

Erin Flynn's Responses to VPIS Questionnaire, submitted 9/12/23
(Official copy with biographical information will be available at vpis.org later in September)

1. Why do you want to serve, or continue to serve, on the Council?

I want to make sure City policy responds to community concerns, enjoys strong community support, and embraces that which makes Falls Church unique—its small-town feel, community-mindedness, excellent schools, local businesses, and walkable, tree-lined streets. Residents love Falls Church; many also share specific concerns. These include the current pace of development and the pressure it may place on City infrastructure, services, and schools; increased traffic and speed and pedestrian and cyclist safety; and the loss of mature trees. I'll seek to address these concerns and others, including affordability, fully engage on each issue, and make decisions that move us forward together.

I'll bring to Council fifteen years of government service focused on States and localities. As an attorney, I understand both the constraints and the power of the law. I'm experienced in quickly synthesizing information, identifying core issues, soliciting input, weighing diverse perspectives, reconciling competing interests, and making thoughtful, balanced decisions.

2. What policies are most important to you?

I will prioritize the reliable delivery of City services, including by making sure we have the necessary workforce and infrastructure to attend to basic needs; appropriately scaled development that protects the pedestrian experience and avoids increased traffic on local streets; and preserving the tree canopy and green space, improving stormwater management, and implementing sound environmental policy that responds to the climate crisis.

I will adhere to strong fiscal policies and use the full extent of the Council approval process to respond to changing needs and secure the best possible outcomes for City residents.

3. With significant turnover of City staff, how would you approach the challenge of rebuilding and sustaining City services?

I've confronted staffing shortages and budget constraints, all while continuing to meet organizational missions. During staffing shortages, it's important to reprioritize work and streamline processes to make sure essential tasks—especially those related to public safety and basic services—are uninterrupted. It's critical to recognize employees' work, seek to boost morale, and provide open channels of communication. For hiring, both job postings and targeted outreach can increase the applicant pool; internship, apprenticeship, and partnership programs can increase exposure to the City's work. Most importantly, compensation and benefits must be competitive, and employees should have a clear path to increased responsibility. The City also should explore increased workforce housing if vacancies persist.

Last year the City was considerably understaffed; residents noticed the difference. Council should increase its oversight by requiring regular staffing reports. The City can use exit interviews, and seek feedback from candidates who decline a job offer, to help identify areas for improvement.

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4. Would you support stronger policies to maintain or even increase the number of trees in future development plans?

Yes. Mature trees are integral to reducing air and ground temperature, managing stormwater, combating pollution, supporting wildlife, counteracting urban heat islands, and improving community health. The City has tree-canopy requirements for residential zones; it has no such requirements for business and commercial districts. I'd impose such requirements, as state law permits the City to do, and also explore requiring replacement trees. Separately, City Council hasn't been forceful enough in securing tree coverage and green space in recent developments. Founders Row is a prominent example.

I advocated for a 15% minimum tree canopy in T-zones and sought to preserve mature trees. I also raised concerns regarding the plans for the Park Avenue Great Streets project, which threatens mature trees along Park Avenue unless strong preventative measures are taken. To promote increased walking and biking, the City should preserve mature trees and capitalize on their aesthetic, economic, and environmental value.

5. What is your view of the permitted density in Falls Church's single-family neighborhoods?

Zoning codes provide predictability and help reconcile competing concerns. I don't take altering them lightly, and certainly wouldn't do so before significant public outreach and feedback that demonstrates a broad consensus for doing so. By the end of next year, the City will have 1500 more housing units than in 2020, with another 700 units soon following if One City Center and the senior housing at West Falls and Quinn/Homestretch are built. The City shouldn't invite a possibly bitter missing-middle debate before gauging the effects of recent development on housing availability, demand for City services, and City finances. And it should improve sidewalks, streets, and bike infrastructure before further increasing density.

The City should focus on preserving the over 100 affordable dwelling units at Pearson Square and The Fields that will expire in the next five years. If not, it risks displacing residents and losing important socioeconomic diversity despite other affordable housing efforts.

6. Would you support new City investments, or stronger ordinances for new commercial and residential construction, to expand on-site green infrastructure in the City?

Yes. The City should enact stronger ordinances, subject to state law, and use the Council approval process to reduce impervious surfaces, increase the tree canopy, and address stormwater runoff. It should closely monitor construction projects to minimize adverse effects on local streams and parks. And it should fund green infrastructure as part of the CIP, as well as more modest programs like RainSmart.

Parts of our zoning code provide for low impact design that we should replicate elsewhere. This includes capturing runoff from roof gutters and parking areas via rain barrels, vegetated swales, underground storage containers, or other infiltration- or retention-based systems; pervious paving for parking, patios, and walkways; permeable driveways; and green or living roofs. The City should continue to enlist the help of Boards and Commissions and civic groups in this effort.

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7. What policies and investments would you support to help the City meet its climate change goals and commitments?

The City and its residents and businesses must act together to reduce GHG emissions and prepare for more extreme weather. I support the Government Operations Energy Action Plan, as well as the adoption of the Community Energy Plan, and I look forward to completion of the Urban Forest Management Plan. I will work closely with staff, Boards and Commissions, other localities, and civic groups to harness our collective power to meet these goals.

Council can support these plans by making sure their most important elements, and those with the largest return on investment, are timely implemented and funded. This includes funding personnel to handle coordination, advocacy, and public outreach. CIP projects must stay on track, and the City should seek outside funds to help finance solar technology; necessary upgrades; vehicle and fleet optimization; and workforce education. Council must use its approval process to seek sustainable buildings and green infrastructure. The City should seek to incentivize building upgrades and make biking and public transport easier, including through bus rapid transit.