

Culture of Arrogance

To the Editor:

On Dec. 14, 2013, City Council rejected a Planning Commission recommendation and permitted stadium lighting at proposed tennis courts at T.C. Williams. In doing so, it knowingly breached 2007 written requirements the city and Alexandria City Public Schools proposed, and formally approved by the city, ACPS and hundreds of citizens. In the process, the What's Next Alexandria effort was exposed as empty rhetoric.

The agreement prohibiting lighting has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s. When the city sought to build T.C. Williams High School, and under the guise of "urban renewal," the city conducted a campaign of denigrating the families, whom it had earlier ejected from their homes at Fort Ward, to generate public support to get their property. As part of its seizure, the families were again re-located behind the school and the city committed not to light the athletic fields. In 2004, citizens (including the families) who were engaged in the negotiations for the proposed new T.C. Williams facilities suggested that it be designed to keep athletic fields away from those properties to ameliorate future concerns about lighting. The city and ACPS declined. However, the city and ACPS insisted that it would never seek lighting at the athletic fields, inserted a lighting prohibition and consultation requirement with the families, and reduced it to written and binding requirements. The new school

opened in 2007.

Thus, what the mayor and council casually dismissed as an obsolete relic was a 6-year-old written agreement formally proposed, evaluated and approved by all parties, including this mayor. It was the culmination of years of negotiations involving many citizens and public officials, dozens of issues, and 60 years of checkered history. The process of engagement leading to the agreement met the principles of What's Next and served as a model for how to do it right. Yet the city discarded it with nary a thought of the consequences.

When the city and ACPS announced that they planned to breach, we were hopeful that the What's Next Alexandria effort would have stimulated improved dialogue and an open process. After all, the What's Next handbook states in bold italics that "The community is a partner and shares responsibility, as they know best the issues affecting their neighborhoods The primary goal of the What's Next Alexandria initiative is to improve the quality of Alexandria's public participation process so that members of the community are actively, constructively, and meaningfully involved in the public decisions that affect their lives and see outcomes as reflective of their input"

Surely, we thought, it would require something urgent and compelling to breach a recent successful agreement, and the community's views and concerns would receive a respectful audience.

One would be wrong. At the Dec. 14 hearing, citizens who

asked the city to honor its signed agreement and address well-grounded concerns were called bullies; an ACPS official implied homeowners are terrorists because they "hold us hostage;" others injected race. One council member dismissively sneered, "If you don't like it, just pull your drapes." At a Dec. 5 school board meeting, ACPS proposed that it conceal what it was doing, and play games with appropriated funds to do it. There were also disparaging remarks directed at the families at that meeting. The mayor and council sat in support of the demagogues.

What's Next was not even mentioned.

In the end, nothing really changed — ACPS never explained, and the mayor and council showed no interest in, where ACPS was getting \$600,000 beyond what was appropriated to pay for the courts and lights (we know what happened the last time ACPS moved money around when no one was looking); what changed since 2007 causing the city to glibly breach; what impacts this will have on the surrounding community; or whether the project can meet City Code. We still do not know any of this. We have to pass the bill to find out what's in it.

I and others had suggested at the hearing that the city approve the tennis courts, defer the lights for now, direct ACPS and city staff to engage the community to address the deficiencies (an existing site condition requirement), and resolve the issues consistent with the What's Next effort. Had ACPS and the city met its own requirements,

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including consultation, the problems with lighting the courts could have been mitigated and the hearing uneventful. But the mayor, council, and ACPS were not interested in civic engagement, sound policy or fiscal prudence; they were interested in gaming the system and victory. This decision required ignoring history, blithely blowing off carefully negotiated agreements before the ink was dry, and undermining What's Next. But it was more important to the City and ACPS to win. "Pull your drapes," not the soothing rhetoric of What's Next, captures the city government's culture of arrogance.

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