sense tells us that continued cutting of trees, filling of wetlands and building of huge projects is going to worsen flooding in Alexandria. Urban planning concepts, complete with beautiful renderings and algorithms developed in far-away institutes, often sound great until they meet with on-ground facts.

May our city’s leaders have the wisdom to know the difference.

## Don’t locate 150 people on a two-home site

*To the editor:*

Residents cannot be blamed for missing a significant business item at the City Council legislative meeting on Sept. 8. Council approved an application for a \$250,000 “predevelopment” forgivable loan in order to develop 2.7 acres of property on Seminary Road, next to Fire Station 206.

Yes, back to Seminary Road.

The plan is to purchase two home sites that front Seminary Road, raze those homes and build a 40-unit apartment building and 15 townhomes. Setting aside the road diet and the fact that no major transit exists near this site, it is already on record as having serious stormwater management, environmental and terrain issues. For example, one home very close to the site has been flooded nine times since 2010 from site runoff, and had a river rushing over a waterfall into the site earlier this month.

In fact, the city’s Department of Natural Resources published a report in 2013 that discussed this specific area and the importance of its ecosystem, noting “this site is especially important as the headwaters of the southeast tributary of Lucky Run. ... The mature forest canopy throughout the park is also important as a wildlife connector.”

City records show a large drainage swale exists in the back of the homes. U.S. Geological Survey records verify the stream on the site serves as the headwaters for Lucky Run.

Residents who learned about the proposal recommended that the city defer the loan until all of the infrastructure issues were fully vetted, with adequate public notice and engagement. While Council deferred the loan until a full written report and a virtual public meeting can be arranged, many neighbors remain disturbed by the glib and dismissive remarks during the discussion.

For example, the Director of Transportation & Environmental Services Yon Lambert said the city had done a “high-level review,” insisting there were no “show-stop-

pers.” Yet even the most cursory review of city records would have told Council and the public differently.

At a recent Seminary Hill Association meeting, the developer stated that there were no firm site plans yet, and forwarded concept drawings it gave the city showing the proposed structures built – on the same sections that the city said during the Council meeting would be unaffected.

How would our city be able to grant a forgivable loan on this sensitive site without understanding where it will go?

The new approach for justifying this absurd proposal to cram more building density into single-family zones at all costs to residents seems to be built on revisionist history. Lambert – with a straight face – claimed that stormwater management remediation had always been “part of the project,” pointing to a 2012 effort by ACPS to replace the grass field at Francis C. Hammond Middle School with turf.

Setting aside the fact that this 2012 effort became a nightmare of delays, cost overruns and contractor disputes because the site’s entire stormwater management system had to be replaced, the contractor doing grading for the new field was shocked by what they found. ACPS and T&ES documented that stormwater management on the site was “failing,” including violating the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act.

An ACPS memo said that the massive delays and cost-overruns “was due to the extensive storm water management work required [and bus lane]. Neither of these costs were anticipated when the CIP budget was proposed and approved.”

Worse, records show the residents informed the city and ACPS of serious stormwater management issues in the area – like they are here – before installing the field. T&ES seemingly dismissed those concerns.

There is no reason to think that the same failed stormwater manage-

## Our View

### Hutchings' double standard

Alexandria City Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Gregory Hutchings, Ed.D., confirmed last week that one of his two children is attending Bishop Ireton High School, a private Catholic school, rather than T.C. Williams High School.

And ACPS announced yesterday that it is delaying even limited in-person learning until at least January 2021 for all except disabled students. This, despite neighboring Fairfax and Arlington counties' plans to reintroduce limited in-person learning for broad swaths of students during the next two months.

The ACPS decision starkly contrasts with Alexandria's private schools: All three private high schools and most private elementary and middle schools are offering some in-person learning for all of their students right now.

Taken together, these decisions by the superintendent create terrible optics for the school system. They make ACPS' supposed devotion to equity for all students ring hollow, and, frankly, make the superintendent and school board, should they approve this plan, appear hypocritical.

It's important to acknowledge that this decision by the Hutchings family was also a courageous act of love for their child. They made a personal decision to do what they thought best for their own child, knowing that their choice to send a child to private school rather than the public system Hutchings leads would result in scrutiny and criticism.

Therein, of course, lies the problem: They had a choice because of their income, while most of the students in the system Hutchings heads have no such option.

According to the December 2017 employment agreement between Hutchings and the Alexandria School Board, Hutchings' starting total compensation was \$275,000. This included his base salary, retirement contributions and travel allowance – but excluded benefits like health insurance and employer-paid taxes. The agreement also called for annual cost of living raises.

It's also worth noting that this salary is taxpayer funded, and that most funding for public schools comes from local property taxes.

Hutchings' decision to send his child to B.I. was praised by no less than U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, who tweeted:

“How great that Superintendent Hutchings is able to make this choice for his child. Every child in Alexandria, VA, and across the entire country, should have the same freedom to choose where, when and how their kids learn. #SchoolChoiceNow”

DeVos is a long-time advocate for school choice for low-income families. Her efforts to make private schools available to the less affluent have been attacked by many, including teachers' unions, as undermining public education.

In a July 23 community chat, Hutchings also criticized parents who set up learning pods for their children to supplement remote learning provided by the school district. The superintendent decried parents for doing what they thought best for their children because he feared it would widen the achievement gap. In a wide-ranging answer, he labeled such families “privileged.”

Poor children living in crowded conditions, often with just one parent present, need in-person learning the most. For many ACPS students, their school was their safe place. Virtual learning deprives them of that safety.

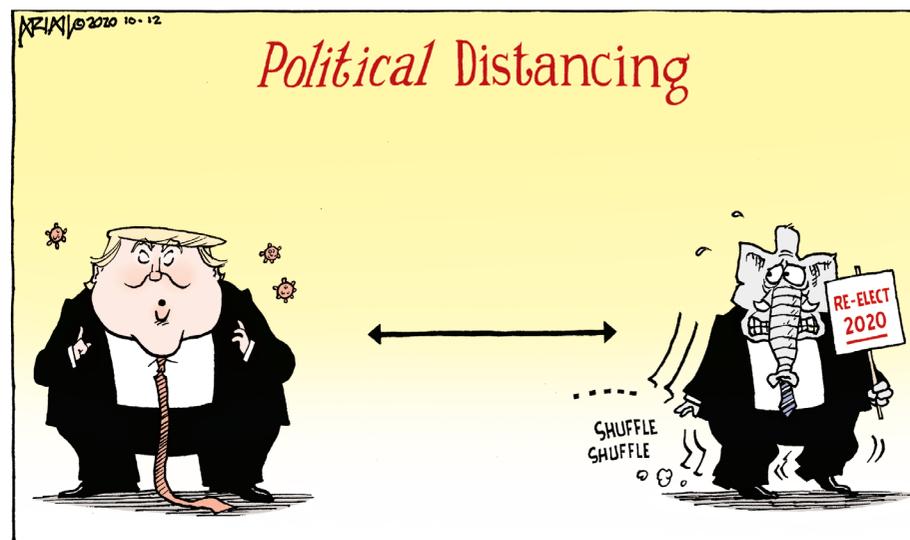
Many of Alexandria's low-income families would jump at the chance to send their high-schoolers to B.I., where the 2020-21 tuition is \$16,700 for Catholics and \$21,100 for non-Catholics. Those students would be receiving a hybrid model of in-person instruction right now.

Direct, taxpayer-funded school vouchers for parents to send their

# Opinion

“Where the press is free and every man is able to read, all is safe.”

- Thomas Jefferson



## Your Views

### Don't bulldoze Taylor Run

To the editor:

The City of Alexandria wants to re-engineer 1,900 feet of the Taylor Run stream channel in Chinquapin Park between T.C. Williams High School and the First Baptist Church. The project, which is funded by a grant of more than \$2 million from Virginia's Stormwater Local Assistance Fund, is supposed to reduce pollutants like nitrogen, phosphorous and sediments that harm the Chesapeake Bay.

Residents are concerned, however, that the project will harm the native flora and fauna that can still be found here. Rod Simmons of the city's Natural Resource Division has compiled an inventory of native flora in all our parks over many years. He has identified a unique wetland and more than 25 distinct native plant species that are now rare to Alexandria along this part of Taylor Run. Also threatened by the project are more than 250 trees, which also recycle nutrients.

The city's consultants contend that the stream will flow more naturally after the channel is “restored,” and that

the stream and the new vegetation that will be planted here will actually improve the terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. But we know from other projects that these so-called stream restoration efforts often fail to deliver what they promise.

There are many reasons for this. First, these projects are not usually designed by fluvial geologists, who are better equipped scientifically to understand what happens when you try to stabilize a stream channel. Second, the plan does not address stormwater runoff, which is the primary reason that Taylor Run is eroding its banks and deepening its channel. Most of the Taylor Run watershed or sewer-shed has been paved over. So, when it rains in the part of the watershed that lies above T.C. Williams, most of the water flows into culverts that lead to Chinquapin Park.

Because fixing the problem of too much stormwater runoff may well cost more than armoring a stream channel, local jurisdictions like Alexandria of-

SEE **TAYLOR RUN**

| 28

The opinions expressed in letters and columns are those of the writers only and do not reflect the views, nor receive the endorsement, of the Alexandria Times.

## My View | Denise Dunbar

# It's a family thing

This being 2020, I'm about to share a tale of woe. This story is only tangentially related to COVID-19 and thankfully is not about loss of life or livelihood. It's instead an account of family, competition and realizing life lessons can be drawn from the trivial.

About two months ago, my sister decided it would be fun if members of our family formed a fantasy football league and drafted teams. My initial reaction was, "No, thanks." I'm a huge baseball fan, and have a background as a sports writer, but don't follow pro football much anymore.

But she wouldn't take no for an answer. We needed eight teams in the league, she said. It would be a bonding experience for our families, to trash talk about our matchups, she said. The clincher was when she said our 85-year-old mother was willing to have a team. Ouch! I finally said "yes."

At first, I was just going to auto-draft, but wound up picking my own players. I had the second pick and landed the NFL's top-rated receiver and last year's NFL most valuable player. For a reluctant participant, it seemed like I did OK.

After the draft, I received an automatically generated email saying my team was projected to go 9-1. It congratulated me on having the best team in the league. I began to secretly suspect I was a hidden fantasy football genius.

You know where this is going.

The first week matchup was, of course, against my sister. The pre-game projection had my team winning by 18 points. She won by 38.

Seven of my players failed to reach their projected point totals. Their failures were comical. My kicker had a 50-yard field goal hit the crossbar and bounce back onto the field. A running back was given the ball two plays in a row with his team inside the five and couldn't get it across the goal line. Worst, my star receiver went out with an ankle injury early in his game – and hasn't played since.

**Life lesson #1:** Never assume. It's one of the first messages drilled into young journalists. I assumed that because the stats said my team would do well that it would.

I had attempted to set up auto-draft for this team. But instead, I somehow accidentally set up an entirely new auto-drafted team in a random league. I went from no

fantasy football teams to two, just like that.

My accidental team didn't look so good on paper, so I set about adding and dropping players through the waiver wire. I began doing the same in the family league, while attempting to play matchups like my sister and boys were doing.

Those moves invariably failed. If I benched a supposedly star running back because of a perceived tough matchup, he got 30 points. If I played him, he got seven. This was a pattern with player after player.

Four weeks in, I was 0-4 with a whopping -200 point differential. One week, one of my running backs had 53 points. I still lost.

**Life lesson #2:** Stick with your strengths. A business executive for the Washington Nationals once told me they emphasize selling out weekend games against big name teams, rather than putting energy into drawing a few hundred more fans to Monday night games against lesser teams. You have to know, and abide by, the scale of diminishing returns.

My accidental team was somewhat competitive early on.

I lost week one by just three points, and actually squeaked out a victory in week two. But the accidental team cratered in week three, with 70 total points. My highest point generator was the kicker. That. Is. Not. Good.

It was week four when I mentally threw in the towel. That week, a nephew beat me by more than 120 points. That's almost mathematically impossible. Imagine an entire team of players who suddenly get sick, hurt or become invisible all at once.

**Life lesson #3:** Don't ever think you're going to be good at something random because the odds of that are really low. It's akin to being a casual college basketball fan all season and then thinking you can successfully pick upsets in your March Madness bracket. It usually doesn't work.

**Life lesson #4:** Don't let your sister talk you into a seemingly innocent competition, particularly if she's an expert and you're, well, not. You not only won't win, you will become fodder for family ridicule for years to come.

You could say the outcome was predestined though, as my fantasy football team is named "Baseball Rocks."



**DENISE  
DUNBAR**

*The writer is publisher and executive editor of the Alexandria Times.*

# Meaning of T.C. Williams has changed

*To the editor:*

How about we remove the shame but keep the name and rededicate the school T.C. Williams to honor all of the students, teachers, administrators and coaches who have changed what that name means over the past 50 years?

I honestly was not aware until this issue arose that Williams was a segregationist, but I do believe that the legacy of the past half century overshadows his non-inclusive ideals and demonstrates how diversi-

ty can work and be successful.

Given today's even greater diversity among Alexandrians and the Titan student body, keeping and honoring that achievement seems more appropriate than ever to serve as a benchmark and goal for future Titans to carry on. Changing the name erases so much that so many have worked for to redefine the meaning of that name.

Just one alum's opinion.

*-Timothy Fahey,  
Class of 1978*

**TAYLOR RUN**

FROM | 26

ten use such projects to meet regulatory clean water goals. That's not to say that some stream channels can't benefit from some restoration, but it has to be very well thought out. And it is still probably only part of the solution.

The city's plan to restore Taylor Run will result in the destruction of a unique natural area, followed by an attempt to replace all the natural vegetation that has been damaged or removed. This is simply the wrong approach.

I find it incredibly sad that the colonial-era seaport town I grew up in has preserved so little of its extraordinary natural history. Small remnants of our natural heritage still exist. They are scattered along a few

stream valleys that the city has not completely paved over or channelized. But that is all that remains, and these natural areas should be carefully protected and sensitively restored.

Eleven civic associations and the Environmental Council of Alexandria have urged the city to step back and consider other restoration alternatives that are more environmentally sound before we lose yet another local natural treasure. We are a true Eco City only if we work together as a community to protect places like Taylor Run.

Sign up for 30-minute tours of Taylor Run on Oct. 17 with local experts. See our ECA Facebook page for more details: <https://www.facebook.com/ECA2018/>

*-Andrew Macdonald,  
former vice mayor; chair, ECA*

**OUR VIEW**

FROM | 26

children to the school of their choice is not currently an option in Virginia. But in-person learning in public schools is not only allowed, it's being phased in by Alexandria's neighboring jurisdictions.

If equity is more than an attempt at "virtue signaling" to ACPS, then tonight the school board needs to take a stand for the city's students whose families can't make the choice for their children

that the ACPS superintendent was able to make for his. The school board needs to demand a return to limited in-person learning for all students this semester.

Which group is better serving the children of our city? ACPS with its remote learning or our city's private schools, which have found a way to provide in-person learning while protecting both students and teachers?

The answer is clear, and it's unfortunate.

## Our View

# Wanted: Better approach to affordable housing

Important issues will be discussed during next year's local election campaign, such as approaches to street design, school capacity, in-person learning and environmental preservation.

We think the city's approach to affordable housing should also be debated at length – particularly the current policy of giving developers significant density waivers in exchange for small numbers of affordable housing units.

This topic was discussed at length at the Dec. 12 public hearing, when members of City Council debated whether to up the percentage of units required from developers in some parts of the city. Councilors Mo Seifeldein and John Chapman also pushed for city staff to clarify the exemptions and potentially limit exemptions. See the Times' front-page story, "Council debates affordable housing policy" in the Dec. 17 issue for the details of that conversation.

Mayor Justin Wilson pushed back against strengthening requirements on developers to contribute more affordable housing in exchange for increased density. He used the decision of developers to forego added density on Beaugard Street as a reason to demand less from them. "We don't want to go too far or we're not going to have anything happen," Wilson said at the public hearing.

But is it actually bad for developers to build "by right" projects, meaning buildings that comply with Alexandria's small area plans without being granted added density?

Given the litany of problems Alexandria is currently experiencing that are unintended consequences from over-densification – flooding, closed schools, environmental destruction, traffic bottlenecks – we think perhaps not.

An open, widespread discussion about Alexandria's approach to affordable housing is overdue. The question is whether the few affordable housing units the city is gaining through developer contributions are worth the exacerbated problems caused by too much density.

We think a compelling case can be made that there should be a moratorium on further density waivers for any reason until the above-mentioned issues have been addressed.

As with many things, this boils down to simple math. Alexandria has lost around 90% of its affordable housing supply in the past 20 years, decreasing from about 19,000 to about 2,000 units.

When a developer who is planning to build a 200-unit building gets a density waiver to add another 100 units, the 10% affordable housing requirement only applies to the additional density, not the entire project. Under the above scenario, said developer would be required to provide 10 affordable units in a project that has increased 50% in size.

Is this a good tradeoff for the city?

We asked in our June 6, 2019 editorial, "Is development a net positive?" In it, we questioned the endless pursuit of more development. The ensuing 18 months, with all but six Alexandria children forced to learn at home because

# Opinion

"Where the press is free and every man is able to read, all is safe."

- Thomas Jefferson



## Your Views

# Time to decriminalize cannabis

To the editor:

I applaud Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam, Attorney General Mark R. Herring, State Sen. Adam Ebbin, State Delegate Mark Levine and many in the Virginia legislature for recent efforts in working toward cannabis decriminalization.

The prohibition of alcohol became the law of the land in 1920. In 1933, U.S. legislators decided it was for the common good that alcohol manufacture, distribution and consumption be made legal, within bounds, despite alcohol's poisonous, debilitating and addictive qualities. Over the previous years, making alcohol illegal had caused an expansion of organized crime, increased illness from unregulated manufacture and caused economic losses, including lost tax revenue.

In 1933, the public found that society as a whole was harmed by making illegal a product that a significant portion of the population felt contributed to their happiness, felt was their right to use and would consume whether it was illegal or not. With this in mind, in 1933, the prohibition of alcohol was ended.

Over the last decades, cannabis has also shown itself to be a product that a signif-

icant portion of the public will consume whether it is illegal or not. Cannabis is less debilitating than alcohol, less unhealthy than alcohol and is associated with far fewer traffic accidents in the states where it is legal than alcohol.

The majority, 68% according to a Gallup poll, believes that ending the cannabis prohibition will be for the common good. They believe that ending cannabis prohibition will likewise result in a reduction in organized crime, reduce illness from unregulated manufacture and create economic gains, including from tax revenue.

Moreover, ending cannabis prohibition will reduce the burden on law enforcement, reduce tax-consuming incarceration expenses, reduce the suffering and loss of manpower due to associated incarceration and end an unnecessary intrusion into many of our citizens' peaceful pursuit of happiness.

For those of us who are not interested in consuming cannabis, it is still reasonable to support a reform that will bring little to no harm and will likely be an overall benefit to society.

-Robert Ray IV,  
Alexandria

The opinions expressed in letters and columns are those of the writers only and do not reflect the views, nor receive the endorsement, of the Alexandria Times.

Denise Dunbar

Publisher & Executive Editor  
ddunbar@alextimes.com

Cody Mello-Klein

Managing Editor  
cmelloklein@alextimes.com

Margaret Stevens

Sales Director  
mstevens@alextimes.com

Patrice V. Culligan

Publisher Emerita  
pculligan@alextimes.com

### ADVERTISING

Margaret Stevens

mstevens@alextimes.com

Marty DeVine

mdevine@alextimes.com

Patrice V. Culligan

pculligan@alextimes.com

Chelsea West

sales intern  
cwest@alextimes.com

Tina Franco

Office Administrator  
tfranco@alextimes.com

### ART DIRECTOR

Lyvian Sieg

graphics@alextimes.com

### CONTRIBUTORS

Mara Benner

Alexa Epitropoulos

Kim Gilliam

Sarah Liu

Louise Krafft

Jim McElhatton

Dr. Vivek Sinha

Jordan Wright

### ALEXTIMES LLC

Denise Dunbar  
Managing Partner

The Ariail family  
Suzanne Brock  
William Dunbar

### HOW TO REACH US

110 S. Pitt St.  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
703-739-0001 (main)  
703-739-0120 (fax)  
www.alextimes.com

## OUT OF THE ATTIC

# Commercialization of Christmas in Alexandria

Following last week's column on the assertions of churches to maintain Christmas as a religious holiday, our story moves to the early 20th century, as Alexandria and the United States saw Christmas shift its cultural role toward the more secularized version that we see today.

The Alexandria Gazette noticed the rise in fortunes for Alexandria merchants as early as the 1910s. Alexandria retailers and merchants did their best to continue to commercialize the holiday during the years that followed.

In 1919, the Gazette announced that "the sale of Christmas trees this year beat all previous records and homes that never before had a Christmas tree will have one this year." That by itself isn't evidence of the shift, but the article continued, "Merchants generally reports (sic) a bigger Christmas trade than any



King Street in the 1960s.

PHOTO/ OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

previous year."

The Retail Merchants Association organized Alexandria's first Christmas parade in 1932. The parade took place in the evening. It started on Fayette Street, went down King Street and

circled city hall. City officials reviewed the bands, costumed children and Santa Claus that composed the procession.

Alexandria's 1945 celebration caught the attention of The Washington

Post as "the most elaborate ever seen in the city." The newspaper noted that the celebration included "ever-green trees on every lamp post strung with lights and tinsel."

Such decorations continued through the decades, as you can see in this image of the 300 block of King Street in the 1960s, before urban renewal. The parade continued, sponsored by the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce, with specific decorations being paid for by individual businesses.

While retailers and merchants never eliminated the religious aspect of Christmas – not that they sought to – there is no doubt that Alexandria's concept of the holiday changed drastically between the 1860s and the 1960s. What might our concept of Christmas be in the 2060s?

*Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.*

### OUR VIEW FROM | 26

our schools are too crowded, plus monthly "100-year" flooding events, have made it increasingly clear that Alexandria should put the brakes on its current push for new development and more density.

Simply put, the affordable housing deficit is too large for six units here and

eight there to be more than drops in the proverbial bucket. The net negative on life in Alexandria of continued density waivers is not offset by the handful of additional affordable housing units gained.

To be clear, we think a lack of affordable housing is one of our city's biggest problems, and we lament the reality that many peo-

ple who work in our city can't afford to live here. But over-densifying the city to the point that it becomes unlivable for everyone is not the right policy either.

We need projects where big chunks of affordable housing can be obtained, such as The Bloom project in conjunction with Carpenter's Shelter that's yielding 97 units, or the 81-unit partnership between Fair-

lington Presbyterian Church, Wesley Housing and the City of Alexandria.

Those running for City Council next year need to be ready to have an honest conversation with residents about how to best approach housing affordability.

Loss of affordable housing is a conundrum. Run-away densification is not the solution.

## Weekly Poll

### Last Week

**Do you agree with the city's updated affordable housing policy?**

- 34% No, I think the update is too restrictive for developers.**
- 28% Yes, but I'd like to see the city push developers even more for affordable housing contributions.**
- 26% Yes, affordable housing contributions should be made mandatory for developers if they want more density.**
- 12% I don't know.**

### This Week

[Take the poll at alextimes.com](https://www.alextimes.com)

**How are you approaching this holiday season?**

- A) I'm trying to compensate for COVID-19 with more decorations than usual.**
- B) I'm trying to keep things as normal as possible.**
- C) It doesn't seem like the holidays without in-person religious services.**
- D) I'm not sure.**