



Sierra Club-Potomac River Group City of Falls Church Candidate Questionnaire 2023 City Council Election

The Sierra Club is considering endorsing candidates for the upcoming City Council election in the City of Falls Church. Our endorsement is nonpartisan; we have no party affiliations and encourage all candidates to support a pro-environment policy.

This questionnaire is an essential part of our candidate endorsement process. As a City Council member, you will be responsible for regulating and upholding the environmental laws in Falls Church, as well as influencing ordinances that affect the environment. Your responses to this questionnaire along with an in-person interview will be the basis of our endorsement decisions. These questions give you the opportunity to express your opinions, values, and knowledge regarding environmental protection and conservation. Your responses will not be shared beyond Sierra Club leadership without your permission.

Please complete this questionnaire and return it by August 25, 2023, to Michael Trauberman and Dean Amel.

Personal and Campaign Information

Candidate Name: Justine Underhill
Occupation: Journalist
Email:
Phone:
Campaign Address:

General

List your top three environmental priorities for Falls Church and describe what specific measures you will take to achieve them if elected. Are these priorities and proposed measures being highlighted as part of your campaign?

My top three environmental priorities for Falls Church include housing and land use, transportation and pedestrian-friendly design, and meeting our greenhouse gas reduction goals. I am highlighting all three of these priorities as part of my campaign:

1. Housing and land use: Population growth in Northern Virginia is happening increasingly in areas which are further from DC: Prince William and Loudoun Counties, and beyond. This pattern is unsustainable economically, socially, and environmentally.

Not only does this mean those who work in the DC area face longer commutes, this exacerbates deforestation and the loss of ecosystems in our region.

As we face a housing crisis, I strongly support policies to create more housing, and a diversity of housing types, in Falls Church. I align with the Sierra Club's 1986 [Urban Environment policy](#) to "'Infill" residential and commercial development on unused or under-used land within city boundaries and already served with streets, water, sewer and other public services...". By encouraging higher-density, mixed-use development and efficient land utilization, we can curb the uncontrolled expansion of sprawl and its detrimental impact on ecosystems and natural habitats.



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2. Transportation and pedestrian-friendly design: Falls Church has an amazing opportunity to be truly walkable and bikeable, where people can meet their daily needs without needing a car.

Transportation is one of the largest contributors to emissions in Falls Church. By prioritizing public transit, bike share, cycling lanes, and walkable infrastructure, we can significantly reduce reliance on individual vehicles, subsequently lowering emissions of pollutants and greenhouse gasses. This approach not only improves air quality and mitigates traffic congestion but also encourages healthier lifestyles by making physical activity more accessible. Pedestrian-friendly design also includes finding ways to maintain or increase our tree canopy (as trees have the co-benefit of shading hot sidewalks and separating pedestrian space from cars).

3. Greenhouse gas reduction: With thoughtfully crafted policies we can achieve the MWCOG targets of a 50% reduction in greenhouse gasses in Falls Church by 2030, and an 80% reduction by 2050 (ideally even more). To do this we need to have clear frameworks in place (like the Community and Government Operations Energy Action Plans).

In addition to cars and transportation, commercial and residential buildings are among the largest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in Falls Church. I strongly support “green” building design guidelines for projects to consider building orientation, living rooftops, energy-efficient designs, renewable energy integration, as well as stormwater retention plans.

If you were to receive an endorsement from the Sierra Club, how would you use it?

I would proudly highlight the endorsement during my campaign— on flyers, posters, mailers and advertisements in the News Press, as well as at speaking engagements. As I go door-to-door I would mention the endorsement and emphasize the importance of prioritizing environmental issues and promoting sustainable practices within our city.

If elected, I would hope to continue the relationship, and collaborate with the local Sierra Club chapter (as well as other local environmental organizations) to address pressing concerns and leverage the expertise of members to develop comprehensive strategies.

Government Operations Energy Action Plan

City Council recently adopted the Government Operations Energy Action Plan (GOEAP). https://fallschurch-va.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=2373&meta_id=123875. Do you support the goals the GOEAP sets forth for City government to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030 and to be carbon neutral by 2035? To what extent will you support the strategies and actions outlined in the GOEAP that are needed to achieve those goals? Do you see areas where you believe the City government could do more to lead by example?



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Yes, I support the goals in the GOEAP for the Falls Church City government to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030 and to be carbon neutral by 2035.

As of now the City is not on track to meet these emissions reduction goals by 2030. Although we now have a framework that could result in a government emissions reduction of 83% from 2022 levels, the plans are only worthwhile if we follow through with them– and that means they need to be fully funded and implemented.

Many of the investments in the plan, including solar infrastructure and building energy efficiency, can save the city money in the long-run. As a member of the City Council, I would be a staunch advocate for implementing the GOEAP strategies and I would also press for a clear timeframe for funding all of the investments, including how much time we will allot for grant applications.

Given that one of the goals of the GOEAP is to lead by example, I would also like to see clear communication and outreach plans to inform citizens about key efforts.

Community Energy Action Plan

City staff are developing an action plan to reduce the community’s greenhouse gas emissions. <http://www.fallschurchva.gov/2141/Community-Energy-Plan> What greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals do you support for the community by the years 2030 and 2050? What specific actions do you believe the City should prioritize in order for the community to achieve those goals? What resources should the City government provide to help the community achieve those goals?

For the Community Energy Action Plan I support sticking to the regional goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50% below 2005 levels by 2030 and 80% by 2050.

While I am optimistic about reaching the 2050 goal, it is going to take a concerted effort to hit the 2030 goal.

Given that transportation is among the largest contributors to our greenhouse gas emissions, I would like to see the city prioritize investments in walking and biking, as well as EV chargers around the city, especially at multifamily buildings.

One of the most cost effective measures for encouraging community emission reduction is through communication: Help citizens learn about what programs and tax incentives are available and how to apply, as well as connect them with others who have installed solar, purchased an EV, heat pumps or switched over to electric household items. In July I was an organizer of the “Electrify Falls Church” event where we helped those in the community learn about tax incentives and the process of installing solar and making other electric purchases. This was a citizen led initiative, and I would like to see the city host and promote more community events like this too.



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I would also like to see the city adopt green building standards (as mentioned above in my top three priorities) and a more robust composting program, similar to [Arlington's yard waste and food scraps collection](#).

Zoning

For 2024, the City Council work plan includes consideration of amendments to the Zoning Code to allow greater flexibility for accessory dwelling units in residential zones, and other measures, to expand the availability of housing. What would be your top priorities for those amendments?

My top priorities for those amendments to the zoning code include encouraging stormwater capture, tree canopy and permeable surfaces, and green building design – to the degree that we can under Virginia state law.

Our stormwater issues in Falls Church are serious, and will likely be worsened by climate change– as a city councilmember I would push for changes in the zoning code to accompany green building/lot standards that help us prepare for, recover from, and adapt to the effects of climate change. While increasing density is key to reducing sprawl, we want to make sure we are encouraging *sustainable* development and not increasing our stormwater runoff or a “heat island” effect.

City Council recently granted First Reading to proposed updates to the T-1, Transitional District in the City Zoning Code and referred the proposed changes to the Planning Commission for review and recommendation. The updates seek to facilitate redevelopment of smaller infill properties between higher density business districts and lower density residential neighborhoods and to promote environmental sustainability. Do you support the proposed updates to the T-1, Transitional District? https://fallschurch-va.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=2&event_id=2036&meta_id=124155

I support adding infill density in the form of mixed-use development, townhouses and multi-family housing on T-zone lots as a way to combat sprawl, and for that reason I support changes to the Transitional District zoning code.

The T-zone lots in Falls Church are either directly on metrobus service lines or one block away, and also in close proximity to the W&OD trail– these are the exact types of transit corridors where we want to encourage more housing, as these are the areas where people have the option to live car-free.

I especially support current requirements such as a minimum tree canopy coverage (the maximum allowed under Virginia state law), removing parking lots as a primary use, including a maximum impermeable lot coverage, and requiring improvements to stormwater quality, while not increasing stormwater quantity.

I realize that many of the environmentally friendly requirements for buildings in Falls Church come from concessions in a much longer Special Exception process– and so there is a push to make all development go through that process. But by forcing smaller infill development (like many of the T-zone



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lots) to go through a multi-year approval process, we lose out on homes and shops we could benefit from right now. I have been meeting with city planners and zoning attorneys to see if we can create a more streamlined approval process that has a clear code of environmental building standards for rooftops, insulation and more. This may ultimately require lobbying efforts at the state level, which I would also support.