

Mayor Allison Silberberg's Statement Regarding Ethics and the New Ad Hoc Code of Conduct Committee

December 15, 2018

When this Council term began in 2016 one of our first actions was to establish a citizen committee to draft a new code of ethics and ethics pledge for the Mayor and members of Council. I introduced the resolution to create the committee and I was disappointed that Council watered down the resolution by declining to explore creation of an Ethics Commission. I am, of course, pleased that we established a Code of Ethics and that all my colleagues joined me in signing the ethics pledge. I still believe that pledge should be required of all members of city boards, commissions, and task forces.

Our review today, at the end of our term, is fitting, but ironic. We have hardly touched on ethics matters since we adopted the recommendations of our review committee. Without an ethics committee or commission, we have had no entity to review ethical principles, and we have fallen short of my goal to make Alexandria a national leader in promoting ethical government.

Ethics is not about pursuing elected officials or punishing people. It is about looking for ways to better serve our community. We can talk frankly about ethics, and we can always find ways to raise the level of our discourse and make our city more inclusive, fair, and ethical.

Resolution 2707, by which we authorized the Ad Hoc Code of Conduct Review Committee, requires Council to re-organize the committee at the beginning of its next term. The resolution directs the committee to review progress and make recommendations for improvement of our ethical program.

So in the spirit that improvement is always possible, I offer three recommendations for the next Council to consider and hopefully adopt.

First, next year I would urge the committee to expand our pledge and set our own standards regarding contributions to campaigns. I feel strongly that no elected official nor candidate for elected office should accept any contribution from anyone or any entity that brings business before the city that could cause personal or corporate financial gain to that donor. Since I decided to run for public office, I have made this my own ethical standard, and have returned thousands of dollars in contributions from individuals or businesses I know fall into this category.

We already pledge to take no action that will cause the appearance of personal gain or conflict of interest. Accepting contributions from those who will come before Council seeking approval for business matters creates that appearance of personal gain and is an

inherent conflict of interest. Further, it erodes public trust in our objectivity and commitment to ethics. We should not deny the appearance of conflicts of interest in the eyes of the public when we consider and vote upon matters of financial importance to major campaign contributors.

Second, we require disclosure of the identity of persons with financial interest in preliminary site plans. For corporate and partnership entities, we only require disclosure of owners of interests greater than 3% of the entity. We should eliminate that loophole and disclose the entire ownership of developers. And elected officials should disclose any financial interest they have in a matter coming before Council, and recuse themselves from any deliberation or vote on that matter.

Third, Council should create a permanent ethics commission.

These changes are made more important by the hundreds of millions of dollars of new development that will come before future Councils. Small interests in large projects can mean huge dollars. Members of Council should avoid the appearance of conflict of interest that comes with campaign contributions from developers of projects in Alexandria.

Alexandria deserves highly ethical government and looks to City Council to lead.

We can do better.

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