

**Elizabeth Bennett-Parker**  
**Alexandria Chamber of Commerce Survey**

**1. Introduction**

I was born in Alexandria to two Naval officers who instilled in me a sense of service to others and to our community. In particular, my mom would always tell me, “if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.”

I’ve applied that belief to my entire career, including starting my own business. I founded Fruitcycle to fight food waste. We bought fruit that would otherwise go to waste from local farmers and turned it into healthy snacks, while also hiring women who were formerly incarcerated or homeless. I wanted to fight the paradox that we waste 40 percent of our food while 1 in 6 Americans are hungry.

As a small business owner, I’ve been responsible for hiring employees, making payroll, and balancing a budget. I know the razor thin line between profitability and survival. Small businesses are the lifeblood of our economy; in addition to attracting new industries to Alexandria, we must also build up and support our small businesses to ensure their success and survival.

I hired my first employee through the local nonprofit Together We Bake. Over time, I realized we were doing similar things and thought we could have a larger impact together, so we joined forces. We provide job training and personal development for women in need. The issues that face the women in our program affect a lot of Alexandrians – and there is only so much we can do as a small nonprofit. That’s why I’m running for City Council: to elevate the work I do every day to the highest levels of Alexandria. I want all families in Alexandria to succeed, alongside our businesses.

I am committed to making sure Alexandria remains a great place to live, work, and play. Balanced economic development must be a top priority so that our city is a vibrant, exciting place to live and visit. It is also crucial to help offset the current imbalance in revenue generation.

Many families are barely making it because housing is too expensive and affordable places to live are becoming increasingly scarce. Seniors who have lived their entire lives in our City deserve the decency of retiring here. Our teachers, first responders, and others who serve the city should be able to live here, as well.

In addition to a place to live, our children also need a world-class education. We need to address our capacity issues and modernize our facilities. Alexandria has excellent teachers and we must work with ACPS to empower them to help close the very real and significant achievement gaps for low-income students. And more than anything, young Alexandrians need a strong start in life with high-quality pre-K.

In the nonprofit world, to help people you must build coalitions, collaborate, find consensus, and constantly do more with less. In the small business world, you must make tough decisions to balance your budget and survive. I will bring those skills to City Council.

## **2. Attract**

As a small business creator and innovator, I believe strongly in finding new and creative ways to support our business community, especially as Alexandria is facing steeper competition from rapidly developing areas in the region.

City Council's efforts have been, at times, inequitably focused on areas close to the waterfront. I envision Alexandria as a city where the vitality of Old Town and Del Ray extends to the West End, with as many visitors near Landmark every weekend as there are at the waterfront. So many areas in the City have untapped potential. I also see Alexandria as a city that competes for creative small businesses that attract out-of-state and international visitors with as much vigor as we compete for larger industries.

The next City Council must prioritize creativity in their economic development pursuits. The West End is ripe for makerspaces, food halls and incubators for consumer-focused retail. Such projects in places like Portland, Oregon were jump-started through a commitment from city leadership to pursue small businesses looking for more affordable leasing opportunities outside urban centers and nurturing new talent looking to test-drive innovative ideas.

Aside from directly supporting these businesses, it is also critical that we make sure we have a well-trained and educated populace at all levels of the workforce to support and attract businesses; affordable housing so that it is easier to attract and retain employees and they are not wasting time and energy on long commutes; and a robust public transportation system to make it easier and less expensive for employees and customers to access our local businesses. In addition to school and transportation infrastructure, we must also improve our broadband infrastructure to attract and retain businesses.

AEDP and Visit Alexandria do an amazing job of promoting our City and we must ensure consistent collaboration and communication with them, and with the business community at large, to make sure that it is clear that Alexandria is "open for business."

## **3. Sustain**

I used to work at the National Governors Association and one of our favorite phrases was “one size does not fit all.” What works in one state, or in one neighborhood, may not work in another. However, we can learn from other jurisdictions about best practices and innovative solutions to challenges we are all facing. We need all possible solutions on the table and I strongly support exploring public-private partnerships to address some of our infrastructure challenges and other needs. Ferdinand Day is an excellent example of an innovative solution that converted a vacant office building into a school; this model should continue to be explored, especially given our office vacancy rate and our need for more schools capacity.

As a City Council member, my responsibility will be to advocate for funding for our schools and to strengthen the partnership with the school system to make sure the City is working to support our schools. We need to increase school capacity, modernize facilities and support students and families outside the classroom. We also need to enhance connections among pre-k, ACPS, Workforce Development, NOVA Community College, and our businesses to prepare students for the future. As a small business creator and co-director of an employment training program, I know how these changes will bolster our City, both by supporting residents and providing economic opportunity, but also in supplying the workforce needed to attract and support Alexandria businesses.

Alexandria needs to do more to insure the availability of affordable housing. I support exploring zoning changes that would allow for micro-units, ADUs, and increase density in certain areas, particularly near metros, that would ultimately increase the supply of housing.

A key aspect to the vibrancy of our communities is whether they are easily accessible and walkable. Voters across the City have pointed out areas where sidewalks are lacking or in poor condition. Parking has also been a concern; we must make sure our garages are well-marked and easy for visitors to access. We also need to maintain parks and keep them safe for all users. These relatively minor infrastructure investments are one way to keep residents connected and make Alexandria an even more appealing place to live. Recreation areas that are attractive to visitors of all ages - such as the public spaces planned as part of the Old Town Waterfront redevelopment, also draw customers to our businesses. I strongly support programs like the AEDP pop-up program and the King Street Initiative, as they are crucial to help drive and support economic growth.

#### **4. City Process**

As both a small business owner and a nonprofit leader in the City, I know well how our local government can be a help and a hindrance. Business owners face so many administrative tasks in their daily operations - from dealing with vendors and the bank, to managing staff and customers, to abiding by government rules and regulations. I support streamlining the City's various administrative processes to make it as easy as possible for business owners to comply with city regulations and make required payments. I especially want the City to work for businesses that are based here, that's why I went to bat for local businesses in seeking updated rules for who should be given priority to sell products at the Alexandria Farmers' Market.

I also want to make our government more accessible for everyone, including making it easier for stakeholders to comment on proposed budgets and council actions and making City government as transparent as possible. We need to be listening to affected parties before decisions are made. The City also needs to be predictable - if we say we are doing something, businesses need to be able to count on the City to follow-through and that it will enforce rules and requirements consistently.

## **5. State and Regional Issues**

No matter what area of the City I am in, I hear from voters about the need to reduce traffic. There are things the City can and should do to make improvements, but eliminating traffic congestion, which also requires significant investments in public transportation, is going to require a regional approach and state funding. Traffic and the ability to easily get around the City do not just impact the people who live here, but it also affects businesses - both their workforce and their customers. I am committed to lobbying to replace NVTA funding that was redirected toward WMATA and continue dedicated funding for WMATA. I will also work with other jurisdictions to find solutions for congestion, cut-through traffic, and more accessible public transportation. Northern Virginia is the economic engine of the Commonwealth and the ease with which people are able to make and spend money here has a significant impact on the rest of the state. I also see how critical reliable and accessible public transportation is with the women I work with every day, all of whom want to be reliable workers and support themselves and their families, but often cannot afford cars.

The City also has infrastructure needs beyond transportation. As climate change increases the severity of weather events, we have to plan for addressing increased flooding and storm water run-off. The City is already working to remediate sewer overflows in Old Town, but as we are seeing across the country, we have other infrastructure needs that will likely need financial support beyond what the City can provide on its own, so working with our regional, state, and federal partners will continue to be crucial.

