

# **MAPPING THE ARLINGTON WAY**

Understanding  
The System of  
Citizen Participation in  
Arlington County

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Arlington, Virginia

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*In July 1999, the Arlington County Zoning and Ordinance Review Committee made recommendations to the County Board on steps to preserve the character of Arlington's established neighborhoods (Daly, 1999).*

*In the August 25 edition of The Banner, St. George's Episcopal Church announced the formation of a civic committee to "stay abreast of developments or opportunities in the community or county that affect St. George's and to recommend strategies or actions (The Banner, 1999).*

*On October 23, 1999, Arlington celebrated its third annual Neighborhood Day when civic associations, public schools and community groups staged special events and activities throughout the county (Arlington County, 1999).*

*Throughout 1998, the Columbia Pike Revitalization Organization sponsored "Dialogue Days" with the residents along the Columbia Pike Corridor. The purpose of these days was for community participants to begin to establish a vision for the future Columbia Pike Community.*

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# INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

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## Introduction

The Arlington Way. At its most basic and broad level, the Arlington Way refers to the form citizen participation takes in Arlington County. It is “how we do business in Arlington” (David Link, 1999). While this is an accurate enough description, it renders simplistic what is, in practice, much more complex and messy.

The Arlington Way is invoked frequently, in a variety of situations, and with diverse and sometimes conflicting connotations. So, while it is indeed citizen participation in Arlington County affairs, when we move past the simplistic and broad, the Arlington Way becomes amorphous, more controversial, and less easy to describe. It is much more than a mantra or a descriptive term. It has, in fact, assumed a personality and characteristics, much like a living organism.

Intrigued by the feelings it evoked – pride, consternation, frustration – I set out to profile the Arlington Way. I wanted to explore the processes that lie behind the term and to trace its history. This research is based primarily on interviews. As such, my research findings are a reflection of how Arlingtonians believe, feel and experience the Arlington Way. I rely heavily on quotations to present the information and have attempted to limit my own interpretations of the interview content.

This is, ultimately, Arlington’s document. For those who are intimately acquainted with the Arlington Way, there may be little new here, though I hope that everyone will see at least some aspect of the Arlington Way for the first time or with a different lens. My admittedly lofty desire is that this research will serve a

constructive purpose. I would like to see it used as a springboard for promoting a stronger and more fruitful interaction between government and residents in Arlington County. Fortunately, the comments of the interview participants illustrate that there is certainly no dearth of ideas for strengthening this relationship. Yet before we can strengthen it, we must understand it. That is the purpose of this research – understanding the Arlington Way in all its manifestations.

This document has three main parts. In the first part, *The Model*, I define and describe the Arlington Way. This description is only a partial reflection of how it works and is experienced in practice. It is the ideal of the Arlington Way. The deficiencies of the Arlington Way are the subject of the second part, *Shortcomings of the Arlington Way*, and they present the other face of the system. In the third part, *Ideas for Reconstructing the Arlington Way*, I offer the interview participants’ ideas and visions for reshaping the Arlington Way. I hope the readers find this a useful and constructive community document.

## Methodology

Before I turn to the content of the document, I will briefly outline the research methodology. As noted, my primary means of documenting the Arlington Way was to conduct interviews with range of individuals living or enmeshed in Arlington County affairs. To obtain interview participants, I used a process called snowball sampling, whereby I solicited recommendations from my colleagues in the Leadership Arlington Class of 1999. This produced a broad list of individuals that I narrowed by interviewing those whose names

were recommended most frequently. As I interviewed, I continued to solicit names from the interview population to further develop my list. I ultimately contacted a total of 20 individuals, 17 of whom participated in the interviews. The list of interview participants can be found in Appendix A. In addition, I have included some material from other sources to supplement my findings. These are listed in Appendix B.

Since one of the goals of my research was to develop a full understanding of the Arlington Way, reflecting as much as possible the spectrum of views on the subject, I sought participants from three broad categories: elected and public officials, public administrators, and citizens/civic activists. I attempted to ensure diversity in my interview population, being especially sensitive to race/ethnicity and political affiliation. Nonetheless, I am certain that this research suffers from the same problem that was mentioned about participation in Arlington County in general. I could only contact those whose names were given to me; this automatically limited the vast field of potential interview participants and consequently narrowed the range of perspectives. I have tried to soften this limitation by fairly presenting the breadth of views expressed by those I did interview.

For the interviews, I developed a list of questions to learn more about the Arlington Way. The questions were as follows:

- What is the Arlington Way? How would you define/describe it?
- What is the process for getting involved in the Arlington Way?
- What is its genesis and history?
- How has the Arlington Way evolved over the years?
- What are some of its positive elements?
- What are some of the challenges and problems with the Arlington Way?

- How would you like to see the Arlington Way evolve, and how could it be improved?
- What is your connection or direct experience with the Arlington Way?

I conducted the interviews in a free-format style, allowing the respondents to answer questions with whatever information came to mind. The questions thus served as a guide for the interviews, not as a formal structure. Following the first question, I used the flow of the interview responses to guide the order of subsequent questions, so they were not necessarily asked or responded to in the order they appear above. Furthermore, respondents frequently addressed one question in an answer to another question. For example, when describing the Arlington Way, an interview participant might have discussed several of the problems with the Arlington Way. When this occurred, I recorded the response and followed-up with the question about the challenges of the Arlington Way at a subsequent point in the interview, seeking further explanation of the previously raised issues as well as information on additional issues.

The findings in this report are based on an analysis of the content of the interview responses. I segregated the interview material into three broad categories based on the content of the responses: what is the Arlington Way and how did it emerge; what are some of the shortcomings; and what can be done to improve the process of citizen participation in Arlington County. These components comprise the three main parts of this document. Within each part, I further divided the responses into categories and developed a simple coding system to convert the responses into data that could be aggregated. In some cases, I created sub-categories.

To aggregate the data, I counted each issue raised by an interview participant as one response in each of the categories and sub-categories, regardless of how many times someone mentioned an issue. For example, if an interviewee indicated the Arlington Way was tedious at three different points in the interview, it is counted as one response in that category. I did this to weight each individual's responses equally within the given category or sub-category.

While there are certainly limitations to this approach to interviewing and coding, I am confident that I received a more thorough and comprehensive picture of the Arlington Way than had I engaged in a more structured process. Dr. Cynthia McSwain, my project advisor from the George Washington University, guided me through the coding process and made suggestions and changes to improve the final analysis. In my view, the richness and openness of the responses I received outweigh the limitations of the approach.

A final note on the interviews. I have chosen not to include the text of the interviews or the coded responses as an attachment to this document. I recognize that many readers would find the interview material interesting and might like to come to their own conclusions regarding the validity of this research. Nonetheless, I feel compelled to maintain the confidentiality of the material. Without exception, the interview participants spoke with utmost candor. Most spoke to me for the public record. Two individuals requested that I refrain from quoting certain responses. Consequently, other than the quotations, I have decided not to publish the interview content to respect the interests of those who graciously gave their time and input to my research. This document would be of limited value if it were based on filtered responses from the participants. Instead, I believe I received a more complete accounting of the Arlington Way from the perspective of those individuals I interviewed.





## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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At its most basic level, the Arlington Way is the system of citizen participation in government decision-making that has emerged in Arlington County. Like any system, it has many faces, some of which are positive and some of which are threats to the viability of the system itself. This document is an attempt to present the many dimensions of the Arlington Way based on the thoughts and in the words of the individuals interviewed for this research.

According to the interview participants, the Arlington Way is a combination of mechanisms, processes, and relations by and through which public officials, public administrators, residents and citizen groups interact to develop, establish and implement county policy. It is a model that maximizes the use of citizens in the decision-making processes as a means for developing the best policy with the most community support.

The Arlington Way is primarily regarded as the formal system of Citizen Advisory Groups (Advisory Groups or commissions), and the interaction of the Advisory Groups with the other key players in the system to establish county policy. The other players are the county staff, the County Board, and the network of civic associations and community service organizations in the county. Through the Advisory Groups, commission members and county staff work together on public issues to develop recommendations based on extensive research and input from county residents. This input is most commonly provided through deliberate contact with the civic associations, the Civic Federation and the relevant community service organizations. The Board considers the recommendations of the commissions and takes the official actions. The ideal outcome of the process is a consensus

decision that reflects the best course of action for the community.

In addition to the formal processes, there are some informal manifestations of the Arlington Way. County government operations are conducted openly and with transparency, and the public officials and administrators maintain an availability to communicate with residents. There is also a shared philosophy of close cooperation between the government and its citizens to make Arlington County a positive place to live. All of these combined constitute the Arlington Way.

In the main, Arlington residents believe that the tradition of civic participation in the county has a long history, starting at the turn of the century and gaining momentum following the Second World War. With this tradition as the foundation, Arlingtonians find tremendous value in having an active citizenry, and the Arlington Way serves as the primary channel for this involvement. The resulting benefits to the system are that: 1) decisions consider the full range of needs and perspectives found among the residents; 2) there is stronger support for public decisions and improved confidence in government activities; and 3) the community can draw on more resources to address public issues, particularly expertise in the citizenry.

From this vantage point – the framework, philosophy and potential benefits – the Arlington Way is certainly a model for citizen participation. Yet the model, in practice, is not without its flaws, as many of the interviewees noted pointedly. The Arlington Way is also a bundle of shortcomings. These shortcomings generally fell along three main themes: Government by a Few, the Elephantine System, and System Chaos.

*Government by a Few* refers to the lack of full representation in the Arlington Way. A large majority of the interview participants believe that involvement in the system is greatly restricted for many people and segments of the community. Those who are involved are disproportionately influential in determining policy outcomes. Lack of representation poses a significant problem to a system that relies on broad participation in determining the course for the community.

Interview participants overwhelmingly identified the county's racial and ethnic minorities as underrepresented in the Arlington Way. Others included "nouveau Arlingtonians," individuals who are relative newcomers, younger, single or married without children, and renting or living in condominiums; the business community; poorer residents; parents with small children; and individuals living in South Arlington. Several factors limiting representation were identified; among them were the changing forces in society at large, lack of interest, cultural barriers to participation, the cumbersome nature of the Arlington Way, and the system's reliance on existing networks of relationship in the community that, while unintentional, restrict entry into the system.

On the other hand, there are a number of groups and individuals which have a significant impact on civic affairs. The most frequently mentioned were the "party loyalists," those individuals who are active in the Democratic Party in Arlington. Others included the elderly or retired persons, individuals who are discontented with the outcome of a decision and are able to impede the policy-making process, and the civic associations and the Civic Federation. It is not surprising that the associations and the Civic Federation exert influence, since they are generally recognized as key players in the Arlington Way. The expressed concern was that the associations

themselves may not be representative of their prospective members.

The other major shortcomings of the Arlington Way are its laborious character, which I have called *The Elephantine System*, and the disorderliness of its proceedings, which I have called *System Chaos*. Those involved with the Arlington Way believe that it takes too long to make decisions, and often definitive decisions are never made. As a result, the Arlington Way requires an unnecessary amount of time and input from its participants, rendering it very cumbersome. Consequently, it can be wasteful and inefficient for addressing public issues.

*System Chaos* is present because considerable confusion exists over leadership, roles and authority in the process. This confusion occurs on two levels: between county staff and commission members; and between the County Board and commission members. The roles of the county staff and commission members are not clearly delineated, resulting in ambiguous relationships sometimes fraught with conflict between the two parties.

The conflict at the level of the County Board and commission members arises around the authority of commission recommendations. It was clear from the interviews that people have varying expectations of how commission recommendations should be deliberated by the Board. Generally, citizens believe that commission recommendations should be adopted by the Board with limited, if any, alteration. In practice, the Board sometimes makes changes to the recommendations or takes an entirely different course of action altogether. Residents see this as devaluing the work of the commissions, while the County Board may feel constrained by forces outside its control or guided by a county-wide perspective when making adjustments. A related concern raised in the interviews was the perceived

reluctance of the County Board to make controversial decisions. Its reluctance may be manifested by sending an issue back to a commission for further study, appointing another Advisory Group to review the issue, or relying on task forces to take on issues that it or the county staff should be able to address.

Most of these shortcomings have been raised previously in a variety of forums, and many interview participants believe they can be overcome if focused attention is placed on reshaping the Arlington Way. The interviewees generally believe that Arlington has an excellent government, at least some of which is due to the Arlington Way. At the same time, most everyone would like to see it evolve into a more productive and representative system.

It is from this position that the interview participants provided numerous ideas for reinvigorating the Arlington Way. Not surprisingly, they closely parallel the shortcomings, and could be categorized as methods to enhance participation and ways to reorganize the system of Citizen Advisory Groups. Ideas for enhancing participation revolved around promoting outreach and education and identifying alternative means for engaging individuals in the process. Outreach and education could occur through grooming civic-minded youth; mentoring across all age and demographic categories; and identifying alternative sites, organizations and networks to inform people of civic activities and enable them to participate. Alternative methods of

engagement could also be explored, such as reexamining how and when people interact to conduct civic affairs. Many people mentioned using technology and the Internet to bring people and the government together in new ways and to create new forms of interaction.

There was general agreement among the interview participants that an essential step in revitalizing the Arlington Way would be to revamp the Citizen Advisory Group structure. This could involve combining or eliminating commissions, exploring ways to streamline the process, and improving the interaction between the commissions, the county staff, and the County Board. Regardless of the specifics, an Advisory Group reorganization will be necessary to improve the effectiveness of this mainstay of the Arlington Way.

While the ideas for reconstructing the Arlington Way ranged from the specific to the general, they were plentiful. The interviews revealed that a systematic and deliberate effort could generate many more possibilities for the community to explore. In short, people were very willing to engage in creative discussion about what could be done to enhance citizen participation in Arlington County and improve the outcome of the decisions brought through the civic process. People clearly want to see the Arlington Way work – and work well. Thus, the time may be ripe to build on the momentum of past and current activities and take further steps to reshape this Arlington institution.



# THE MODEL

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In Arlington County, citizen participation extends far beyond the voting booth, referenda and public hearings. It has evolved into a deliberate, organized system through which citizens are intricately involved in the government decision-making process. This interplay between the government and its citizens is the Arlington Way. When I asked the interview participants to define the Arlington Way, I was surprised at the remarkable consistency that emerged in the definitions. Two definitions, from Mike Lane and Sally Michael, represent many of the elements mentioned in the interviews.

*The Arlington Way is an organized structural process to allow for citizen input into major decisions the county makes. It is a combination of a myriad of neighborhood associations, civic associations, and citizen commissions, all of which interact to produce a final reflection of what is perceived to be citizen opinion (Lane, 1999).*

*It is intended to be a system where all voices are heard or have an opportunity to be heard in a tiered approach finally funneling to the County Board, utilizing civic associations and neighborhood groups, various commissions and ad hoc committees with a consensus building process being the result (paraphrased, Michael, 1999).*

## **The Formal System of the Arlington Way**

The definitions describe the Arlington Way as a formal system through which specific players engage in a process of developing and implementing policy in the county. The

purpose of the system is to make decisions that incorporate or at least consider the full range of viewpoints reflected in the citizenry. In practice, the Arlington Way relies on an extensive network of organized groups that serve both as actors in the process and as the mechanisms through which the decision-making occurs. I will first describe the actors and then briefly depict, through examples, how they interact to develop county policy.

### Who's Who in the Arlington Way

The most cited and recognized groups, which have become virtually synonymous with the Arlington Way itself, are the Citizen Advisory Groups (Advisory Groups or commissions). Over 50% of the interview participants specifically incorporated the commissions as part of their definition of the Arlington Way. As Conchita Mitchell stated, "the whole advisory committee structure is the Arlington Way in action" (Mitchell, 1999). Arlington County has over 50 standing Advisory Groups and a number of time-delimited committees and task forces established to study or address a particular issue. While some of these commissions are mandated by the state or federal government, such as the Planning Commission and the Community Services Board, many have been created by the County Board to "give citizens the opportunity to guide and participate in the policy-making process" (Fisette, 1999). Commissions are given a charge and can establish subcommittees with non-commission members to complete their work.

The County Board appoints commission members. Most of the appointments are limited to county residents, however, some commissions have positions reserved for

individuals representing a specific interest or with specific expertise. According to the interview participants, residents can get involved by expressing an interest in a committee appointment or through a recommendation to serve by a County Board member or other commission member. On the surface, it appears relatively easy to get involved, "though some don't realize how easy it is to get involved;" a resident simply fills out a form and submits it to the County Board for its consideration (Newman, 1999). Involvement on commissions is considered an important part of participation in Arlington, so the opportunity to serve is encouraged and publicized.

While Advisory Group positions are open to all residents, interview participants did cite several criteria for appointment. It is particularly important for an individual to have the time to commit and a keen interest in serving. Other criteria included having expertise in a pertinent issue area or a track record in the community. Someone can develop a track record by attending commission meetings, sitting on a subcommittee or getting involved in a civic association or other community group. Further, according to the interview participants, who you know and how you know them may play a significant role in appointments to commissions, since positions are frequently filled through recommendations. Finally, the Board may consider other factors in making appointments. "The Board seeks to reflect the broad diversity of the Arlington Community in order to bring all segments of the community in to full partnership with the Arlington County Government" (Arlington County Board, 2000).

Another key segment of the Arlington Way is the network of citizen organizations. Six of the 17 interview participants mentioned these groups as part of their definition of the Arlington Way. The most notable are the 61 neighborhood and civic associations that cover

most of Arlington's residential areas and operate as membership organizations. There are also over 55 condominium, homeowner, and tenant associations throughout the county. These associations represent the interests of the residents included in their respective boundaries (Arlington County Board, 2000). At the head of the neighborhood groups is the Civic Federation, a longstanding organizational presence in Arlington that is influential in county affairs.

The community service organizations are also important in the process, though clout and involvement varies tremendously from organization to organization. Over 134 community service organizations are listed on the county's web site, including non-profit service providers, interest groups, clubs and other membership organizations (Arlington County Board, 2000). Several of these were mentioned specifically in the interviews: The Committee of 100, a non-partisan group formed in the 1950s to discuss county-wide issues; and the public-private partnerships in each of the major business corridors, such as the Columbia Pike Revitalization Organization and the Clarendon Alliance. Other organizations in this category range from the Lions Club to the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC); from the Martin Luther King Community Center to the Women's Clubs; and from the Arlington Free Clinic to the Organization of Chinese Americans. Many of these organization work directly or indirectly to promote their interests and/or provide community services (Arlington County Board, 2000).

Finally and obviously, the county staff and County Board are intricately involved with the Arlington Way. The county staff serve as liaisons and coordinate the work of the Advisory Groups by collecting information, conducting research, providing professional expertise and generally guiding the commission

work. The staff's role and influence tend to vary from commission to commission (Whipple, 1999; Appel, 1999). The Board's involvement ranges from establishing the Advisory Groups and appointing their members to considering the commissions' recommendations and taking the formal action to enact the policies. It decides which issues warrant the attention and involvement of citizens to the extent dictated by a task force, and it establishes the work of the commissions through the specific charges it gives. All of these Board actions shape the process in profound ways.

### How the System Works

Much of the formal system of the Arlington Way revolves around the Citizen Advisory Groups. They are the vessels through which the players interact and the policy-making activity occurs. According to the interview participants, the scope of the commissions is expansive. Thirty-five percent (6) of the interview participants indicated that residents are involved in "virtually everything the county does" through these commissions, though the exact process of decision-making and the roles of the commissions vary (Milliken, 1999).

Generally, commission members and county staff work together to research and analyze information, establish and implement mechanisms for soliciting broad resident input, consider the impact of various decisions, and develop recommendations to present to the County Board. The civic associations and other organized groups provide input and contribute information throughout the process, and they may have a member appointed to serve on a relevant commission or task force. The Board considers the recommendations of the commissions and takes appropriate actions.

The best way to illustrate how this system works is through examples, which I provide in the boxes below. The first example, taken from my interviews with Mike Lane and John Milliken, gives an overview of the work of a standing committee, the Planning Commission and its Site Plan Review Committee. The second example illustrates the work of an ad hoc group established to address a specific issue, the Affordable Housing Task Force. These examples are for descriptive purposes and are not intended to be a precise depiction of the cited processes.

#### **Site Plan Review**

If a developer wants to develop a parcel of land in Arlington, it would present its proposal to the county staff. The proposal would be put to the Site Plan Review Committee of the Planning Commission, and would likely involve members from other citizen advisory committees, such as the Historical Affairs and Landmark Review Board, the Disability Advisory Commission, the Pedestrian Advisory Committee, and/or the Transportation Commission. Working with county staff, the subcommittee would meet with the developer to examine the design of the building, its landscaping, pedestrian issues, etc...In other words, the subcommittee really shapes the development of a project, going into the intricate details of the proposed development. The county staff would also work with the developer to "notify affected civic and neighborhood associations and convene a process by which citizens and developers might come to a consensus on the site plan...Once the proposal works its way through the process, staff puts together the final recommendation on the proposal and brings it to the County Board for final consideration" (Lane, 1999).

Sources: Lane, 1999; and Milliken, 1999.

### **The Affordable Housing Task Force**

In February 1999, the County Board established the Affordable Housing Task Force to recommend "specific activities, programs and initiatives to improve housing opportunities in the County for renters and first-time home buyers, particularly those of low and moderate incomes." It grew out of concerns over high housing costs and limited affordable housing for low-income renters, precipitated by the County's recent experience over the proposed redevelopment of Arma Valley Apartments, the site of 700 units of affordable housing. This experience "demonstrated substantial gaps in the County's ability to assure adequate affordable housing opportunities." The fifteen-member task force was given until December 1999 to complete its work and develop a report for the Board. Over the course of a year, it engaged in a series of tutorials using the expertise of county staff and other community resources, used statistical data to guide its work, established four subcommittees to address several discreet issues, and held at least one hearing.

On January 21, 2000, the task force presented its report to the County Board, which included 10 goals with 42 specific recommendations for improving affordable housing in Arlington. In the letter to the County Board from its co-chairs, the task force wrote that it was "not unanimous in all its recommendations... Nevertheless, all members of the Task Force endorse the document as a fair reflection of the broad views among the diverse Task Force Membership." The letter concluded, "we urge the Board to consider favorably our recommendations." On April 13, 2000, the County Board approved spending over \$500,000 to implement the major recommendations of the task force.

Sources: Report of the Affordable Housing Task Force, January 21, 2000; and Arlington County News Release, April 13, 2000.

The purpose of this expansive system is to ensure "all voices are heard or have an opportunity to be heard" in order to "produce a final reflection of what is perceived to be citizen opinion" (Michael, 1999 and Lane, 1999). While the ultimate decision-making authority rests with the County Board, nearly 25% (4) of the interview participants indicated that the de facto decision-making occurs at the commission level. The Board's role is "to officially take the action, ... [and] the citizens and staff fully developed the action. The Board is just adopting the committee's recommendations" (Bozman, 1999).

The commissions, then, have an important and difficult task. Working with staff, civic groups and other residents, the Advisory Groups must develop the best possible product with the most community support. It appears the ideal outcome of wading through this process is to achieve a consensus decision that

the Board can adopt. In fact, 41% (7) of the participants cited consensus as the goal of the Arlington Way.

Despite this ideal, however, many individuals indicated that consensus is elusive in practice, and several other scenarios frequently occur. In some instances, the county staff and an Advisory Group have different ideas of what would constitute the best course of action. In these cases, the staff and commissions might present different recommendations to the County Board, which would then weigh the range of alternatives to make its decisions. In other instances, the Board may take actions that do not conform exactly to commission recommendations. These alternate outcomes will be explored further in the second part of this document under *System Chaos*. The point here is that consensus is the goal, though other outcomes are more common.



## The Informal Elements of the Arlington Way

While the Arlington Way is most recognized as the formal system, some interview participants referred, either implicitly or explicitly, to another aspect of the Arlington Way – its informal manifestations. Several such manifestations noted in the interviews were the openness of the Arlington County Government and the cooperation between the government and its people to tackle problems and provide services.

The Arlington County government has an open door policy, both in terms of its activities and in terms of public officials' and administrators' approach to governing. There is a broad listing of telephone numbers, wide availability of information and government reports, and extensive communication with residents. As Kevin Appel stated, "there are no back room decisions being made." Ellen Bozman cited as examples the recent Citizen Forums convened by the Board as informational meetings and the Land Use Planning Short Course to educate citizens on how Arlington evolved and how someone can get involved. Other examples might include the distribution of *The Citizen*, the government's quarterly newsletter, to households throughout Arlington and the county web site, which contains extensive information on county services and activities.

Cooperation and a sense of shared responsibility are also mentioned as part of the Arlington Way. Senator Whipple noted that private non-profit organizations in the community perform many government functions in partnership with the county government, while simultaneously stretching limited government resources and promoting citizen interest and involvement. Joan Cooper Stanley recounted the successful cooperation

between the government and residents of the Nauck neighborhood to clean up an open air drug market that was "destroying our community" (Stanley, 1999). Jorge Gonzales summed up the county's philosophy of cooperation:

*The notion is that government alone is not going to solve all of the problems. There has got to be ownership and investment. What government can do, we will do. What citizens can do, we will want them to do... Neighborhoods know what they want and should tell us what they want, and we should be able to deliver (Gonzales, 1999).*

While this activity and view are not unique to Arlington County, the abiding sense that the government and citizens are inextricably entwined certainly influences the breadth and depth of this activity and philosophy. It is to this philosophy of citizen participation that I turn next.

## The Tradition of Citizen Participation in Arlington County

Civic participation is deeply embedded in Arlington County. Many interview participants indicated that there is a long tradition of government and residents working together to shape the direction of the county. The most widely held view is that the roots of citizen involvement can be traced to the close of World War II, when the population began to boom. At that time, several demographic shifts and social events converged to shape the role of citizens in government decision-making.

First, there was an influx of federal government employees who had a positive perspective on government. These were people who viewed government positively, thought

government had an important role to play, felt strongly about the value of government, and wanted to see it work well (Whipple, 1999). Secondly, a citizen movement developed to improve the school system in the state and then in the county. Finally, a group of citizens formed the Committee of 100 as an opportunity for citizens to discuss “a pertinent issue without coming to any decisions” (Lampe, 1999). According to Margaret Lampe, this idea of discussing all sides of an issue prior to making a decision was then adopted by the County Board and the School Board “as a way of earning consensus and flushing out issues before a policy was adopted” (Lampe, 1999). These simultaneous occurrences following World War II combined to embed civic participation in the fabric of the county and its residents.

It is interesting to note, however, that civic participation may have an even longer tradition in the county. As Randy Swart offered,

*Civic associations began at the time that the first settlements appeared at the turn of the century – in the late 1880s... It was a citizen committee that renamed Arlington in 1920 from Alexandria County... It was established back then that citizens should be involved in local government... Very early on people found it important to wrestle with the County Board – even before the ‘new dealers’ (Swart, 1999).*

Regardless of the specific time frame, it is clear that there is a longstanding culture of citizen involvement in Arlington County.

As Arlington’s tradition of citizen participation would suggest, the Arlington Way had its genesis long before it had a name. It did not have a deliberate beginning, rather it evolved into a model of citizen participation. The “Arlington Way” was coined sometime in the early to mid-eighties. According to John Milliken, “someone said it first in response to a wrongheaded suggestion, ‘well – huh – that’s

just not the Arlington way” (Milliken, 1999). After that, “it began to slide into the speeches of public officials and into use in the community of citizen activists” (Milliken, 1995). Ellen Bozman and Senator Whipple recount a similar beginning, though Ellen Bozman attributes the first use of the term to John Milliken. I think John Milliken is not certain whether to accept that distinction or not.

While citizen participation is not unique to Arlington County, several interview participants indicated that, in their experience, more citizens are involved in a wider array of issues than is typical in communities across the United States. As Jorge Gonzales stated,

*My observations are that generally the community and citizens are more interested in getting involved. You have the big issues – and you’re going to get everyone out for that. Then you have the smaller issues, and in Arlington you get a great number of people involved in those. I was surprised by the level of involvement and interest (Gonzales, 1999).*

The importance that residents place on citizen participation and their willingness to engage in civic activities was evident in the findings from the 1998 Neighborhood Initiative Citizen Survey. This survey found that 95% of respondents believe residents have a responsibility to help address neighborhood problems and issues, and 80% are somewhat to very willing to engage in solving those problems in their neighborhoods (Brossard Research Services, Inc., 1998). Of particular interest were the findings that willingness to participate cut across racial and ethnic lines, with the most significant difference being that black residents were more likely to be “very willing” than white, Asian, and Hispanic residents. Also, while parents were more willing to get involved than non-parents, there were no differences between renters and homeowners (Brossard Research Services, Inc., 1998).

This survey suggests that the tradition of civic participation in Arlington County continues today.

As a result of this tradition, participation does not stem from the government outward, rather citizens have come to require a system that facilitates their involvement. This came through with particular clarity in several comments from interview participants:

*The Arlington Way is founded on the principal that people expect and demand to be part of the process of funneling citizen input to the county (Swart).*

*Arlington government couldn't keep people out if it wanted to! (Bozman, 1999).*

*There would be great resistance among county residents if the system were to change significantly...I think people would rebel (Fisette, 1999).*

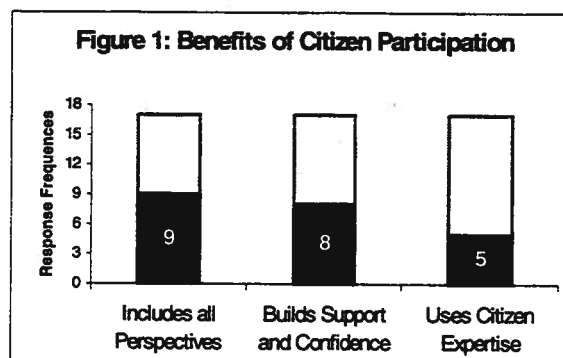
## The Benefits of Citizen Participation

The notion that citizen participation is positive and desirable is deeply entrenched in the county ethos. Its perceived worth is perhaps one of the primary reasons the tradition continues with such vigor. Over 76% (13) of interview participants indicated that citizen participation adds value to the process and outcome of decision-making. It has several tangible advantages, with the overarching benefit that, "government will be better if it involves citizens" (Bozman, 1999).

The interview participants cited several interrelated reasons why government is better when citizens are involved in shaping the direction of the community. Respondents believe that 1) decisions are a better reflection

of citizen desires because all voices, needs and perspectives are considered; 2) there is better support for public decisions and improved confidence in government activities; and 3) it brings more resources to bear on community issues, particularly expertise that lies in the citizenry. See Figure 1 for the response frequencies.

To many, the Arlington Way is successful to the extent that, as a process, it facilitates the airing of citizen sentiment toward various issues. This serves two functions. First, it is an important outlet for people to express their concerns and views so they have "meaningful input into county decisions" (Swart, 1999). David Link pointed out, "as a citizen, my voice is heard" (Link, 1999). Jay Fisette feels one of his primary roles as a public official is to let people know that the government has heard them (Fisette, 1999). Second, it helps ensure that decisions stemming from the process have at least considered a wide range of interests and needs. From Judge Newman's perspective, "the biggest advantage is that you do get citizens to come together to look at an issue, and someone will be devil's advocate to make sure that seemingly every point of view has been considered" (Newman, 1999).



Another benefit of the system of citizen participation is the broad support for decisions and confidence in government that emanates from the process. There is a shared

responsibility between the government and its residents for ensuring the county offers a positive environment in which to live. The Arlington Way gives the local government the ability "to gain citizen acceptance of something that on the surface may be controversial, because they can help shape it" (Milliken, 1999). Jay Fisette's quote encapsulates some of the promise in the Arlington Way:

*This country has gone through decades of the public losing faith in government. It can't lose touch and lose faith. The most effective public policy is when people are aware, involved and contributing... That trust is what a philosophy like the Arlington Way is – as imperfect as it is. It helps create trust in government. That is why it is so important (Fisette, 1999).*

Finally, "another advantage of citizen participation is that it allows the County Board to attract a greater range of expertise than would be possible to have solely in the county staff" (Wholey, 1999). Arlington County has a highly educated citizenry with a wealth of experience and knowledge. Sometimes citizens may have greater proficiency in a particular issue than county staff or County Board members. Being able to draw on this expertise is an invaluable resource to the community.

Broad participation by residents enables government and residents to work together to solve problems and make decisions that affect the overall quality of life in the community. I

should note here that not all people see these benefits realized through the Arlington Way. It is what people espouse, and for some, this is the actual experience. Others have quite different experiences with respect to citizen input into county decisions. Nevertheless, the tradition of citizen participation and the value it adds are very important to the Arlington community. People want to make the system work. Judge Newman summed it up when he stated, "the overall goal to make Arlington a great place to live, work and raise a family is the overriding magnet that attracts citizen participation" (Newman, 1999).

The many benefits cited by the interview participants illuminate the hope inherent in the system. The desire is that Arlington will reap all the system has to offer. The following statement by Joan Cooper Stanley, summarizes this hope, "I feel it is a way that all people – and it doesn't matter what color you are or how much money you make – join in a holistic approach for making things better in Arlington County" (Stanley, 1999).

From this vantage point, the Arlington Way is indeed a model of citizen participation. Yet this model is not perfect, particularly in practice, and many of the interview participants were quick to point this out. The Arlington Way is also about its shortcomings, and it is to these that I turn in the second part of this document, *Shortcomings of the Arlington Way*.

# SHORTCOMINGS OF THE ARLINGTON WAY

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To be sure, much of the picture I have painted of the Arlington Way thus far is the ideal. It represents the aspirations of Arlingtonians for the type of interaction between the government and its people. This ideal, however, is only one aspect of the Arlington Way. It also has its downsides, and for several of the interview participants, the Arlington Way is synonymous with its negative attributes. As Joe Wholey put it, "the term was not in use 20 years ago, and it has a negative connotation in my mind. I distinguish it from the tradition of citizen participation in Arlington County, perhaps as a sub-variety, and not a particularly good sub-variety" (Wholey, 1999).

However one thinks about the Arlington Way, the stark reality gleaned from the interviews is that the community is not reaping its full potential, and much of its promise has been lost in its application despite the best intentions of its proponents. In this part, I explore some of its deficiencies. While they are not fatal flaws, they are significant cracks in the foundation that may be transcended only if the community is up to the challenge.

Not surprisingly, the interview participants had a lot to say about the shortcomings of the Arlington Way. Having an abundance of material on the subject, I arranged the responses along three themes that emerged.

**Government by a Few:** A great majority of the interview participants believe that large segments of the population are not part of Arlington's primary vessel for citizen participation, the Arlington Way. As a

result, those who are active in the system disproportionately influence Arlington's civic affairs.

**The Elephantine System:** Another frequently mentioned shortcoming is the system's structure itself. The process is unnecessarily cumbersome and wasteful, and its unwieldy nature diminishes its ability to effectively and efficiently address public issues.

**System Chaos:** A significant majority of respondents expressed concern that the Arlington Way is disorderly. Participants hold conflicting and often ambiguous expectations of their roles and level of authority, which frequently leads to conflict among players and dissatisfaction with the outcome of the process.

In the sections that follow, I will describe each theme in more detail and provide a breakdown of the response frequencies.

## Government By A Few

There was nearly universal recognition that participation in the Arlington Way is not broadly representative of the Arlington community. Ninety-four percent (16) of the interview participants cited problems with representation and participation in the Arlington Way. Many people either cannot or do not get involved in the Arlington Way, so there are a lot of voices missing from the mix as decisions are made on how to proceed on particular issues. As a result, those who are involved disproportionately sway the decisions.

*If you get a situation when one percent of the population is really involved...then chances are that it is becoming government by a few, because it is these small numbers that the Board and elected officials are hearing. They are responding to this group, and there are another 180,000 people who aren't on the 'A' list (Michael, 1999).*

Interview participants cited segments of the community who are left out of the process, several of the factors that contribute to the problem of representation, and those who are disproportionately represented. In the subsections that follow, I provide an overview of these issues from the interviewees' perspectives.

### The Underrepresented in Arlington

Who is not on the 'A' List? The most widely identified groups of people who are not fully represented through the Arlington Way are the racial and ethnic minorities. Seventy-one percent (12) of respondents indicated that racial and ethnic groups do not participate in the Arlington Way to the extent that they comprise the community. No other demographic, social or organized group came close to being mentioned as frequently.

Another notable group that is absent from the process is what I call "nouveau" Arlingtonians. According to the respondents, these are relative newcomers to the county,

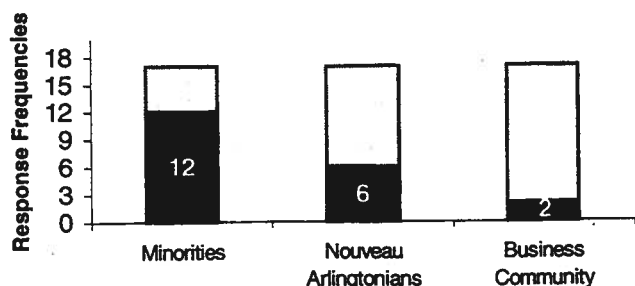
younger in age, likely to be single or married with no children, and perhaps renting their housing or living in condominiums. This demographic group was mentioned in 35% (6) of the interviews.

The business community was also mentioned by two interview participants. According to David Link, "businesses provide 60% of the taxes in the community, but they are underrepresented in the Arlington Way because many business owners live outside the county" (Link, 1999). Finally, several other segments showed up at least once in the interviews, including poorer residents, parents with small children and residents living in South Arlington. Figure 2 illustrates the response frequency for the categories that were mentioned in two or more of the interviews.

### Barriers to Participation

The amount of attention brought to bear on the issue of representation indicated that this is of particular concern to the individuals I interviewed, and many offered explanations for the problem. The response frequencies for these reasons are depicted in Figure 3. Several noted that community participation had decreased over the years, perhaps due to changing forces in society at large. Whatever the reasons for the diminishing involvement, interview participants indicated that lack of interest in participating in the Arlington Way, mentioned in 47% (8) of the interviews, is a significant problem. An issue related to the minority population is the cultural barrier to participation. This was raised by 35% (6) of the interviewees. As Leni Gonzalez noted, "the majority of us,...we have very little trust in our governments from our county of origin. It is hard to think that government could be different" (Gonzalez, 1999).

**Figure 2: The Underrepresented in Arlington**



**Figure 3: Barriers to Participation**

Response Frequencies	Lack of Interest	Cultural Barriers	Structural Constraints	Existing Relationships
Number	8	6	5	4
Percentage	47%	35%	29%	24%

Another culprit restricting full participation is the system itself. It promotes the involvement of some and inhibits the involvement of others. There were two types of systemic issues raised in the responses. The first is related to the commission structure and the process of funneling citizen input to the Board. According to the interview participants, the Arlington Way is not adaptable to the varying needs, schedules and realities of vast numbers of Arlington's residents. The system does not facilitate involvement. Structural constraints were mentioned in 29% (5) of the interviews I conducted. To illustrate the meaning of structural constraints to participation, I offer the following quotations:

*The entire system is geared toward those who are free in the evening, have enough money so they don't work second jobs, are married so someone is at home to stay with the kids, and it's all in English. This doesn't send a welcoming message to everybody (Mitchell, 1999).*

*Some of the things are so time consuming that only people who have the means to spend that amount of time on the issue really can participate. (Endo, 1999).*

The second systemic issue is what Todd Endo referred to as "informal networks of relationships" in the county (Endo, 1999). These are relationships that people have through their social contacts, churches, and children's sporting events. Recall that appointments to Advisory Groups are facilitated by a track record in the community. As John Milliken aptly put it, "regardless of what outreach you do, you are limited in the

range of people you can appoint, because you don't know who you don't know" (Milliken, 1999).

Reliance on these built-in relationships raises several issues. One is that a lot of decisions are influenced through these relationships. When he was a soccer coach, Todd Endo said, "a lot of business took place on the [sidelines] of the soccer field" (Endo, 1999). In addition, certain people may become regarded as spokespersons for a particular group, with the perception that they "represent" the views of entire group of individuals. This issue was mentioned in four of the interviews. When this occurs, participation is further limited, because there is a sense that outreach has occurred and the Arlington Way has achieved broader representation, when in fact it has not. Furthermore, these individuals may represent one facet of the population segment they are representing. Fuller representation requires a multiplicity of voices from all segments of the population.

### Standing on the Inside

If all of these people and groups are not driving Arlington's civic affairs, then who is on the 'A' list? While more attention was focused on who was excluded from the Arlington Way, there were several groups mentioned that seem to have the inside track. These included "party loyalists," the elderly and retired persons, individual voices of opposition and the civic associations and the Civic Federation. Refer to Figure 4 for the response frequencies.

Figure 4: Inside the System

Response Frequencies	"Party Loyals"	The Elderly and Retired	Individual Opponents	Civic Assoc./ Federation
Number	8	3	3	3
Percentage	47%	18%	18%	18%

It seems that nothing is immune from party politics, and the Arlington Way is no exception. Forty-seven percent (8) of the interview participants indicated that the Arlington Way is in some way tainted by politics. The perception is that the system is tipped in favor of those associated with the Democratic Party. One is more likely to exert influence if one is a Democrat, and not just any Democrat, but a party "insider;" I call these the "party loyals." Consequently, Republicans feel they are underrepresented and that the commissions are dominated by Democrats. This shift to a seemingly unbalanced system has possibly occurred over time, particularly since the early 1980s, and has grown in recent years. As Margaret Lampe stated, "the politics of the day changed the complexion of the commissions that were established to help the County Board. Party regulars and friends began to be active. Commissions no longer had a balance of views from throughout the county, but were filled with people with similar thoughts" (Lampe, 1999).

The other powerful participants in the Arlington Way – the elderly and retired, the individual opponents, and the civic associations and Civic Federation – were mentioned in 18% of the interviews each. It is obvious that the elderly might be more inclined to engage in the process. They presumably have more time to volunteer. The issues raised about the other two groups were interesting.

With respect to the individual opponents, in the Arlington Way it is feasible for one or two

individuals who are displeased with the process or the decision that has emerged to seriously impede and undermine it. Note that these are not organized groups opposing a particular issue, but "one or two lone voices" (Michael, 1999). The ability of these individuals to block the process may be the outgrowth of a desire to maintain the perception of the Arlington Way as a consensual decision-making process. If one or two individuals vocally oppose a recommendation or a decision, then consensus has not occurred.

The other powerhouses in the Arlington Way appear to be the civic associations and the Civic Federation. Recalling the description of the Arlington Way in which these groups were specifically cited as primary players, it is not surprising that they exert substantial influence over the process. According to the interviews, however, these associations may not adequately serve the interests of a significant number of residents, including renters and residents of condominiums, who do not traditionally belong to the civic associations. Further, many individuals may not be active in their civic association, so the association can only present the views of a portion of the people they do exist to serve.

*The handful [from the civic associations] that do come and show up for early-on education and dialogue and information exchange [about an issue or project] are suddenly speaking for all their neighbors who, for whatever reason, aren't there (Michael, 1999).*



Limited involvement and the resulting imbalance of influence in the Arlington Way are particularly problematic. This is a system that touts the inclusion of all perspectives in the decision-making process. To be effective, “the Arlington Way requires active participation from a wide range of people from throughout the community” (Swart, 1999). In as much as some voices are excluded from the debate and some groups are overly powerful, the final decisions are sub-optimal, at best, and detrimental, at worst. The entire system is devalued. This is an issue that warrants attention in order to realize the full value of the Arlington Way.

## The Elephantine System

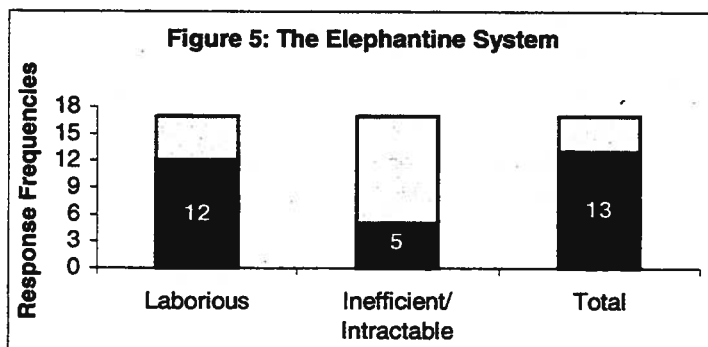
The Arlington Way is built on extensive interaction between and among the various players -- the citizen advisory commissions, organized groups and associations, and the Board members. As previously mentioned, the goal is to hear all sides of an issue in order to come to a consensus decision that reflects as closely as possible the interests of all affected parties. Inherently, the Arlington Way requires an outlay of time and resources, and the interview participants acknowledged this reality. Nevertheless, 76% (13) of the interviewees believe the system is overly laborious, inefficient and intractable. Refer to Figure 5 for the response frequencies.

The first structural problem, its tendency to be laborious, was mentioned in 71% of the interviews. It simply takes too long to come to decisions, and frequently decisions are elusive. People sit in multitudes of meetings, and sometimes there is no clear direction. It is hard on the citizen participants, it is hard on applicants working through the system to develop a project, and it is hard on the county staff. As Ellen Bozman explained, “one

downside is the length of time it can take to make decisions...We need to watch how cumbersome the process becomes. We want it to be full, but not cumbersome” (Bozman, 1999). It appears that the Arlington Way has reached this point and is now cumbersome.

Other related issues, mentioned by five of the interviewees, are the amount of waste in the system and how intractable it has become. The Arlington Way requires a significant input of resources, particularly staffing the commissions. This cost may be reaching unacceptable levels as the commissions become more labyrinthine.

*There is enormous overhead in the Arlington Way. Commissions and committees spend gobs and gobs of staff time and citizen time disseminating information, collecting citizen input, analyzing and funneling that into the government process, and then dealing with the fallout when people don't agree (Swart, 1999).*



Furthermore, there are too many commissions working on various interrelated issues without sufficient coordination (Link, 1999). This contributes to the amount of time it takes to deal with issues through the process. Finally, it is stagnant. Margaret Lampe notes the intractable nature of the Arlington Way, “the commissions are like a large barge that chugs down the Potomac. And now it is very difficult to use it effectively any longer” (Lampe, 1999).

The interview responses imply a failure in the system. I sensed that these issues would not be raised as shortcomings if Arlington were reaping the promise of the Arlington Way. However, as we have seen, the final decisions are not necessarily reflective of what's best for the community, and Arlington may be missing important opportunities. According to Margaret Lampe, when she was a member of the Board of Education, "if I needed information or a quick answer to a piece of information..., it was almost impossible to get because no one was willing to make a definitive judgement quickly. This was a great hindrance." In short, the Arlington way demands a lot, and the participants believe that the returns to the community are diminishing.

## System Chaos

With a system that involves so many players at so many levels, it is not surprising that tension and conflict sometimes arise. In the Arlington Way, however, these have reached prohibitive levels. Seventy-six percent (13) of the interview participants indicated that significant problems exist over leadership, roles and authority. The interviews revealed murky and divergent expectations among the players, which has led to confusion and disillusionment with the process.

Recall that county staff, commission members and the County Board, with input from other citizen groups, review public issues and develop solutions. The county staff and commissions work together to establish recommendations, and the County Board deliberates the recommendations in order to take a specific course of action. While the process sounds clear, the players' roles in the process are not. The absence of role definition cultivates conflict, in this case, among the county staff and the commissions in the

development of recommendations, and among the County Board and the commissions in the consideration of recommendations. In the Arlington Way, this conflict appears unresolved.

Upon examination, the interview material produced evidence of the ambiguous relationship between the county staff and the commissions. I mentioned that the county staff roles tend to vary from commission to commission. Interview participants cited that on some commissions, staff set the agendas and drive the process, and on other commissions, it is the opposite. I found it interesting that one respondent said that the "committee is not a rubber stamp," while another said that "commissions act as a rubber stamp." These contradictory conceptions indicate that the roles and responsibilities of the county staff and the commission members are not as clearly defined as would be necessary for a smooth process.

As noted previously, it is possible for the commissions and county staff to present different recommendations to the County Board. This raises significant questions about the purpose of the process itself. Is the goal to present several recommendations to the County Board so it will have a range of alternatives representing varying perspectives, or is it to develop a unified recommended course of action that represents the input and consideration of multiple views? It is possible that sometimes it is the former and sometimes it is the latter, yet to the extent that this is not explicated at the outset of the process, tension and confusion among the members and with the process are a likely outcome.

Another point of unresolved conflict is occurring when the commissions present recommendations to the County Board for its consideration and action. In defining the role of the Board related to commission decisions, Ellen Bozman stated that the "Board is just adopting the committees' recommendations"

(Bozman, 1999). According to many of the interview participants, this is not the way decisions are made today. On the contrary, sometimes the Board alters commission recommendations, and often it postpones or defers decisions (Refer to Figure 6 for the response frequencies). Among the interview participants, there were different rationale for these Board actions, and clearly divergent expectations over how the commissions' work should be used by the County Board.

**Figure 6: Frequent Board Action on Commission Recommendations**

Response Frequencies	Amends Decisions	Defers Action
Number	5	8
Percentage	29%	49%

Nearly 30% (5) of the persons I interviewed found it problematic when the Board alters a commission's recommendations. From Randy Swart's viewpoint, "some of the biggest mistakes by the County Board have occurred when the Board feels that the citizen process hasn't produced the correct result, and they go ahead and substitute their own judgement" (Swart, 1999). The citizen sentiment is that a lot of time and energy go into developing recommendations that are based on extensive knowledge of an issue and input from the citizens. Therefore, the recommendations reflect the best course of action and should be adopted. Margaret Lampe elaborated, "the problem with the committees and the Arlington Way is that if you are going to use them and use them well, you must...take their advice. You have to take their recommendations once you have asked them to examine the issues" (Lampe, 1999).

One the other hand, Jay Fisette indicated that sometimes the County Board is compelled to "tweak" things because it is constrained to

state policy or law, county authority over an issue, and/or budget restrictions (Fisette, 1999). The following quotation offers another point of view:

*Sometimes people confuse the Arlington Way with getting their way. The two are not synonymous. I have heard it said that the Arlington Way has failed or that something was a perfect example of the Arlington Way, facetiously, often times because decisions are made at the end of the process that someone doesn't agree with (Fisette, 1999).*

These divergent perspectives reveal the ambiguity that exists over the adoption of recommendations. There is a demonstrable need to clarify expectations and improve communication among the players.

The comments also indicate another potential glitch in the commission structure – the difficulty commissions may have in placing their issues in the context of the county as a whole and other issues that need attention. As Senator Whipple explained, "if you appoint a group on a topic, they are going to advocate it" (Whipple, 1999). Consequently, the Arlington Way segments issues and does not facilitate understanding the broad community and its interrelated parts.

A final concern raised by the interview participants is the Board's reluctance to make decisions, particularly those that may be controversial. Nearly 50% (8) of the interview participants intimated that, on occasion, the County Board seems to be "hiding behind" the Arlington Way (Endo, 1999). It does this by sending an issue back to a commission after the commission has presented a recommendation, appointing another group to re-review the issue, or relying on task forces for issues that it or the county staff should be able to address. The following three quotations illustrate each of the three scenarios respectively.

*There is criticism that [the Arlington Way] tends to work or massage an issue until it disappears as an issue, or is so round and smooth that it is not an effective response. On occasion, I've heard the County Board say, 'take this back and bring back something where there is community consensus.' The criticism is you should be able to make the decisions and not have something handed to you on a plate (Milliken, 1999).*

*There is nothing more frustrating than sitting on an ad hoc task force for a year or 18 months and then having the Board say, 'This isn't ready yet.' And then it turns it over to another committee. This is one of the drawbacks – when what the citizens produce is not perceived as useful... [it] can take a long time (Swart, 1999).*

*Arlington does not make a single move without having a task force look at it (Link, 1999).*

These conflicts over how decisions should be made and by whom exacerbate the problems from the previous sections. First, it may inhibit participation by many people because they would be reluctant to join a process that does not value their time, effort, and product. Secondly, it lengthens the amount of time the process can take and makes it more cumbersome. For the Arlington Way to have

value, the misunderstandings and incongruous expectations require resolution.

As this part illustrates, the Arlington Way is fraught with complications. Generally speaking, it is not a representative system, it is cumbersome, and it is chaotic. As many participants stated, these shortcomings are characteristic of the Arlington Way as it operates today and are widely recognized by those inside and outside the system.

Many, if not all, of these issues have been raised previously. The Arlington League of Women Voters addressed many of the problems with the citizen commission structure in its 1997 study, "Effectiveness of Arlington County Citizen Advisory Groups" (League of Women Voters of Arlington, 1997). At the January 12, 2000, meeting of the Committee of 100, panel members discussed the Arlington Way and whether it works for various Arlington residents. Numerous issues raised by the interview participants were also cited by the panel and audience members at that meeting. Perhaps all this information and attention on what doesn't work provides an opportunity for the community to begin to change the face of the Arlington Way. This is the topic of the final part of this document.

# IDEAS FOR RECONSTRUCTING THE ARLINGTON WAY

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While much may be wrong with the system, overall the interview participants believe that Arlington County has an excellent government, and the Arlington Way is certainly one of the contributing factors. In fact, 41% of the interview participants specifically stated that they were proponents of the system, though everyone would like to see it evolve in relation to its shortcomings. I found that many of the individuals I interviewed had ideas, some quite specific, for how the Arlington Way might evolve. Frequently, these were spontaneous ideas generated in response to my question, "how might the Arlington Way be improved." I am encouraged that so many ideas were born with little prompting.

The ideas for reinvigorating the Arlington Way fell into two broad categories: enhancing participation and reorganizing the system. Not surprisingly, these categories closely reflect the shortcomings reviewed in the second part of this document. I am presenting these suggestions as though they were cultivated during a brainstorming session. They are not intended to be recommendations. Also, several of the ideas are activities that used to occur or still do, but only infrequently and without deliberation. The aim of this section is to inspire more creative thought about the Arlington Way and to be an intentional step toward system change.

## Enhancing Participation

Probably the most significant shortcoming of the Arlington Way is its lack of representation, and many of the interview participants spoke about ways of increasing participation and making the system more reflective of the Arlington community. The methods of increasing participation and

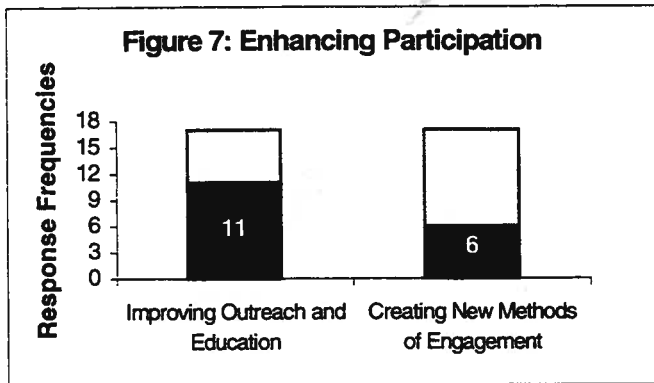
representation revolved around outreach and education and creating alternative means for engaging individuals in the system.

A frequently mentioned means for increasing participation is to educate people about the importance of civic involvement. People felt this process should start early, particularly with the youth in the schools. Judge Newman gave a poignant example of how important grooming youth can be:

*I think we need to start reaching out earlier to younger generations. I developed my sense of wanting to give back when I was in high school because of some input from one of the County Board Members. [Joe Fisher] came to speak to the class about citizen participation, and maybe I was just really impressionable, but he had an affect on me. For those who do choose to stay, they will want to do something... we need to foster a sense of community pride and wanting to make it a better place (Newman, 1999).*

- ✓ Interview participants also mentioned having a student forum for youth to tell the community what they would like to see happen, appointing student representatives on relevant commissions, and linking elderly residents with youth to groom them in civic participation.

While many people mentioned educating youth, several mentioned the importance of mentoring adults in the civic process. Leni Gonzalez spoke of Jim Hunter, a former County Board member, mentoring minorities. "I felt that he introduced me to the whole democratic process – what it was like to stuff envelopes for a candidate, and [told] me how to access power here" (Gonzalez, 1999). Joan Cooper Stanley said she was groomed by senior citizens. Grooming is important because it helps people "become educated and knowledgeable about what is the right thing to



do – not just for themselves, but for their families, their parents, their grandparents and their community” (Stanley, 1999).

Interview participants suggested using alternative sites, organizations and networks to inform people of opportunities to participate in Arlington County. Leadership Arlington was mentioned as a new entity with potential for reaching leaders from communities who are not currently fully represented in the Arlington Way. Ellen Bozman suggested establishing a forum for non profit and business leaders “to come together on a regular basis to learn about each other...and create a body of informed citizens” (Bozman, 1999). Margaret Lampe thinks that Arlington could use the service agencies to do outreach to underrepresented segments because “they have a good handle on the needs and wants, and can tap them into the committee structure more dramatically than we have in the past” (Lampe, 1999). Finally, Sally Michael proposed that we distribute information about getting involved to places where the young adults spend time, such as restaurants and shopping centers (Michael, 1999). All of these thoughts put forth some new ways to educate people and invite them to participate in the Arlington Way.

The interview participants recognized that improving outreach would not, in itself, solve the representation problem. Arlington also needs to identify alternative means for engaging individuals in organized civic life. As Conchita

Mitchell suggested, “maybe there are different ways to engage the community than to have people get in their cars and come to Committee Room B” (Mitchell, 1999). Jay Fisette further explained,

*Arlington is the only jurisdiction that has meetings on Saturdays to make the meetings and government more accessible to everyone. When you meet in the daytime, the assumption [is] you would exclude more people. I am not even sure anymore that Saturday daytime is more accessible or not, because people work different times (Fisette, 1999).*

The premise behind these ideas is that all decisions and assumptions could be reexamined in the context of today’s population and social realities.

Nearly 25% (4) of the interview participants cited using technology to bring government and people together, particularly the Internet. Several suggestions included having a bulletin board, creating interactive and simultaneous web communication to pass information between the government and citizen groups, and conducting electronic town meetings. Arlington County may be taking steps in this direction with its recent revision of the web site to include more electronic interaction. Judge Newman promoted using the Internet to engage people, “we are all prisoners of time – we need to make it easier to participate,” though he also cautioned about accessibility. For technology to work, it must be widely available in public places and “there must be people available to facilitate their [computers] use,” otherwise technology will only fuel the gap in representation among populations (Newman, 1999).

Several other suggestions included increasing participation in the voting process and conducting meetings in locations where there is a congregation of people who are underrepresented in the Arlington Way. Todd Endo suggested that it is more than just

scheduling meetings at alternative sites, “but devoting the staff time to making things work. It means county staff time working with the community to get out the people” (Endo, 1999). Leni Gonzalez proposed using cultural mediators to provide not only interpretation, but to facilitate understanding “of what works for both cultures” (Gonzalez, 1999). These are people who have spent enough time in more than one culture to explain why each culture does things the way it does and then use that understanding to figure out a way of interacting that works for both. It could also be used to as a way to educate about the civic process in the United States, once a foundation of understanding had been created (Gonzalez, 1999).

Finally, participants indicated that a lot of work is being done around the country to increase citizen participation. Arlington could learn from other places about what has worked and not worked by drawing on the research and experience in this area.

*There are cities around the country that have used various techniques to regenerate citizen interest and input...Some serious research has to be done on how to increase citizen participation...We need to empty the box out and not assume that the way it was done yesterday is the way to do it [today] (Michael, 1999).*

## Reorganizing the System

There was general agreement among the interview participants that the Citizen Advisory Group structure needs overhauled. The first step appears to be a reevaluation of the committees and their missions to streamline the process. As Conchita Mitchell stated, “do we need a committee for everything? Maybe we could consolidate or even eliminate some committees” (Mitchell, 1999). This sentiment was supported by several of her fellow interview

participants. Jorge Gonzales also suggested greater coordination among the committees:

*[Thinking] off the top of my head, I have seen a couple instances where we have had members of commissions appoint representatives to address an issue. If an issue needed to be reviewed by numerous committees, maybe a structure could be created to have each commission appoint a representative with the full authority of the commission to approve the item, then it doesn't need to go to six commissions to have a full airing. The might expedite the process, [though] I don't know if that hinders what we need to get out [of the process]. (Gonzales, 1999).*

According to several of the respondents, part of this restructuring would also involve determining which issues require study and which do not. Some issues may not have to go through the citizen review process, and the staff and/or County Board should have the authority to take action on these. As Judge Newman said, “[we need to come to the] realization that not everything requires all of this study. [For some issues], we just need to deal with them and do what seems logical instead of studying it over and over again” (Newman, 1999).

In addition to reorganizing the Citizen Advisory Groups, interview participants proposed tightening the interaction between the County Board and the commission members. Senator Whipple said the County Board used to have annual meetings “with the chairs of the commissions to talk about their roles and the membership...The Board would meet with the Advisory Groups and talk about the work plans for the year, so they knew the things they were studying were of interest to the County Board” (Whipple, 1999). While the annual meetings still take place, according to the 1997 League of Women Voters report, they are not perceived as effective as they could be (Arlington League of Women Voters, 1997).

Improving the interaction between the County Board and the commissions could involve setting definitive timelines for decisions; clarifying the roles of the commission members, staff liaisons, and the County Board; narrowing the issues for study; and establishing a process for funneling information about the commissions' work to the Board. Mike Lane proposed getting "more information to Board members all through the process. The Board is essentially on the periphery until it [the decision] is in the pipeline to come to the Board for consideration" (Lane, 1999). This way, the Board could see the process of decision-making as it progresses to a final recommendation.

Another element of this communication would be to facilitate the development of a county-wide view. As such, everyone – commission members, county staff and the Board members – could see an issue in the context of the entire spectrum of community issues. A potential outcome of this might be that the Board more frequently adopts the recommendations of the commissions outright. Finally, Todd Endo suggested using the staff liaisons as facilitators. While this would involve providing them with the training and expertise to act in that capacity, it would provide a valuable resource to the Advisory Groups and to the entire Arlington Way process (Endo, 1999).

These are just some ideas for improving the Citizen Advisory Groups that are such an instrumental component of the Arlington Way. As I noted previously, the Arlington League of Women Voters conducted a study of the commissions by surveying those involved in the process. The League presented its findings and a list of recommendations in its report, "Effectiveness of Arlington County Citizen Advisory Groups" (League of Women Voters, 1997). The work of this report is a major contribution to Arlington County and a significant step in evaluating and reorganizing the system. I have taken the liberty of including the Executive Summary as Appendix C.

The abundance of ideas for improving the Arlington Way should be encouraging. It indicates that there is much that can be done and a willingness to do it. Arlingtonians are proud of their tradition of citizen participation and would like to see it continue. With the community commitment and the focus it seems to be drawing lately, the time may be ripe for reconstructing the Arlington Way and revitalizing citizen participation in this community in new and exciting ways. It might even be possible to begin reconstruction *without* first appointing a task force to study the issue!



## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

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- Appel, Kevin. Assistant County Treasurer, Arlington County. July 30, 1999.
- Bozman, Ellen. Former Member, Arlington County Board. July 21, 1999.
- Endo, Todd. President, the Urban Alternative. August 24, 1999.
- Fisette, Jay. Member, Arlington County Board. August 17, 1999.
- Gonzales, Jorge. Former Assistant County Administrator, Arlington County. August 23, 1999.
- Gonzalez, Leni. Member, Arlington County Multicultural Advisory Committee. August 26, 1999.
- Lampe, Margaret. Chair, Committee of 100. August 19, 1999.
- Lane, Mike. Member, Arlington County Board. July 29, 1999.
- Link, David. Chair, Arlington County Economic Development Commission. August 2, 1999.
- Michael, Sally. Former Assistant County Administrator for Public Affairs, Arlington County.  
August 5, 1999.
- Milliken, John. Former Member, Arlington County Board. August 24, 1999.
- Mitchell, Conchita. Executive Director, Columbia Pike Revitalization Organization.  
August 4, 1999.
- Newman, Judge William T. Judge, Arlington Circuit Court. August 5, 1999.
- Stanley, Joan Cooper. Former Community Service Technician, Arlington Police Department.  
August 19, 1999.
- Swart, Randy. Chair, Arlington Civic Federation. August 16, 1999.
- Whipple, Senator Mary Margaret. Former Member, Arlington County Board. August 2, 1999.
- Wholey, Joe. Former Member, Arlington County Board. August 18, 1999.

### A Note on the Professional Titles:

I have identified the professional or civic position of each individual that was most relevant for this research. However, all of the individuals are actively involved in Arlington County and have held a variety of professional and/or civic positions connecting them the Arlington Way over the years. Also, several of the individuals have changed positions since I conducted the interviews. In those instances, I have listed the position that was effective at the time of the interview.

## APPENDIX B: OTHER SOURCES

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Affordable Housing Task Force. (January 21, 2000). Report of the Affordable Housing Task Force. Arlington County, Virginia.

Arlington County News Release. (April 13, 2000). Arlington County, Virginia.

Arlington County Board. (March 23, 2000) "Citizen's Advisory Groups – Get Involved." URL: <http://www.co.arlington.va.us/cbo/advgroup.htm>. Arlington County, Virginia.

Arlington County Board. (April 25, 2000) "Citizen Advisory Boards, Groups, Commissions and Task Forces." URL: <http://www.co.arlington.va.us/cbo/advlist.htm>. Arlington County, Virginia.

Arlington County Board. (April 25, 2000) "Civic Organizations." URL: <http://www.co.arlington.va.us/cbo/civic.htm>. Arlington County, Virginia.

Arlington County Board. (April 15, 1999). "Government in Brief." URL: <http://www.co.arlington.va.us/cbo/govbrief.htm>. Arlington County, Virginia.

Brossard Research Services, Inc. (December 1998). "Neighborhood Initiative Citizens Survey Findings." Arlington County, Virginia.

Committee of 100 Meeting on the Arlington Way. (January 12, 2000). Arlington County, Virginia.

Daly, Rich. (July 28, 1999). "County Weighs Building Guidelines." *The Arlington Journal*. Arlington County, Virginia.

League of Women Voters of Arlington, Virginia. (February, 1997). "Effectiveness of Arlington County Citizen Advisory Groups." Arlington County, Virginia.

Milliken, John. (October 11, 1995) *Remarks to the Committee of 100*. Arlington County, Virginia.

St. George's Episcopal Church. (August 25, 1999) *The Banner*. Arlington County, Virginia.

Strand, Palma. (July 22, 1999). Telephone conversation. Arlington County, Virginia.

# **APPENDIX C: 1997 LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS STUDY**

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## **EFFECTIVENESS OF ARLINGTON COUNTY CITIZEN ADVISORY GROUPS**

### **I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**A. INTRODUCTION.** In June 1995, the Arlington League of Women Voters (LWV) adopted as one of its study issues "Citizen Participation in Local Government." The topic was later refined to focus on a review of the effectiveness of Citizen Advisory Groups (**Groups**) that are appointed by the Arlington County Board (**Board**). A Study Committee was subsequently formed and began work in September 1995. The Study Committee selected 17 Groups for this Study which were representative of the 25 to 27 Groups that provide citizen input to the Board. The primary research tool was personal interviews of present and past Board members, Clerks to the Board, Staff Coordinators, Group Chairs (**Chairs**) and members of the Groups. Five questionnaires were designed to reflect the differing perspectives of the interviewees.

The Study was conducted in an atmosphere of cooperation and professionalism. The Study Committee is most appreciative of the time and expertise so willingly given by all those contacted during the conduct of this Study.

**B. FINDINGS.** This Study found that,

1. Groups were viewed as an invaluable asset to the community and to the governmental process. Without committing additional resources their effectiveness could be enhanced by ensuring that all appointed members attend meetings and do their share of the work.

2. The general public's awareness and knowledge regarding the existence and work of the Groups is minimal at best.

3. Interaction among the Groups and with the Board is seen as inadequate.

4. The orientation process for Chairs and members is haphazard at best and non-existent at worst.

5. No formal evaluation method exists for the Board to periodically review the effectiveness of the Groups.

6. Adherence to the guidance contained in the Board's policy documents regarding Groups would create a more efficient operation. These documents need to be consolidated.

7. The role of Staff Coordinators is not fully understood or recognized.

8. Recognition of work done by Group members is lacking.

**C. RECOMMENDATIONS.** In developing the following recommendations the Study Committee made an effort to be as specific and practical as possible. It is recommended that,

1. Appointment of members not be finalized until appointees are advised by their Chair of their responsibilities and have acknowledged an understanding of the role they are undertaking.

2. A plan for a continuing media campaign be developed to bring the existence and work of the Groups to the attention of the general public. The campaign should stress application procedures and highlight those Groups seeking new members and/or assistance with specific projects.

3. The Board explore the concept of having some staff and/or volunteer entity act as a facilitator of the Groups to encourage their coordination and interaction.

4. The Board overhaul the orientation process for Group Chairs to ensure there is ongoing Board involvement.

5. Annual meeting of Chairs with Board members be restructured. It should be more interactive and provide an opportunity for Chairs not only to have a dialogue with the Board but to also allow them to learn from each other.

6. A plan be developed to conduct periodic evaluations of all Groups to ensure they are meeting the needs of the Board.

7. Policy documents concerning Groups be consolidated and refined to eliminate existing inconsistencies.

8. Board develop means to appropriately recognize Group members for their service.

Collectively these Groups are a useful and highly valued asset to the County and its citizens. The recommendations outlined in this Study should be viewed as a way to make a good system better.







