

## Deliberation Day 2007 Report – Executive Summary

### Falls Church City: What Are We Becoming?

Date of Event: March 17, 2007  
Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School  
Falls Church, Virginia

Sponsored by

Citizens for a Better City  
Falls Church League of Women Voters  
Village Preservation and Improvement Society

On the icy morning of Saturday March 17, 2007, 135 Falls Church City residents came together for the City's first Deliberation Day. Attendees moved through four segments of small and large group discussions. Six students from George Mason High School and five adults led the eleven small group discussions. Eight more GMHS students served as note-takers. A panel of four City officials responded to questions in the large group discussions.

The format gave people of varying interests and backgrounds an equal chance to have their questions answered and their opinions registered. At the morning's end, attendees developed lists of possible actions that could be taken by individuals, by community organizations and by the government. Those suggestions were reviewed by 130 respondents in a subsequent online survey, which is summarized in this report (p. 11).

This report is a guide to the trade-offs the deliberations identified, as well as areas of common ground. The trade-offs will be faced repeatedly as new opportunities for economic development arise and as the City's fiscal circumstances ebb and flow. The common ground provides a means to meet those challenges.

**How to balance the City's environment between its village legacy and a more urban future (p. 5)** was the trade-off most widely identified and discussed. Attendees wanted Falls Church to remain a unique place, but did not agree on how a village sensibility can co-exist with a more urban look and feel. Managing traffic better and creating pedestrian-friendly retail and public spaces were common goals.

**Application of the City's master plan (p. 7)** was cited by some as too susceptible to exceptions for developers. Others countered that there is a trade-off: The City Council's use of the special exception ordinance has restored long-lost momentum to redevelopment, by enabling the Council to bargain more effectively with developers.

**Fiscal responsibility (p. 8)** was a third trade-off. The tension here revolved around whether urban-style redevelopment along the commercial corridors is the best way to sustain the City financially. Arguing that it sacrifices the character that has made the City an attractive residential community, some called for less City spending. Antagonism towards specific redevelopment decisions was balanced, to some extent, by calls for greater or more constructive citizen involvement in City policy-making.

**Consultation and involvement (p. 9)** emerged as common ground. Attendees, including the panel of City officials, took the position that the more consultation and citizen involvement, the

better. Respondents to the online poll emphasized that more citizens should vote, volunteer for City boards and commissions and organize civic groups, and; that the City should reach out in specific new ways to better inform the community.

Each of the official panelists indicated a desire -- and named specific recent and future steps -- to increase citizen involvement in the City's work, e.g., an open house event at City Hall, a new online documents system on the schools' website, and recruitment of new residents to join in City planning work. The school board will make sure to speak regularly in public about the school system's most important strategic issues.

A number of participants felt that volunteers on City boards and commissions would benefit from more opportunities to review City policy-making from an integrated, over-all point of view.

**Next steps and financial support (p. 13):** Deliberation Day provided a safe public space for those well-versed and those new to City affairs to engage one another and learn. In this it succeeded, especially among the new residents to the City who attended. However, a conflict with a school event kept some parents away. Young adults and ethnic minorities were notably absent as well.

In response to those problems, and keeping in mind the stated desire for greater consultation and involvement, the Steering Committee is exploring other ideas, including the possibility of mini-deliberations this fall, in order to reach out to these and other City populations.

Cost is also a problem. Deliberation Day cost \$3,032, of which half came from a foundation grant. To survive in the long-term, Deliberation Day and mini-deliberations must cut costs and rely much less on printed advertising, which accounted for half of expenses. The Steering Committee hopes to work with other community groups to advertise one another's events to their respective e-mail lists. Deliberation Falls Church, in the future, will look to financial contributions from individuals, as well as community organizations. Information on how to contribute time and money is on p. 14.

Comments on this report are encouraged at [www.DFCCVA.org](http://www.DFCCVA.org). Comments are moderated and will appear after they are reviewed, usually within twelve hours. No comment will be excluded or edited on grounds other than incivility or assertions of bad faith.

### ***About this report and the Deliberation Day process***

The purpose of this report is to encourage continued deliberation about the future of Falls Church City. It does not provide answers or solutions to the challenges the City faces, but rather, it highlights the trade-offs and the common ground that emerged at Deliberation Day on March 17, 2007.

The challenges faced by the City today will return repeatedly for consideration as new opportunities and problems arise. The need for deliberation, in order to reconfirm or redefine what the trade-offs are and what the common ground is, will continue.

Establishing common ground is particularly important. It is a means to set achievable community goals, on which individuals, community organizations and government then must act. Cycles of deliberation and action can bind a community more closely together.

This report was prepared by Beth Offenbacher and Bill Corbett of the Center for Voter Deliberation at no charge. It was reviewed and issued by Jerry Barrett, Phil Duncan, Ellen Gross and Edie Smolinski of the Steering Committee for Deliberation Falls Church City.

May 11, 2007  
City of Falls Church, Virginia

Deliberation Falls Church City

[www.dfccva.org](http://www.dfccva.org)

*A chance to be heard and a reason to listen*