

**Statement of the
Advisory Council on School Facilities and Capital Programs (FAC)
on the
APS Superintendent’s Proposed FY 25-34 Capital Improvement Plan (CIP)
4 June 2024**

The FAC welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the Superintendent’s proposed FY 25-34 CIP for Arlington Public Schools (APS).

Among the responsibilities assigned the FAC is a directive to make recommendations to the School Board on the biennial “ten-year capital improvement plan and recommendations for funding thereon.” We regard this opportunity as one of the most important tasks that we perform, especially given our collective expertise and ties to the Arlington community.

Our comments address project elements covered by the Board’s FY 25-34 CIP direction to the Superintendent and other considerations for your attention. In making these recommendations, we are mindful of projected budgetary constraints, especially debt service limitations necessary to maintain the County’s AAA bond rating. None of our recommendations should be seen as support for jeopardizing Arlington’s bond rating.

➤ **Recommendations based on the School Board’s CIP Direction**

The FAC supports the Board’s FY 25-34 CIP direction with specific recommendations in the following areas: Major Infrastructure Projects, “Deep Dive” studies, and options to fund Phase 2 of the Career Center site. Our recommendations are based on our understanding of APS’ new facility condition assessment methodology (Methodology), which is being implemented with this CIP. The FAC is on record as supporting the Methodology as a data-driven objective means to identify building system needs and opportunities to modernize existing facilities based on the data collected as part of the 2023 Long-Range Plan to Renovate Existing School Facilities (LRP).

- **Major Infrastructure Projects:** Using the Methodology, the Superintendent has proposed major infrastructure projects at five schools: Hoffman-Boston Elementary School (ES), Dorothy Hamm Middle School (MS), Oakridge ES, Williamsburg MS, and Jamestown ES. We agree that the Methodology supports these projects, which are to include roof and/or HVAC replacements, with the possibility at Hoffman-Boston of adding a water heater and communications wiring. While projected replacement costs of most of the proposed major infrastructure projects are included in the LRP under the year that the renovations would be expected between 2024 and 2035 and/or the Superintendent’s MAY 16, 2024 proposed CIP slide presentation, we have not been given a project-by-project, year-by-year estimate of all estimated project costs or a timeline for project execution. Without this information, we are not in a position to comment on the impacts the projects or timing may have on future APS budgets or debt service.
- **Deep Dive Studies:** The Superintendent used the Methodology to recommend five other schools for detailed site surveys (“Deep Dive”). The Methodology identified these schools not only as needing building systems replacements, which is the focus of major infrastructure projects, but also as having inadequate educational and/or common spaces, which would be expected to require extensive repair, renovation, and/or reconstruction. The purpose of these

surveys is to provide necessary information about each school as a whole, with options and estimated costs to modernize these facilities in line with health, safety, and educational standards consistent with community expectations. Likewise, the FAC independently applied the Methodology to identify the projects that we would recommend for Deep Dive studies. As a validation of the Methodology, it is significant that our three highest priorities (scoring tied) aligned with three of the five schools recommended by the Superintendent. These three are Barrett ES, Taylor ES, and Jefferson MS.

As the FAC recommended in comments to the Board on the LRP and above, we continue to urge that no more than three Deep Dive studies be approved in this CIP. Each study is estimated to cost \$800-\$833K and take between a year and 15 months to complete; not insignificant investments. Further, the number of studies authorized each CIP cycle should not exceed the number of projects that could actually be launched and completed in any 10-year window given funding constraints. Fewer studies done more frequently would yield more current pricing and needs, including fluctuations in student attendance. What limits the Board puts on the number of Deep Dive studies selected will set a precedent for future CIPs.

Finally, please note that various repairs and/or renovations at these Deep Dive candidate facilities are itemized under the Superintendent's proposed CIP slides that summarize the Minor Construction/ Major Maintenance (MC/MM) 10-year proposed plan (slides 47-49). We question the merits of going forward with near-term facility improvement until the Board determines which schools warrant renovation and/or replacement so that the value of the MC/MM projects are not lost. There is no shortage of other MC/MM needs that could be accommodated if additional funds became available.

- Phase 2 of the Career Center Site Redevelopment/MPSA: First, we take this opportunity to thank the Board for its milestone May 9th approval of construction contracts for the Grace Hopper Center. This action now allows us to pivot to Phase 2 of the Career Center site's redevelopment and options the Board will consider for the relocation of the MPSA program to the legacy Career Center building. Specific to the Board's CIP direction, the Superintendent proposed three price points for this relocation. None exceed the Board's cap of \$45M in current dollars. Although, we would expect project costs to increase over time due to inflation and/or policy changes, such as the anticipated Board policy on prevailing wages. The FAC recommends that the Board approve option 2 (mid-range). Option 2 is not currently expected to exceed the \$45M cap until 2027, while Option 3 is expected to top the cap later this year. Importantly, option 2 includes renovations that are necessary to accommodate the unique needs of the Montessori program; renovations not included in Option 1 (low range). Not moving swiftly and decisively to facilitate the MPSA relocation defaults to the continued occupation of the substandard Patrick Henry building and the legacy building without an APS tenant, as well as projected escalating costs to address these consequences in the future.

➤ **Additional Considerations for Attention**

While the Methodology can be used to produce results as noted above, there are other critical considerations and community values that the FAC feels should be studied before recommending schools for Deep Dive feasibility studies. It may be possible to incorporate some of these considerations into the Methodology itself, but if not, the process of selecting projects for Deep Dive studies should affirm the Board's prerogative to deviate from Methodology-identified priorities

when other factors justify. In no order of importance, we recommend that the Board consider the following:

- **School-by-school Enrollment Disparities:** While the rate of total student enrollment may appear to be flattening over the next several years compared with the last decade, the rate of growth within the school district varies. The APS 2023 Pre-Capital Improvement Plan (Pre-CIP) Report projects significant increases in the student population in the Richmond Highway Corridor and decreases in the Residential Area, North of Rosslyn-Ballston Corridor over the next five years. Three additional considerations are intended to give weight to these disparities.
 - **Educational Space Inadequacies:** Deep Dive studies should consider current average and projected enrollment at each school in addition to space specifications for grade levels. Some schools may have classroom sizes that are below the educational specifications, but the actual number of students attending is lower as well. Schools with inadequately sized classroom spaces and higher enrollment for classes held in these spaces than standards recommend should rank higher under the “inadequate space” metric. APS has enrollment data that should make adding an over- and under-crowding metric relatively easy.
 - **Overcrowding:** Similar to the recommendation above, schools that are chronically, or projected to be, overcrowded should rank higher for Deep Dive consideration, as renovation of these facilities to relieve congestion will benefit the larger populations at such schools and mitigate against the need for boundary changes and possible additional transportation costs to redistribute student populations to less crowded schools.
 - **Relocatables:** Another metric that should factor into the ranking of school renovation needs and selection for Deep Dive study is the number of current and projected relocatables that will be required to accommodate student enrollment. Reliance on relocatables should not be accepted as a permanent solution to overcrowded conditions at any school. Deep Dive studies should assess options to build additions to schools and decrease relocatable usage. Such was the outcome of the WL high school annex addition. Data on relocatable usage is available in APS’ Facility Optimization Study.
- **Equity:** The School Board’s policy A-30, Equity, states that “facilities ... contribute to balanced, inclusive, and diverse school enrollments” and that Universal Design principles are to be incorporated into “all facilities and maintenance work.” Additionally, the Equity policy requires that “available resources, including local, state, and federal funding [be] allocated to deliberately ensure targeted and differentiated investment in teaching and learning experiences for the varied and unique needs of each student.” These principles underscore that the learning environment greatly impacts the teaching and learning experience. We agree and believe that opportunities to advance equity principles should be considered when selecting facilities for Deep Dive studies and investment. It is unclear if the currently identified schools meet the Board’s goals for facility equity across the School District.
- **Budget Constraints:** As mentioned above, we did not have sufficient information to apply a budgetary lens to our recommendations. However, the Board should begin conversations with a goal to educate citizens on facility-driven decisions that benefit our community.

- Accommodation of Students During Construction: An option to lower costs and complete construction more quickly and safely for students, staff, and community users is to phase construction while facilities are not occupied. Using swing space, boundary changes, rebuilding on school property outside of the footprint of an existing building, and/or relocatables are ways to achieve these outcomes. The Board should consider now what Deep Dive information is needed to evaluate tradeoffs for these student accommodation options, being mindful that options for swing space are few at the ES level and fewer, if at all, for reconstruction of MS or HS facilities.
- Underutilized Facilities: The Board should consider cost-tradeoffs for continuing to operate facilities with falling enrollment. If area enrollment no longer supports using an APS facility as a school, alternative uses should be considered. However, we do not recommend that facilities and space be taken out of APS inventory without commensurate property acquisition in other areas of the County needing additional facilities.
- Options to Avoid Capital Costs: We suggest that the Board consider options to reduce capital costs.
 - Transportation: Transportation is a serious cost and logistics delimiter for APS. APS has run out of room for buses and is struggling to hire and retain enough drivers. The Board should consider additional steps to reduce reliance on yellow school buses for high school students. The County's free iRide program is available to all students. However, APS is still obligated to provide its own bus transportation for students even if they use iRide to and from school. The Trade Center Optimization Study should be delayed to allow additional collaboration with the County about the use of ART and Metro buses to meet high school student commuting needs (not to include field trips, sports, or club events). At minimum, APS should use iRide data to reduce the need to provide school bus seats and attendant costs for APS. Stronger incentives to promote iRide would benefit both the County and APS as the number of buses APS would have to own, operate, and maintain would drop while boosting more efficient use of ART/Metro buses. As noted above, school utilization/crowding is an important factor affecting the quality of the educational environment. Transportation efficiency (fewer buses and more walking) is an option that can lower crowding in some schools.
 - Boundaries: Arlington's housing inventory is projected to add hundreds of new units during the FY 25-34 CIP. We were glad to see the Board begin the process of revising its policy on boundaries. Boundary changes need to be an option to make better use of existing schools and thus mitigate the need for additional facilities.
- Long-term Recommendations for Methodology Improvements: While we do support the Methodology as an improvement over how major construction projects were identified and prioritized in the past, we believe that some improvements are warranted based on our experience applying the Methodology. For transparency, APS should provide the public a simplified step-by-step guide as to how the process is used, including highlighting decision points where subjective expertise augments the data. Providing the public, including FAC, visibility into how the Methodology was used to generate, refine, and finalize the proposed lists of schools for Major Infrastructure and Deep Dive studies would clearly demonstrate the value of the Methodology and support continuous improvement thereto. Consideration should also

be given to creating an equation or formula for database manipulation demonstrating that the process is repeatable and allowing for evaluation factors to be weighted. Additionally, a glossary should be added that, at minimum, includes all acronyms used in the LRP or other documents supporting the application of the Methodology.

Finally, we offer a reminder that the LRP data which feeds the Methodology has limitations too. Foremost is the fact that data is a snapshot in time that is never as relevant as the day it was collected. Thus, we reiterate our recommendations that the School Board not use the Methodology in a vacuum and that the School Board take into consideration other factors when making decisions about CIP expenditures to ensure that the projects meet APS needs and support APS goals and values.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments and recommendations.

Cynthia Hilton
Acting Chair