

DRAFT (Updated 3 November 2022)

Resolution to Restore the Public's Confidence in Arlington County Governance

Whereas, for decades Arlington County had an established, bottom-up community engagement process to make decisions, frequently called the “Arlington Way. [Appendix, Section 1]

Whereas, in this process Arlington residents had a meaningful seat at the decision-making table, which resulted in robust community discussion, producing consensus-driven outcomes that have made Arlington one of the most sought-after places to live in the nation. [Appendix, Section 2]

Whereas, it appears to many residents that the current community engagement methods are unevenly applied or have fundamentally changed and no longer consistently includes critical engagement principles and features, and where far-reaching decisions may be made without incorporating substantive resident input or broad community consensus. [Appendix, Section 3]

Whereas, it appears to many residents that the Arlington County Board and County Manager frequently dismiss concerns of individuals, civic groups, civic associations, multi-family residence associations, and the Arlington County Civic Federation, which historically have played an integral role in the county's decision-making processes. [Appendix, Section 4]

Whereas, the current Arlington County Board, County Manager and staff conduct processes frequently led by outside consultants that, from the perspective of many affected residents, lack transparency and seem to be designed to reach a single, predetermined conclusion (e.g., Sector Plan updates, Public Spaces Master Plan update, Site Plan approvals, increased density and other mechanisms) without addressing substantive community concerns expressed during the process. [Appendix, Section 5]

Whereas, the current community engagement process is perceived by many to marginalize or stifle substantive criticism from residents about proposed County policies by such methods as not recording public comments, using “push poll” surveys that are structured to support a single point of view, providing on-line only presentations that do not allow for two-way communications, encouraging special interest group support, not recording or posting public minutes, and failing to include some letters from the public record. [Appendix, Section 6]

Whereas, the citizen-commissioner appointment process and objectives lack transparency for member and Chair selection and seems to result in commissions that lack a diversity of opinion or thought and do not necessarily reflect the views of the public at large. [Appendix, Section 7]

Whereas, it appears to many of our members that the County frequently conducts a planning review process without two-way engagement with residents and residents report that in some planning reviews, paid developer staff have the opportunity for two-way engagement at the table with planners while residents are limited to short, one-way comments. The information presented to planners can thus be considered “unbalanced” and “skewed”. [Appendix, Section 8]

Whereas, certain types of meetings exclude public attendance—even when the planning is holistic in nature (not a specific site plan)—permitting developers, approved “stakeholders” and staff to meet and consider planning during “office hours” in a way which limits public discussions public and skirts public “sunshine” laws’. [Appendix, Section 9]

Whereas, the outcome of land-use planning and development processes appears to focus almost exclusively on increasing density and satisfying developers’ goals and interests without providing specific metrics to document an equitable focus on achieving a balanced outcome that mitigates negative community impacts and enhances the long-term livability of both existing and new residents. [Appendix, Section 10]

Whereas, there is no accurate, measurable public accounting of the value of the “community benefits” developers offer as part of the site plan process and likewise no accurate public accounting of the value of the density and other benefits that property developers receive in return, leaving the public in the dark as to whether or not what is received is of roughly equivalent value. [Appendix, Section 11]

Whereas, the County continues to enact further restrictive rule and limitations on public speaking. [Appendix, Section 12]

Whereas, there is a lack of data transparency, accessibility, and properly working systems such as policies, processes, broken website links, website links to meetings, documents, historic content, minutes and video resulting in significant impediments to residents’ ability to view, research, and participate in County activities in a transparent way. [Appendix, Section 13]

Therefore let it be resolved, the Arlington County Civic Federation calls on the County Board, County Manager and Staff to re-affirm their commitment to meaningful public engagement and

to work with the Arlington County Civic Federation and whole community to restore robust civic engagement and restore faith Arlington County governance, including taking action to:

1. **Recommit the Arlington Way principles and processes** where the intent of community engagement is to give community members a meaningful role at the decision-making table by including the public in robust two-way conversations – to incorporate and address public concerns and ideas, encourage a diversity of thought and information in all processes, provide a full accounting of support and public participation, identify areas of common objectives to build consensus, improve engagement timeframes, provide information in advance with proper notice, improve transparency of the Board’s monitoring of the implementation of policy, disclose conflicts of interest and financial disclosures, ensure public availability of Six Step Guide and other engagement documentation, create an equitable balance between development interests and residents’ interests, relax public comment requirements and reduce reliance on both Consent Agenda and Closed Sessions;
2. **Ensure full government transparency** by making all notices, policies, guidance, data, analysis and objectives available to the public before, during and after each process, allowing participants to observe meetings and review notes from ALL county meetings including using technology to record and livestream its public meetings, to publish all residents’ feedback frequently and broadly, and to restore transparency in all its process and engagement activities;
3. **Revitalize efforts towards data driven decision** making by reconvening and reinvigorating the Arlington County Open Data Advisory Group and open data portal; encourage the County Manager, Staff, and County Advisory Groups to use Data driven analysis to form their recommendations; and encourage dialogue with the community regarding project data sources, methodology and data analysis results;
4. **Re-commit to Comprehensive integrated planning** by including comprehensive planning to address the impacts to services, facilities, and the environment before, during and after any planning process reviews to ensure comprehensive planning and data driven analysis of impacts with consensus driven incorporation of public concerns and input;
5. **Improve transparency for density policy and planning** by conducting a County level planning review and public engagement policy changes which will be used to provide new guidance for comprehensive planning, specifically the county-wide change in policy for increased density that is currently being applied throughout the County in all individual planning reviews including Sector Plan reviews, Planning Studies, GLUP studies, Master Plans and site/conceptual site plans; and

6. **Establish a policy that a plan revision or project will not move forward without an impact analysis or an implementation plan** that collects information on outcomes and is designed to include review and modifications as needed, including data which may show the project is not in the best interest of the community.

Be it Further Resolved, that notwithstanding the documented instances reflected in the Appendix to this Resolution that demonstrates the erosion in public confidence of the County's existing engagement processes, ***the Civic Federation is willing to work with the County Board and Staff on finding ways to strengthen the engagement processes*** by reestablish the bottoms up community engagement process inherent in "the Arlington Way", revisiting some of the positive techniques in public engagement referenced in Section 2 of the Appendix.