

**Statement by the Honorable Allison Silberberg about Ethics
December 15, 2018**

After City Manager Mark Jinks' comments at the Public Hearing on December 15, 2018, Mayor Silberberg provided the following remarks:

The City has taken some good steps forward, and I am certainly glad to see these steps, but I think it is also part of a whole process of moving forward and creating an even more ethical culture. We can always look at ourselves and our systems and see what is possible.

I am certainly glad that when our term began in early 2016, one of our first actions was to establish a citizen committee to draft a new Code of Ethics and an Ethics Pledge for the Mayor and Members of Council. I am 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 for all members of city boards, commissions, and task forces. Speaking for myself, I would have signed it when I was a member of the Economic Opportunities Commission, as that pledge speaks to all of our values.

Our review today, at the end of our term, is fitting. We have hardly touched on ethics matters since we adopted the recommendations of our review committee. Without an ethics committee or ethics commission, we have had no entity to review ethical principles, and I feel we could be doing better in order to reach our goal to make Alexandria a national leader in promoting ethical government. I think we have made some changes and that is good, but there are still opportunities to make it even better here.

For our next Council, I do have some thoughts. We must and 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 a candidate for elected office should accept a contribution from someone 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 that came from individuals or businesses that I know fall into this category. So while I appreciated their contribution, I did return them, given what I just stated.

We already pledge to take no action that will cause the appearance of personal gain or conflict of interest. So 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 potentially erodes public trust in our objectivity and commitment to ethics. We should not deny that there is an appearance of conflict of interest in the eyes

of the public when we consider and vote upon matters of financial importance to major campaign contributors.

My second recommendation is that 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 went from 10% to 3%, and that is good, but we should eliminate that loophole and disclose the entire ownership of any development deal. And elected officials should disclose any financial interest they have in a matter coming before Council in the future, 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 all the developments that come before us, and will be coming before future Councils. Small interests in large projects can mean huge dollars, as we all know and we all want to avoid the appearance of conflict of interest that comes from campaign contributions from developers of projects in the City of Alexandria.

I think we have come a long ways, but I think we can go much further. So that is what I offer to my colleagues now, and it is really for the next Council to consider and hopefully adopt.

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