



PHOTO BY DAVID SCHULTZ/THE CONNECTION

Hundreds packed Lomax AME Zion Church for an event encouraging the county to save social services programs.

Favola Faces Interfaith Group

Board Chair agrees to fund dental, ESL programs, not cut affordable housing.

By DAVID SCHULTZ
THE CONNECTION

Despite declining revenues that are forcing officials to consider budget cuts for the first time in years, County Board Chair Barbara Favola (D) said this weekend that she would not support scaling back Arlington's affordable housing programs.

Favola also promised to increase funding for a local free dental clinic as well as for English as a Second Language programs and said that she would work to

expedite the construction a new affordable housing complex in South Arlington.

She made these commitments at a rally organized by Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement, or VOICE, a group that seeks to organize the area's religious community for political action. Hundreds of people representing nearly a dozen Arlington houses of worship packed the chapel at Lomax AME Zion Church to encourage Favola and other board members to take social services programs off of the county's chopping block.

"We do not want to erode the services that

support families," Favola said. "We will do our very best to exercise fairness and compassion in our budget."

FAVOLA, ALONG with her County Board colleague Jay Fisette (D), was called up to the pulpit at Lomax to answer yes-or-no questions about their budget priorities in front of a standing-room-only crowd. Before the board members were called to answer the questions, several speeches were given about the vital importance of county programs.

Kristine Gabster spoke about the prohibitive cost of dental care. She had an emergency root canal in March of last year but has been unable to afford a crown to cover it. Gabster said that an

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extra \$25,000 for the Northern Virginia Dental Clinic would be enough to hire another full-time dentist there. "One small contribution from you will make a big difference to people like me," she told Favola and Fisette.

Yared Lakew spoke about the need for scholarships so immigrants to the county can learn English. "Scholarships are absolutely mandatory for a man living by himself who wants to pursue his dream," Lakew, who immigrated to Arlington from Ethiopia two years ago, said.

Karen Archer is an Arlington Public Schools employee who is looking to buy a house in Arlington to be closer to her ailing mother. But she has been unable to find a property that is both affordable and spacious enough for her family. "Are families welcome here?" she asked. "Are the people who work and serve here good enough to live here?"

BOTH FAVOLA and Fisette agreed to nearly all of VOICE's requests. They said they would increase the amount of English scholarships and would allocate \$25,000 to the Northern Virginia Dental Clinic. They also promised not to cut funding for affordable housing and to expand so-called "safety



Father Gerry Creedon of St. Charles Borromeo Church spoke of the need to maintain social services in grim economic times.

net" housing.

One area where the two board members hedged was on the funding of Macedonia Baptist Church's new affordable housing

complex. The South Arlington church is looking to erect an apartment complex that will feature below-market-rate rents on land it owns in South Arlington. But the project

needs more funding from the county to be realized and VOICE wants the board to address this issue this month.

Favola said that this would not be possible because more negotiating needs to be done. But she said she would work towards putting it on the board's agenda in March and promised that the project would come to fruition before the end of the year.

The rally ended with a speech from Macedonia's pastor, the Rev. Leonard Hamlin. He called the organization of Arlington's religious community "uniquely wonderful" and led the energetic crowd at Lomax's balmy, unseasonably warm chapel in chants of "Yes we will! Yes we will!"

ALL FIVE County Board members were slated to attend the rally. But, due to a state law that regulates County Board meetings, Chris Zimmerman (D), Mary Hynes (D) and Walter Tejada (D) were forced to back out at the last minute.

State law requires that, whenever more than two board members gather to discuss county business, the meeting must be publicized at least three days in advance. Because the County Board office failed to get the notice out in time, the other three board members were legally prohibited from attending the event.