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Testimony for the Alexandria City Council, September 17, 2011

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9-17-11

Our city and our nation have had many ceremonies during the past week to remember first responders - the real heroes of 9/11. Who could forget?

Amazingly, the Department of Defense has either forgotten or never fully absorbed the very real lesson of their ultimate sacrifice. With 9/11/01 as its impetus and the Base Relocation and Closure Act of 2005 as its congressional mantra, DoD has erected a nearly billion-dollar Ft. Belvoir beachhead 8 blocks from where I live - and have lived for 30 years - at 1000 North Vail St. in Alexandria.

The Army Corps of Engineers turned over keys to the facility last month to DoD's Washington Headquarters Service with assurances the building meets all metrics. The move-in for 6,400 workers began Aug. 9.

Mission accomplished? WHS, the Army Corps, and the City of Alexandria all admit to having zero - nada, no, none - first-responder strategy for protecting: (a) workers at the site, (b) Alexandrians who live nearby, and (c) commuters along one of the most heavily-trafficked corridors in the nation.

City Fire Chief Adam Thiel says his personnel probably couldn't even reach someone having a heart attack at the BRAC building in time to save a life. The reason: Alexandria has no fire station west of 395.

On Monday night, Council will hear a "progress report" on the Beauregard Stakeholders Group Plan. You likely will hear that the developers adjacent to the Ft. Belvoir annex are being asked to pay - and are agreeing to pay - for a new fire station as part of a "bucket list" exchange of proffers to purchase community approval in return for more than tripling population density in the neighborhood. Did those of us who attended these stakeholders meetings agree to any such quid pro quo? WAY "NO"!!! Just as we never agreed to being annexed by Ft. Belvoir.

DoD's own employees are nervous about the safety of the site, as TIME Magazine (Sept. 6) and The Washington Times (Sept. 12) both have reported. The real lesson of 9/11 too often seems to be: Act first, figure out systemic risk later.

Public safety is the responsibility and sacred trust of city - local - government. We must build this new first-responder structure, build it now, and pay for it ourselves. We are all stakeholders. Public safety is not up for negotiation; certainly it is not a bargaining chip.

We need to do better than to ceremoniously remember the dead 9/11 first responders. It's time to think how to live smarter, safer, more deliberately; to value life, community, and the systems of support that make both life and community possible; to listen to the first responders who are still alive. And to listen to the needs of the people whose duty it is for you to serve.

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