

REMARKS BEFORE ALEXANDRIA CITY COUNCIL
Rabbi Jack Moline, President, Alexandria Interfaith Association
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Mr. Mayor, Members of Council,

Thank you for accommodating my remarks this evening. I will be uncharacteristically brief.

More than five years ago, Mayor Kerry Donley convened the religious leaders of Alexandria and asked us to be a force for good in the life of the city. We have endeavored over those years to forge personal bonds with each other and to seek an opportunity to improve the city in which all of us are proud to serve. I have lived here for fifteen years, longer than any other home I have known. I consider it a unique privilege to be a part of this community and even to pay the taxes that support public safety, public education and the diverse cultural and recreational life of this city. I am here on behalf of the Alexandria Interfaith Association to report on these past twelve months, as I promised I would. I come to report on our activities and to ask you to spend more of those precious tax dollars – and other funds as well – on improving the life of the city and the lives of some of its most vulnerable residents.

You have before you the Alexandria Interfaith Association's statement of moral principles for affordable housing. Its primary author is Paul Glist, who is our representative from the Baha'i community. The statement is presented by consensus, and clearly addresses the heartbreak we feel as we stand to lose both our history and our future by becoming merely a community of those with means. As the statement says, without relentless effort, we in Alexandria will perpetuate a legacy of prejudice and separation that has gripped our country, played out in euphemisms. Race, class and ethnicity are obscured by talk of prosperity and development.

We have also placed before you a call for action, practical first steps to open the conversation about affordable housing, and primarily low-income housing. Our year-long study of the matter leaves us more confused than ever about how the poor are served by this city. An almost unfathomable maze of agencies and restrictions, each protected

zealously by insiders and insulated from criticism by finger-pointing at others, makes accountability all but impossible. And if we with salaries, flexible work hours and support staff cannot penetrate this confusion, then imagine the dilemma faced by the target populations whose secure shelter seems to depend on navigating the labyrinth.

So we expect City Council to take the matter in hand and to be fully responsible for meeting the need for affordable housing in Alexandria. We do so by calling for a tripling of available units over the next ten years and a maintenance of that percentage in the years beyond. We call for City Council to hold developers responsible for building those units as a condition of development, or by making meaningful payments to a superfund for housing that City Council will commit to actually spend. We call for a redefinition of the function of the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority to limit its control over the lives of its clients. And we applaud the suggestions of many in the faith community and members of Council to develop a non-profit housing corporation in the private sector with the cooperation of real estate agents, service organizations and faith communities. We hope that the same efforts that brought us together will bring together this non-profit corporation. In fact, nothing would delight us more than to see this project undertaken by a person of talent and outspoken concern, our retiring Mayor Donley.

Listen, my friends – and you are my friends, so I speak frankly to you. You have squandered the opportunity to meet this need already. Cameron Station and the Eisenhower Valley were developed without meaningful low-income housing availability. Potomac Yards, an ideal location from every perspective, bought off its obligation for a bowl of lentil soup. And now, as we drool over the tax revenues from the Berg, we are prepared to warehouse the poor or chase them into other jurisdictions instead of doing right by these equal and cherished members of our community.

And so now, Mr. Mayor and members of City Council, I return the words to you that you so rightly spoke to us. You have asked us to be a force for good in the life of the city. Now we ask you to do the same by responding to this call for action.

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Moral Principles for Affordable Housing

Our world is enriched when we embrace the entirety of humankind as one family. We experience discovery, challenges and growth. We are all impoverished when we lose variety in our neighbors and friends. "The garden which is pleasing to the eye and which makes the heart glad, is the garden in which are growing side by side flowers of every hue, form and perfume, and the joyous contrast of color is what makes for charm and beauty."ⁱ

We are all enriched by diversity, and all impoverished when we lose variety in our neighbors.

Our community is larger than just people of means.

We lose our history and our future by becoming merely a community of those with means.

Our community includes our neighbors who embody our rich history—a long history as a community of free blacks. We lose our history if we force our neighbors to leave. Our community includes those who wish to join us. Our development and prosperity in Northern Virginia has been fueled by the energies of those who strive to improve their lives and the lives of those around them. We rob the future by barring our gates to new entrants to our economy.

Our community includes our children. We squander our investment in building an Alexandria community if our children cannot afford to come home.

Money is not the only measure of status and belonging in our community. We are all the rays of one sun, the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. It is unjust to exile the poor by reason of their poverty, or to bar our doors to the stranger.

Money cannot be the only measure of status and belonging in our community.

America remains shackled by a great legacy of prejudice and separation. We and our children will not overcome that legacy if we live in a homogeneous community. Our blind imitation of the past and our silence becomes "the ally of the forces of social stagnation."ⁱⁱ

Without relentless effort, we will perpetuate a legacy of prejudice and separation.

We must raise the call for justice for those who cannot speak for themselves. We must "be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression."ⁱⁱⁱ

We have a moral obligation to speak for the voiceless.

For what purpose do we raise public money, if not to aid those in need?

For what else are we collecting taxes? To whom else should people of low and moderate income look to remedy the conditions under which they are living today?

ⁱ Bahá'í Writings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 52

ⁱⁱ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail

ⁱⁱⁱ Bahá'í Writings, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 285