

## **Environmental Priorities and Progress Measures in Alexandria**

by Scott Barstow, Alexandria Environmental Policy Commission member

Six years ago, Alexandria's Environmental Policy Commission led the development of a landmark, comprehensive Environmental Action Plan which was adopted by the City Council. This Action Plan laid out an extensive set of goals, targets, and steps on the full range of environmental issues through the year 2030.

Unfortunately, our region's recent economic woes have sapped the City's ability to make the investments necessary to achieve the progress envisioned in the Action Plan. As an example, the City Council decided not to fund an update of the Environmental Action Plan (EAP) until fiscal year 2016. At this year's EPC planning retreat, held August 22nd, the commission attempted to cope with the current fiscal environment by focusing its work on a few high priority objectives, in addition to its ongoing work of spearheading the city's Earth Day celebration, participating in small area planning groups, supporting and advising City staff work, and working with other boards and commissions on an as-needed basis.

The high priority objectives identified by the EPC include:

### **Updated Environmental Indicators**

The 2009 Environmental Action Plan called for the City to annually report on environmental performance indicators. The [2014 report](#) contains 20 different quantitative measures of the City's environmental performance.

At its planning retreat, the EPC discussed updating and streamlining the performance indicators, in order to make them more understandable, reduce unnecessary staff work, and narrow focus on key objectives. We also discussed establishing explicit goals for the measures reported, to enable Council, staff, and residents to see how close--or how far--our city is from operating within safe resource use limits. Over the coming weeks EPC members will work with City staff to develop a revised set of indicators.

### **Green Infrastructure/Stormwater and CSO**

Alexandria will need to spend hundreds of millions of dollars over the next several years to meet pending Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) requirements for mitigation of Combined Sewer System (CSO) discharges, and reductions in stormwater discharges.

Meeting these requirements will not be easy, and will require an array of responses. As the City works to develop a Long Term Control Plan, due to the DEQ by August 23, 2016, the EPC will work to emphasize the use of green infrastructure (GI) improvements to meet these mitigation requirements. The mitigation potential, costs, revenue sources, and benefits of using green roofs, biofilters, and other GI improvements should be thoroughly explored before more technical solutions are chosen.

## **Urban Forestry**

Alexandria currently has an estimated 34% tree canopy cover, short of the 40% goal that was part of the 2009 Action Plan. EPC members have been meeting with City staff and other local experts to learn more about existing barriers to meeting this goal, and ways to close the gap. EPC hopes to work with City staff, the Parks and Recreation Commission, and the Alexandria Beautification Commission over the next two months to coordinate recommendations and guidelines to move Alexandria closer to the 40% goal in a cost-effective manner.

## **Sustainability Coordinator**

Unlike other Virginia cities such as Arlington, Charlottesville, and Richmond, Alexandria does not have even one full-time staff position dedicated to leading sustainability initiatives both within city government and in the community. Such "sustainability coordinator" positions are increasingly viewed as essential to enabling substantial progress towards sustainability.

To stay updated on the initiatives described above, or to learn more about how you can support the EPC's work, visit the [City of Alexandria website](#).