

## SUBMISSION OF THE JAMES CITY COUNTY CITIZENS' COALITION (J4C) REGARDING AFFORDABLE HOUSING.

In connection with the current revision of the Comprehensive Plan for James City County, an appropriate focus on affordable or workforce housing has been made. Starting with the Housing Needs Assessment, James City County and City of Williamsburg presented by Dr. Casey Dawkins, Director, Center for Housing Research at Virginia Tech in November, 2007 ( the "Study" ) , and continuing with the Greater Williamsburg Chamber and Tourism Alliance Workforce Committee (the "Alliance Committee") there has been an acknowledgment that the County has a problem with attracting the people who are needed to fill the jobs existing and to be created within the County in the next decade.

The approaches to this issue that have been suggested to date all suffer, however, from the same weakness: they have assumed the solution, that is, that we need more affordable housing built here in James City County. Other reasonable solutions, such as County-sponsored transportation or commuter bonuses to low income commuters have not been suggested, let alone studied or explored.

One of the reasons for this failure to "think outside the box" is a serious oversight in the structure of the Alliance Committee: there are no representatives from the population likely to be perceived to need affordable housing. Without input from the people most affected, the risk is that the solution adopted will not be one that is most useful to, and therefore favored by its target population. It is possible that the workforce that is the subject of the study prefers living in "hometown" locations closer to family and friends whose presence for other aspects of their lives, such as childcare and religious institutions, may be paramount. For such employees, the preference may be for efficient public transportation, or bonuses to help defray the high costs of commuting. Indeed, an informal survey of target employees indicated that (1) they preferred living near friends and family in other counties; (2) a move to affordable housing in James City County which would entail a small home on a small lot would not be appealing; and (3) a public transportation solution would be preferred.

A very interesting portion of Dr. Dawkins' 2007 study indicates that in fact, more people travel out of the County to work than travel to the County to work. This statistic bears much closer examination of course, to determine who is commuting out and who coming in – and what the needs of latter may be.

Certainly no one would argue that those living in Governors Land or Fords Colony who commute out of the County to high paid jobs in Newport News or Hampton,

are in need of subsidies. Without further study, it is similarly difficult to determine what the special needs of those commuting, and those likely to be commuting into the County may be.

In addition, the composition of the Alliance Committee perhaps inadvertently favors the solution of building more housing because its membership includes those whose business is homebuilding. Developers are likely to suggest what they know – and that is why the composition of the Alliance Committee is so crucial and yet so flawed. While the development of in-county affordable housing option may be the one that is best, there is insufficient demonstrated support for that conclusion at this time. The “more housing” solution is of course an extremely costly one from the standpoint of economics and the environment. A May 26, 2008 editorial from the New York Times noted that because affordable housing often entails the destruction of remaining, open, rural areas, more creative solutions should be sought. The same is true in James City County where the well-intentioned addition of many small homes on small lots threatens the value of the County. To risk this, without thoroughly exhausting all other alternatives is clearly bad policy.

Without consideration of other options, the County cannot know whether other solutions, alone or in combination, would be better from the aspects of cost, preference and the environment. Accordingly, the J4C urges the County to pursue, as part of the Comprehensive Plan, a county appointed task force representing all constituents of the issue, as well as experts from fields that are necessary for determining and evaluating alternative solutions to the problem of attracting and retaining employees for County-located jobs.

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*On behalf of the James City County Citizens Coalition*

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