

ALEXANDRIA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Supporting Businesses &
Cultivating Community

thechamberalx.com



2022 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA



Alexandria Chamber of Commerce
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INTRODUCTION

For over one hundred and fifteen years the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce has been a leading advocate for business interests in the City of Alexandria.

Over the last decade we have been an outspoken voice for the completion of Potomac Yard metro, redevelopment of Landmark Mall, streamlining small business regulations and a champion of countless issues directly impacting the business community. We are proud to be entrusted with amplifying the voice of the diverse businesses in our city.

As we move towards recovering from the global COVID-19 pandemic, we must accept the reality that the way we work and engage with consumers is vastly different than before. Similarly, our elected leaders are confronting long standing challenges with renewed intentionality and the Alexandria Chamber's role as the advocate for Alexandria business is more important than ever.

For the second year in a row Virginia has topped CNBC's list as the Best State for Business and the Alexandria Chamber is committed to positioning Alexandria as the best City to do business in the best state.

The key to securing this distinction is Virginia's continued investment in attracting and retaining a skilled workforce, the strength of our public education system at all levels of instruction and infrastructure.

However, the ranking serves as an additional reminder not to lose momentum in areas where the Commonwealth can improve, namely cost of living and health care access and quality. Identifying opportunities in these areas are tied to the Chamber's advocacy to drive our city and Commonwealth toward continued success.

We need a commitment to nimble government, capable of responding to rapidly shifting forces that impact the livelihood of Alexandria and the Commonwealth. The Chamber believes it is well suited to articulate the experiences of our diverse businesses to inform our policymakers and when appropriate, challenge our leaders to seek innovative solutions to move Alexandria forward.

We proudly present our vision and recommendations for Alexandria in the form of our 2022 Legislative Agenda. This agenda highlights our broad policy goals coupled with a detailed checklist of key action items to move Alexandria forward.

This Agenda is a call to action for our community, elected leaders, and the Chamber to meet challenges and opportunities with innovation, creativity, and thoughtful engagement.

THE CHAMBER'S COMMITMENT TO ECONOMIC RECOVERY IN THE WAKE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented economic challenges for Alexandria residents, businesses, non-profits, and educational institutions. In order to drive a successful recovery all of the institutions above will need to work together to employ creative short and long term strategies.

The Chamber applauds the City's flexibility and responsiveness during the pandemic. From our elected leaders and city staff, the City of Alexandria worked hard to dispense available resources to businesses in need.

As the recovery phase continues we encourage the City:

- » To thoroughly review temporary changes to zoning and related requirements precipitated by COVID-19 to determine if they have positively contributed to the business environment and should become permanent throughout the City. Such changes include the pedestrian mall with outdoor seating in the 100 block of King Street, outdoor café seating areas on other City streets, permitting fitness or other group uses in public parks, and ABC Law changes.
- » To make available additional City staff to ensure businesses seeking approval for permanent changes afforded under the pandemic can be obtained in an efficient manner.
- » To continue working with businesses to implement tax and regulatory changes that provide flexibility during unforeseen events.
- » To appropriate American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds by prioritizing infrastructure projects that to date have been stalled and whose completion can be fully funded through these dollars.
- » To continue an active dialogue with the business community on the allocation of Alexandria's portion of the American Rescue Plan funds and expected future federal infrastructure and recovery legislation.
 - › In the second tranche of funds, strongly consider additional strategic investments in businesses with the goal of improving business profitability and resiliency.
 - › Consider how the RebuildVA grant program will impact Alexandria businesses through thoughtful engagement with individual businesses in the City and then, as applicable, make recommendations to state leaders.
 - › Focus infrastructure funding in those areas that will produce the greatest return on investment. For instance, addressing traffic concerns, flood mitigation and providing residents with more and better broadband options.

THE CHAMBER'S COMMITMENT TO ECONOMIC RECOVERY IN THE WAKE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Historically, the Chamber has focused its advocacy efforts on informing City Council and the Alexandria delegation to the General Assembly. Yet Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) play a significant role in how employees and employer's work. It is with this renewed attention on the interplay between schools and business, that the Chamber seeks to highlight opportunities for informed conversations to support both the school system and our members.

The Chamber encourages the Alexandria City Public Schools to evaluate their communication methods from the past year. The adoption of a detailed, effective communications strategy, that is clear and concise is imperative to providing valuable information to parents and their employers. School operations have a clear link to our city's workforce and operational changes to the school day/calendar should be provided with as much advance notice as is practical given the external pressures facing ACPS.

STATE AND REGIONAL ISSUES ON ECONOMIC RECOVERY

The Chamber asks the General Assembly to address the following:

» Good Stewardship of American Rescue Plan (ARP) Funds

- › Continue actively soliciting input from the business community on the allocation of American Rescue Plan funds.
 - Continue direct to business grants. Emphasis should be placed on businesses who did not benefit or received very little from previous rounds of local, state, or federal funding.
 - Provide additional support and resources to industries hardest hit by the pandemic such as tourism and hospitality.

» Broadband

- › All levels of government need to work with the market and foster continued private-sector investment and innovation by eliminating barriers to network deployment. The private sector has the expertise and a proven track record of meeting consumer demand at the speeds — and with the service options and technologies — consumers want.
 - We support policies that complement that work by enabling the deployment of broadband services in rural and other unserved and underserved areas. Policies should:
 - Streamline and standardize permitting to accelerate access to public right-of-way.
 - Ensure new programs are technology neutral – supporting both wireless and wireline.
 - Implement improved processes for broadband mapping.

» Allocation of funds to housing assistance

- › Expand and allocate additional funding for affordable housing in Virginia to combat the economic hardships brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes emergency rent and utility assistance for households and tenants who have lost income to prevent evictions.

» COVID Changes

- › Consider making changes that have occurred due to COVID-19 permanent, such as allowing restaurants to sell certain alcoholic beverages to go and other such measures that have helped increase our businesses' ability to be competitive with surrounding jurisdictions.

STATE AND REGIONAL ISSUES ON ECONOMIC RECOVERY

» **Electronic Meetings**

- › Recognize that virtual (electronic) meetings necessitated by COVID-19 have allowed for stronger and more diverse participation across appointed boards, commissions as well as advisory groups and should be allowed to be incorporated in some capacity moving forward.

ATTRACT & SUSTAIN BUSINESSES IN ALEXANDRIA

To position Alexandria as the place to do business in the region. This can be achieved by increasing collaboration amongst stakeholders and putting in place the right framework that attracts businesses and enables them to grow and thrive in Alexandria.

I. Business and Economic Growth

The Alexandria Economic Development Partnership (AEDP) (the 501(c)6 public-private partnership that promotes the City of Alexandria as a premier location for businesses) relies primarily on Alexandria's highly-educated workforce, strategic location, great business climate, and quality of life to recruit and retain businesses. As the pandemic lifts and the future of office work becomes clearer, these factors will only become more important. AEDP is focused on leveraging the city's assets to continue to attract businesses and organizations from sectors that will expand existing industry clusters such as: professional and financial Services, IT and cybersecurity, nonprofits and associations, science, and defense.

To accomplish this, Alexandria and the Commonwealth must continue to advance policies and make investments that support continued business and economic growth. These include:

» Talent Attraction & Workforce Development

- › Continue state-level investments in initiatives such as the Virginia Talent Accelerator Program, Virginia Jobs Investment Program, and the G3 community college grant program among others. Complete the construction of Virginia Tech's Innovation Campus, which is critical to the development of the city's and region's tech talent pipeline. The City should continue to fund programs offered by the Workforce Development Center to ensure workers have the necessary skills to fill 21st-century jobs.

» Business-Ready Sites

- › Develop Class-A office buildings at metro accessible sites and within key commercial corridors to provide businesses high-quality places to work in strategic locations.

» Strategic Access

- › Fund infrastructure projects and broadband initiatives that seamlessly move people, goods, and information throughout the city so businesses have a competitive edge and can take advantage of Alexandria's proximity to the Nation's capital and prime East Coast location.

ATTRACT & SUSTAIN BUSINESSES IN ALEXANDRIA

» Business Climate

- › Continue policies and create systems that make it easy for businesses to locate and grow in Alexandria while continuing support for economic development initiatives that are being led by AEDP.

» Communication

- › Develop and communicate the City's identity as a prime place to do business as well as the processes, people, and incentives that make starting, expanding, or relocating into the City as efficient as possible. Coordinate among City stakeholders to make sure that opportunities for existing businesses are effectively communicated to the businesses themselves as well as to the community at large so that each understands the extent of the City's support of local businesses.

II. Minority Business Support

Review and implement recommendations found in the Northern Virginia Minority Owned Business Working Group's study: *Supporting Northern Virginia's Minority Owned Businesses* specifically:

- › Access to Capital - Work to foster an environment and facilitate relationships amongst both national and community banks to ensure diverse businesses have access to capital.
 - Proactive steps to attract minority-owned banks and financial institutions to Alexandria must be established.
- › Collaborate, as appropriate, with other jurisdictions, Chambers and organizations on outreach and support to minority owned businesses.

III. Enhance collaboration between the business community, schools, and childcare sector

Businesses are attracted to communities with strong schools and capacities, such as childcare, that support the needs of their employees. During the pandemic business owners and their employees were adversely impacted by decisions made by schools, and an insufficient supply of childcare. The pandemic has illuminated the need for greater cooperation among these entities. When businesses are unable to operate it affects the overall economic health of Alexandria.

› The Chamber recommends:

- Establishing a communication structure between the Chamber, schools, and the childcare sector to ensure better coordination in preparation for return to post pandemic work environments.
- Engaging in discussions about ways to strengthen collaboration on matters that impact mutual goals for the business community, schools, and childcare sector.

STATE AND REGIONAL ISSUES ON ATTRACTING AND SUSTAINING BUSINESSES

I. Economic Development

› *The Chamber recommends that the City pursue:*

- Continued support and funding for GO Virginia, including engaging in and promoting GO Virginia opportunities intended to diversify regional and City businesses and to ensure that private sector growth expands beyond government growth or constrictions.
- Innovative solutions to various regional issues through public-private partnerships (P3s), including policies that promote the development and long-term successful and efficient operation of P3s.
- Efforts to utilize the federal Opportunity Zone community investment tool to support new investment in Alexandria's four Opportunity Zones (with Landmark Mall being the highest priority) and encourage the promotion and use of this economic development tool to attract investors, done in coordination with current businesses, real estate owners, community stakeholders and reflecting the approved small area plans.

II. Access to Childcare

› *The Chamber recommends the State:*

- Provide resources to support early care and education as it relates to workforce participation such as:
 - Prioritize Limited State Dollars - Childcare is a core community function. Without viable childcare programs, affordable to working families, the economy can neither be effectively reopened or sustained.
 - Ensure adequate funding to help the childcare sector sustain itself as the state recovers from COVID-19. This is essential to families as they begin to search for reliable, safe, and affordable childcare in order to return to work.
 - Increase funding to bolster mental health consultation and safety net supports for families (food, rental assistance, etc.) as children return to pre-pandemic activities after experiencing sustained and elevated fear, anxiety, losses, and general uncertainty for an extended period of time.

STATE AND REGIONAL ISSUES ON ATTRACTING AND SUSTAINING BUSINESSES

III. Modernize ABC Laws

- › *The Chamber recommends that the City and the Alexandria delegation to the General Assembly:*
 - Continue to review and modernize Virginia’s alcoholic beverage laws to ensure that the Commonwealth can compete with neighboring jurisdictions. While we applaud the steps that have been taken over the last year more needs to be done to make sure Alexandria is competitive with DC and Maryland.

IV. Transportation

- › *The Chamber advocates for:*
 - Continued funding to the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority (NVTA) with revenue sources that are broad-based and include state-wide dollars.
 - Full dedicated funding from the Commonwealth to WMATA, to address the critical needs of the system, strengthen reliability, and help Metro regain ridership lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic, without the continued diversion of NVTA funds.
 - Working cooperatively with Arlington and Fairfax Counties to identify, plan, and submit funding applications to NVTA for projects that will reduce congestion and improve transportation options along corridors that cross into or pass through the City.
 - Collaborating with Maryland, Washington D.C., and the Federal government to prepare for the region’s transportation infrastructure needs in 2040 and beyond.
 - Creation of free transit fare programs throughout Northern Virginia.
 - Exploration of innovative funding solutions for transportation/infrastructure to supplement the gas tax.
 - Continued support of the Commonwealth’s leading role in utilizing Public-Private Partnerships to deliver complex transportation/infrastructure projects.

V. Promote Healthcare Policies for Businesses and their Employees

- › *The Chamber encourages the General Assembly to:*
 - Pursue policies that support quality, affordable health care for businesses and their employees. Further efforts to promote competition in the health care space should be thoroughly reviewed to achieve readily available quality care to our city and Commonwealth.

VI. Right to Work

- › *The Chamber supports:*
 - The continuation of Virginia’s Right to Work laws in their current form.

KEY ACTION ITEMS FOR THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

The Chamber offers the following checklist of detailed action items for the City in order to foster a thriving business climate. The Chamber remains ready to partner with the City to enact these policies.

I. Business Resources/Business Friendliness

- Thoroughly evaluate temporary changes to zoning and related requirements precipitated by COVID-19 to determine if they have positively contributed to the business environment and should become permanent throughout the City.
- Activate Public Space - Capitalize on local assets and provide opportunities for small businesses to help activate public spaces for the benefit of the entire community.
- Review the cost of permits to beautify space and attract customers and consider waiving permit fees for Neighborhood Business Associations.
- Ensure all permitting requests are completed in an expeditious manner and that clear guidance is given on what and how to obtain approval.
- Continue to simplify zoning requirements to permit more businesses to operate by-right or through an administrative Special Use Permit (SUP) process.
- Evaluate the manner in which business resources and information are disseminated to those seeking to start a business or make changes to an existing business in the City.
 - Finish the City's new website, using the Chamber membership as one of the key constituent groups to provide input on ease of accessing relevant business information.
 - Use the Chamber to assist in making City Staff tasked with helping small businesses more visible in the business community.
- Utilize the Chamber to publicize the APEX permitting and land use system.
- Consider giving businesses a rebate as compensation for collecting taxes on behalf of the City.

II. Invest in Workforce Training and Continuing Education Resources

- Continue investment in the City's Workforce Development Center.
 - Leverage the Chamber's membership to inform the City on key needs associated with hiring and retention of employees
 - Ensure job training programs are tailored to businesses' needs.
 - Special attention should be paid to specialized training in construction services. With the anticipated physical growth of the city, skilled trades people and construction staff are not readily available from our city.

KEY ACTION ITEMS FOR THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

III. Invest in K-12 Education

- Increase opportunities for businesses and City programs to partner to provide unique educational opportunities such as:
 - ACPS Industry Boards.
 - Increased business participation in externship experiences.
 - Mentorship, externship, and internship opportunities (i.e., summer youth employment programs). Recognize that not everyone is able to participate in unpaid internship and seek creative solutions to make internships a reality for all regardless of socioeconomic status while not placing a financial burden on businesses willing to participate. Lack of paid internships is a barrier for students when faced with paid employment versus experience in a field of interest.

IV. Broadband and Smart City Technology

- Ensure high speed broadband access is available to all Alexandrians regardless of socioeconomic status through innovative partnerships with the business community.
- Complete construction of the Municipal Fiber Network and engage in dialogue with the business community on how to best utilize private partnerships associated with the Network.
- Research smart city technologies that can be utilized by the City to enhance public services, solve modern challenges, and reduce cost. Alexandria should be a leader in utilizing smart city technology.
 - Work with wireless providers to streamline and expedite the permitting process for the installation of small wireless antennas.

V. Transportation

- Support transportation projects that will increase the City's connectivity from East to West and North to South. Projects include: Potomac Yard Metro Station, Corridor C Transitway, Duke Street in Motion, Eisenhower Avenue access points.
- Adopt specific policies and initiatives to ensure that vulnerable communities, such as low-income households and persons with disabilities, benefit from and are not burdened by transportation investments.
- Seek solutions to rush hour gridlock on City roads, including re-examining traffic flow, considering the effect (if any) of closing selected streets to through traffic, limiting use of turn lanes, resetting the timing of traffic lights, and increasing connectivity.
- Plan effectively to accommodate emerging modes of transportation so that they are a safe and efficient mode of transportation for all who work, live, and play in Alexandria.
 - Include the business community in the decision-making process to ensure that there are equitable rules and enforcement for all.

VI. Housing Affordability

- Incentivize the creation of a workforce housing inventory. Workforce Housing, as defined by the Urban Land Institute, is: "housing that is affordable to households earning 60 to 120 percent of the area median income."

KEY ACTION ITEMS FOR THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

- Better formulate a comprehensive and achievable Citywide Housing Master Plan, benchmarking housing stock in Alexandria with respect to the Greater Washington Metropolitan Region.
- Support funding for the Virginia Housing Trust Fund, which provides support to affordable housing projects while making a significant impact on Virginia's economy.
- Work regionally to implement incentives for developers to build additional density with multi modal transportation options to increase the overall supply of affordable housing in the area.

VII. Review processes relating to Small Area Plans and Development SUPs to maximize efficiency.

- Facilitate communication between stakeholders and the City, taking advantage of local subject matter expertise, when formulating and implementing Small Area Plan implementation goals.
- Complete, in an orderly and expeditious manner, all necessary studies and planning regarding implementation of Small Area Plan goals so that development can proceed in accordance with market demand, without undue delays caused by incomplete information regarding City requirements and expectations.

VIII. Ensure diverse representation, broadly defined, on City Boards/Commissions and similar advisory groups.

- Actively seek out, in partnership with the Chamber, new and diverse voices when filling slots on Boards/Commissions and similar advisory groups.
- Ensure that the business community is appropriately represented on City Boards, Commissions, and similar Advisory Groups.
- Recognize that virtual meetings (necessitated by COVID-19) allowed for stronger and more diverse participation across the board and should be incorporated in some capacity moving forward.

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