

To: Arlington County Board

From: Gail Raiman, Chair, Arlington Commission for the Arts

Date: January 19, 2012

RE: Virginia Square Black Box Theatre: Endorsement and Checklist of Key Issues

The Arlington Commission for the Arts expresses its **strong support for the approval of the Virginia Square Black Box Theater** as part of Site Plan #386. Mark Longo, the Commission's representative to the SPRC on this project, and Terri Prell, another Arts Commissioner, have worked with County staff and the applicant to address a variety of issues throughout the design of the Black Box Theatre and have kept the Commission apprised throughout this process. In the Commission's view, this version is a major improvement over the previously approved one from 2007. Substantial work was done to improve the space, its size and its functionality and the Commission believes that the County now has before it a theater that has great potential to be successful and become a cornerstone of the Arlington arts community. That being said, we believe that ***the following items could ensure even greater success for the Black Box Theatre facility:***

1. **Keep Bonus Density Onsite.** In order for the Black Box Theatre to be **"turn-key" ready** the theatre community will need to raise some \$500,000 of funds (per county staff estimates) to finish out the facility before it can truly be used. We believe that the \$1 million dollars in bonus density provided by the applicant under Section 36.H.5.a. should remain onsite until we can ensure that the community benefit of the two onsite elements, the theater and the plaza, are sufficiently met.
2. **Have AED Lead the Creation of a Business Plan for Theatre.** The County has estimated that operating costs (including pass-thru costs and real estate taxes) will run about \$250,000 annually. Now that Cultural Affairs is part of Arlington Economic Development, we would recommend that AED, in partnership with the Arlington Arts Commission, lead the process to **develop a business plan** for the facility. This partnership should be charged with researching and presenting a variety of options for the successful operation of the Black Box Theatre. We urge that this business model should be developed with the aim to create economically viable performance opportunities for Arlington arts organizations, while minimizing the financial obligations of the County.
3. **Increase Theater Height By Six Inches.** The county's theater design consultant posited that in order for the space not to feel too small, and the audience not to feel claustrophobic, that the catwalk needs to be at a certain height above the deck. The consultant said that the result would leave a space of 5'8" to walk in above the catwalk, except where there were ducts, where it would be less. If it would be possible to gain **an additional 6" in height** that would be ideal; we would prefer to see the ceiling raised rather than have the lights 6-9" closer to the audience

We urge the Board to approve this Site Plan amendment and take the next step in the creation of an amenity that is **an investment in the community well beyond the arts**. A black box theater in Virginia Square helps realize the vision of our community, is additive, fills an important niche in performance spaces throughout Arlington and maintains Arlington's position as a leader both regionally and nationally in its support for the arts.