

Arlington County Civic Federation Task Force in Governance and Election Reform Resolution on Recommendations

WHEREAS the Arlington County Civic Federation (ACCF) historically had a role in establishing Arlington County (the County) and continues to provide ongoing recommendations for improvements in governance and our community;

WHEREAS the ACCF continually seeks:

- To improve the quality of our elected officials' representation and policy making,
- To improve citizen engagement and voter turnout,
- To improve our County and School Board's ability to reflect the opinion and diversity of our communities
- To improve the diversity of our candidates and the quality of campaigns;

WHEREAS in 2020, the ACCF established the Task Force in Governance and Election Reform (TiGER) to reexamine our county governing bodies and to provide recommendations for potential election reforms and structural reforms for governance as well as county board and school board representation, if any are warranted using the above as guiding principles;¹

WHEREAS in 2020, the State of Virginia passed laws (VA HB 1103, HB 506) permitting Arlington County to use Ranked Choice Voting in its local elections;²

WHEREAS the Arlington County Government with its County Manager system of administration is generally speaking a well-run polity;³

WHEREAS our County Board and School Board each have 5 elected members; which number has not changed since 1930, when the County had 25,000 residents;⁴

WHEREAS the County is now far more populous and diverse, and it faces increasing challenges to remain properly responsive to our many communities;⁵

¹ Arlington Civic Federation Website: Task Force in Governance and Election Reform (TiGER)

<https://www.civfed.org/about-us/committees/tiger/>

² Open States: Search and Track Legislation Ranked choice voting; elections for local governing bodies, local option pilot program. <https://openstates.org/va/bills/2020/HB1103/> County manager plan; election of board members by instant runoff voting <https://openstates.org/va/bills/2020/HB506/>

³ Arlington Adopts the County Manager Form of Government Robert Nelson Anderson *Arlington Historical Society Magazine* October 1958 pp 52-67 <http://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/1958-6CtyMgr.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ United States Census QuickFacts Arlington County, Virginia
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/arlingtoncountyvirginia>

WHEREAS the County is deeply interconnected with the metropolitan region with 7.5 million people and many polities;⁶

WHEREAS in 2021, the State of Virginia passed a law requiring localities to ensure election features that enable diverse racial representation;⁷

WHEREAS remuneration for School Board and County Board members may deter some qualified candidates from seeking office;⁸

WHEREAS the practice of annual rotating Board Chairs is detrimental to establishing peer-to-peer relationships with leaders of neighboring polities;⁹

WHEREAS voter turnout for County Board and School Board elections has historically been low;¹⁰

WHEREAS there are substantial financial and systemic barriers for new candidates;¹¹

WHEREAS TiGER met monthly to examine, discuss, debate, and research topics to address these factors, goals, and principles, held seven public forums, created and distributed a public engagement survey, and came to the following six conclusions that are the focus of our recommendations:

- **Conclusion 1:** We conclude that Arlington County’s elected boards remain the same size as they were in 1930 despite a growing and more dense population, resulting in overworked elected officials, inadequate representation, and insufficient community engagement.
- **Conclusion 2:** We conclude that Arlington County does not have sufficient political influence in the region in light of its population and geography. So many of our policy challenges are strongly influenced by our regional neighbors. Yet, Arlington County has a County Board Chair and a School Board Chair that changes each year, limiting the influence of the Chairs as compared to other regional leaders.

⁶ Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments <https://www.mwcog.org/> see ‘Region United: Metropolitan Washington Planning Framework for 2030’

⁷ FINAL PASSAGE: Voting Rights Act of Virginia Passes House and Senate <https://www.jennifermcclellan.com/final-passage-voting-rights-act-of-virginia-passes-house-and-senate/>

⁸ County Board Considering Giving Themselves a Salary Raise <https://www.arlnow.com/2019/05/23/county-board-considering-giving-themselves-a-salary-raise/>

⁹ Interview, Dave Schutz with former County Board Chair Jay Fissette August 2020

¹⁰ Arlington Election Statistics – November General Elections <https://vote.arlingtonva.us/files/assets/vote/elections/electionresults/turnout-stats.pdf>; Arlington Election Statistics – Primaries and Specials <https://vote.arlingtonva.us/files/assets/vote/elections/electionresults/prispecstats.pdf>

¹¹ Arlington’s At-Large Electoral System: A Study of its History, Strength, and Weaknesses Sherman Pratt Arlington Historical Society Magazine October 1995 <http://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/1995-3-At-Large.pdf>; NAACP urges Arlington Dems to end its School Board caucus process <https://www.arlnow.com/2022/01/27/naacp-urges-arlington-dems-to-end-its-school-board-caucus-process/>

- **Conclusion 3:** We conclude that Arlington County's elected bodies do not adequately reflect the county's diversity, including but not limited to racial and ethnic diversity, socioeconomic diversity, and viewpoint diversity. As a result, many Arlington residents, particularly those outside the dominant or majority groups, may not feel represented, and the County Board and School Board may not benefit from the full and robust range of perspectives and experiences of Arlington residents.
- **Conclusion 4:** We conclude that our electoral system does not ensure proportional representation in Arlington, encourage the most qualified and most diverse candidates to run and get elected to office or provide strong competitive races in general elections.
- **Conclusion 5:** We conclude that the current Arlington County election system's reliance on primaries and caucuses discourages candidate participation and voter turnout and presents significant barriers, including the discriminatory candidate impacts resulting from applying the Hatch Act on federal employees.
- **Conclusion 6:** We conclude that the current system (both structures and processes) for obtaining and utilizing community input is inadequate in informing decision-makers and making many residents feel that they have been heard. Concerns have been raised regarding government transparency, accountability, and the level of authenticity in engagement processes. Substantial time requirements for participation limit the number of people able to participate.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that in response to these conclusions, factors, goals, and principles, TiGER has made the following recommendations:

Recommendations addressing Arlington County's form of government:

1. Expand the County and School Boards membership from 5 to 7 members;
2. Maintain At-Large seats for the election of County and School Board members;
3. Increase the term of the Chairs of the County and School Boards from the current one-year term to a minimum of two years, with the ability to extend the term for up to another two years if fellow Board members concur;
4. Increase the salaries of County Board and School Board members to attract a wider range of candidates:
 - a. For the County Board – support and continue the implementation of the phased increase of salaries to the statutory pay caps of \$89,951 for County Board members and \$95,734 for the Chair;¹²
 - b. For the School Board – increase their salaries substantially over the current levels of \$25,000 for members and \$27,000 for the Chair;

Recommendations addressing Arlington County's method of elections:

5. Replace the current plurality method of electing both boards with multi-seat (also known as proportional) ranked choice voting;
6. Stagger the elections for both boards every two years, with one set of elections to be composed of 4 County Board seats and 3 School Board seats, followed by an election two years later to fill 3 County Board seats and 4 School Board seats, with a

¹² The FY 2023 County budget includes increases towards these goals.

continued rotation biennially, maintaining 4-year terms for all County and School Board members;

Recommendation addressing community engagement reform:

- Regarding community engagement reform, TiGER determined, as we delved into the work of discussion and developing recommendations, that community engagement reforms require much more examination, discussion, debate, and research that this task force was not able to address in the timeframe developed for our work. Therefore, we recommend that community engagement reform be addressed through an extension of this task force, a new task force, or another working group dedicated to community engagement reforms and recommendations.