

Candidates Response

After our candidate forum, one question from a delegate was sent in for the County Board candidates. As we had to limit the number of questions, the candidates were willing to answer the question in writing. Below you will find the question and the candidate responses in alphabetical order.

I wanted to bring up the 4MRV project, specifically the Jennie Dean Park component. It's very clear there have been a series of blunders in the process.

1 an ongoing lack of regard for the history of the area

2 excluding Nauck reps from decision making conversations

3 inaccurate use of data

To name a few. This is not how arlington portends to work through a community process. John, you have been the liaison to the 4MRV project and are familiar with these issues.

Matt: I'm interested how you would get this planning process back on track, if elected.

John, how are you planning on correcting these problems moving forward, if re-elected.

DE FERRANTI RESPONSE:

It is concerning to hear about problems with the Jennie Dean Park component of the Four Mile Run Valley study area. Jennie Dean Park holds a particular importance to Arlington and our history. While it is not unusual for areas of disagreement to emerge with planning projects, I have heard some unique concerns with this one that focus on transparency and inclusion. When we ask volunteers to engage in a community process, it is important to create an environment where all voices are heard and respected. Even though the Board has voted already on the Park Master Plan for the area, I would want to engage with all parties to assess the positive and negative aspects of this particular process. I would also like to meet with representatives of the Nauck community to understand better how to engage them in the implementation of the plan.

Let me know if you have any questions.

Thanks,

Matt

VIHSTADT RESPONSE:

Jesse, thanks for your multifaceted question as an active participant in the Four Mile Run Valley planning process. I can certainly understand your perspective and agree with you that there have been a number of stumbles along the way.

Not by way of excuse, but to put things in context, I will note that, to my knowledge, this ambitious process was the first of its kind due to (a) the simultaneous planning of multiple parks and an area plan and (b) having multiple County departments at the table simultaneously, including Parks & Recreation (DPR), Community Planning, Housing & Development (CPHD), Department of Environmental Services (DES), and, very briefly, Arlington Economic Development (AED).

These multiple planning targets by area designation and a multidisciplinary approach—however well-meaning—did result in planning gaps and mis-steps, and the mix of consultants also contributed to mixed

signals and confusion, as well. Certain changes in personnel by the County and the consultants also contributed, at times, to a sense of unsettlement or worse.

Even with multiple departments having a seat at the table, not all departments had representatives at all meetings, and that, too, I believe, resulted in communication gaps and poor understandings of varied perspectives and progress along the way. There was also the inevitable, and natural, tension between the host civic association, who viewed the planning understandably as impacting a primary asset in their back or front yard, as the case may be, and those from other civic associations and/or various advisory boards and commissions who, also understandably, provided a broader perspective.

In addition to Jennie Dean Park issues, I also recall that there were some significant concerns about initial staff designs on sub-areas C and D, though later iterations seemed to be well-received.

I know that some of your concerns have as their foundation the way the charge was written (a presumption of no net loss in field sports), which is what I think you are trying to say at @3–Inaccurate use of data. The Board was purposeful in adapting the charge it did, informed after considerable community input.

Your history observation is noted, though I am glad that Marco Rivera of staff, at my urging, did reach out to Dr. Alfred O. Taylor Jr. and I understand that they had a productive conversation. This should have happened much earlier in our process, and perhaps in more of a conversational round-table setting, rather than a 1 and 1 arrangement.

As with any planning construct, the process is a dynamic one, and not everything can be anticipated or even speculated. In addition, these processes, in order to work, also mean negotiation accommodation and compromise, and give & take among stakeholder and County staff as well. With 23 or 24 members of the working group, there were times when it seemed to be that there were just as many opinions about certain issues. There will inevitably be those who are happier and those who are less happy with either individual decisions along the way or the ultimate outcome, or both.

Jesse, I know we have exchanged emails a number of times through the process, and you have also corresponded with others. I'm thinking there could be real value, now that we have adopted the Park Master Plan and will be adopting the Area Plan this fall, for you to pen a post-mortem as to where you think things went awry (and of course, if there are any from your perspective, what you thought worked, as well).

One thing I would like to see happen on these lengthy processes is, when the County Board has a "check in" work session during the process, that this work session be much more interactive with the full membership of the working group, rather than primarily a County Board/staff-led presentation, with some conversation thrown in. That is the best way, in my view, to have a robust conversation about where you've been and where you're going. Perhaps a third check-in session would have been valuable in the 4MRV context, as well.

I have rambled on here, so please follow up if you need particular clarification, and let me know if you plan to pen a post-mortem like I suggest.

Best regards, and I appreciate your candid perspective.

John Vihstadt
Member, Arlington County Board