

Recently there has been much debate over the placement of a shelter to be built on the corner of route 1 and Beacon Hill Road. We have seen the argument against helping the most vulnerable homeless population take shape - it started with “there is no transparency” then it evolved to unfounded concerns about safety, property values, mental health of homeless individuals, and traffic congestion and parking.

These myths and misconceptions have been crafted by neighbors as an excuse for discrimination and cruelty. And I imagine that many neighborhood associations are promoting these false narratives and fears.

In Fairfax County, approximately 10% of the residents identify as African American. However, it is estimated that 50% of the homeless population in our area is African American. This is the purest example of systemic racism.

Homelessness is a problem we can work to solve, construction of a shelter in the most optimal setting close to jobs and public transportation are the rationale for its location. Yet, a small group of mostly white neighbors continues to fight against something that could be a step closer to unraveling the systemic racism in our county, state, and country that promotes and maintains greater and greater obstacles for homeless individuals to have a better, more secure future.

It is time that all of the Mount Vernon area becomes a model community to speak up, stand up, and act to undue systemic racism. The homeless population is often hidden and powerless. We must question how a group of property owners and neighborhood associations gets to vote on if the homeless population gets shelter or not. Please, Please, Please question this - no matter the popularity of the project of this nature, - property owners and neighborhood associations get to vote on if the homeless population gets shelter and services or not.

And please don't let the next thought be - I want people in need to get help, but I want it to be located somewhere else. Undoing systemic racism means doing what is right, and this location offers proximity to transportation, employment, and the actual potential of reducing homelessness in our community.

It may not be popular, but it is the moral thing to do. Support the shelter's proposed location.

Please show that our community is ready to speak up, stand up, and most importantly act. Many neighbors support this project. And as is sometimes the case, the right thing to do is not always popular and it can be difficult. Support the shelter now, speak up, stand up, and act to end systemic racism.

James Abbatiello, resident of Spring Bank neighborhood