

# Proposed FY 26 Arlington Budget Eviscerates Longstanding Land Conservation Partnership

## What is at stake?

- With Arlington beginning their county budget deliberations for FY 2026, potential spending cuts proposed by the county manager include their annual allocation of \$86,900 to the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust (NVCT).
- Cutting NVCT's annual funding would be a shortsighted and unfortunate decision that would effectively end a productive two-decade long relationship that the county has had with the only land trust actively working in the area.
- NVCT's annual funding allotment from Arlington County allows the organization to fund land stewardship, conservation, and community outreach programming that focuses on land protection, environmental education, and partner building. This is capacity which would be lost if the county investment is not continued.
- Over the past three years since NVCT's last MOU renewal, the organization has contributed \$1,197,000 in financial value for the County's approximate \$260,000 investment.
  - Even when excluding the value of the Terborgh property acquisition, NVCT contributed \$351,100 to the county partnership in the last three years, or \$117,033 per year
- Despite investing more into Arlington County than the organization is being funded annually, and as costs have risen for all goods and services across the board, NVCT has not asked for a base funding increase of any kind from Arlington County since FY 15. Cost Of Living Adjustments have increased NVCT's county supported funds by slightly less than \$7,000 over the past decade, but by nearly all measures, NVCT is already working more for less each year based on inflation and prices.
- NVCT was a key contributor in the creation of the county's Forestry and Natural Resources Plan that the board approved just over a year ago. 11 of the plan goals include NVCT as an important partner, so eliminating the organization's funding would send a clear message that the county's FNRP implementation plan for tree canopy preservation, wildlife protection, and natural resource management are not a priority.
- While recommending an end to NVCT's annual funding, the Department of Parks and Recreation is asking for significant new taxpayer dollars for invasive plant removal. Many of NVCT's conservation easements are adjacent to parks and county owned lands, and the organization's partnerships, volunteer events, and outside funding have been successful in controlling invasive plants on those sites. Without further funding support, that invasive plant management would be in jeopardy, likely costing the county more in future.
- Discontinuing financial support for NVCT would send a very clear message that Arlington is no longer prioritizing the protection of open space and natural areas by significantly limiting the

options that residents have to conserve valuable wildlife habitat, tree canopy and key stream/creek resources.

- NVCT annually stewards and monitors 33 conservation easement-protected parcels which include 5 small nature preserve parcels in Arlington. The stewardship and protection of these landscapes is an obligation that would be jeopardized by funding cuts.
  - These preserves include the Terborgh property that the county encouraged NVCT to protect and steward in 2022 rather than see additional housing go in at the site.
    - NVCT has worked diligently over the past year and a half to turn the Terborgh property into a community garden in partnership with Friends of Urban Agriculture, and this proposed funding cut puts the entire garden project in jeopardy.
  
- In FY 2022, Arlington County budget language specifically directed NVCT to *“create and pursue a pipeline of projects and prospects for land conservation in Arlington aligned with not only our Department of Parks and Recreation priorities, but also our stormwater management and neighborhood conservation efforts. The Board directs the County Manager to ensure that appropriate departments, such as Community Planning, Housing and Development and Environmental Services consult with NVCT to share priorities and weigh on NVCT conservation prospects. This multi-departmental involvement should proceed along the same time horizon as the re-negotiations of the NVCT / Arlington County Memorandum of Agreement on other educational and service-delivery opportunities.”*
  - In response, NVCT raised nearly \$50,000 in outside grant funds and put hundreds of hours of staff time into a new Strategic Conservation Plan GIS mapping tool that allows the organization, on a parcel-by-parcel basis, to rank all properties in the county based on their environmental value and prioritize them for outreach, landowner engagement, and conservation.
  - County staff and board who have previewed and worked with NVCT on the mapping project have been excited by the results and implementation throughout the last year, and this work is expanding conservation opportunities now and into the future.
  
- Through support from the county, NVCT has been able to focus staff time and efforts on expanding our community engagement efforts in Arlington. The Terborgh Terrace Gardens are a great example of this, where over the past year and a half, NVCT has invested significant money and staff time into building a community garden from scratch in partnership with Friends of Urban Agriculture (FOUA) to support their Plot Against Hunger program, directly aiding the county in addressing its food security goals.
  
- Other notable partnerships that are contributing to serving Arlington’s communities through outreach, education and conservation include EcoAction Arlington, the Student Conservation Association, and Earth Sangha. In addition, NVCT has joined the DRE Partners Together cohort run by the county’s Office of RACE in order to connect with additional local organizations and find opportunities for collaboration to connect with and support underserved communities
  - NVCT’s strong commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility has driven the organization to join this effort and led to the annual Conservationists of Color Read-a-Thon held specifically in Arlington. This event brings together our community to uplift the voices of naturalists and conservationists from diverse backgrounds that are often

not highlighted, making this a key educational event that the organization hopes to continue to grow in the coming years.

- None of these efforts can continue without investment from the county as these relationships, events, and projects require significant staff time and resources to plan and maintain.
- Unlike neighboring jurisdictions such as Fairfax and Alexandria, Arlington does not forgive or abate property taxes on conserved lands despite NVCT's nonprofit status, and NVCT pays property taxes on the nature preserves it owns out of the funds it receives annually from Arlington. Cutting NVCT's annual funding would create a disincentive to own or protect more land in Arlington if NVCT is forced to pay those property taxes without county support.
- The overall value that NVCT conserved properties and preserves provide are worth much more to the county than the annual \$86,900 in funds that is provided to NVCT each year. These lands:
  - protect water source areas to ensure clean water,
  - create natural storm water controls,
  - conserve important urban wildlife habitat,
  - minimize the urban heat island affect,
  - protect mature trees,
  - protect historic resources,
  - increase property values and build pride in communities
- NVCT provides a valuable service to landowners and citizens interested in preservation outcomes even when conservation deals cannot be completed right away. The organization provides technical and confidential advice that helps landowners make better land use decisions that other environmental organizations in Arlington do not have the capacity and expertise to provide.
  - Lost funding from Arlington could well mean that NVCT is no longer able to guarantee landowner relationships and sensitive family discussions are continued at a level that will ultimately lead to important conservation outcomes in the future.
- Land trust work means taking a long view with landowners who are considering easements, bequests, family financial planning, etc. – in other words, many projects take years to develop.
  - The Terborgh property success in 2022 is a perfect example of this. NVCT worked closely with Anne Terborgh beginning in 2014 on conservation options, without which the county would not have received new parkland nor would NVCT have a new community garden.
- NVCT's annual financial support from Arlington County represents .00005 percent of the county's overall budget, an investment well worth making in our communities for wildlife protection, clean water, natural areas, trails, tree canopy and overall livability at a time when overdevelopment and climate change are reshaping our neighborhoods and adversely affecting quality of life.