



**ARLINGTON**  
VIRGINIA

**Arlington County  
Civic Federation**



# NAACP's Proposed Amendment to Improve Public Engagement

Presentation to Arlington County Civic Federation

**NAACP**  
*Arlington Branch*

# What's going on here?

The NAACP proposes amending the “public confidence” resolution with a substitute that:

- Focuses sharply on public engagement
- Shortens the resolution and makes it more accessible
- Emphasizes the need to engage under-served residents
- Sidesteps polarizing topics like land-use policy

# What's in the NAACP's amendment?

Recognition that the county must improve engagement

+

Recommendation that the county take *eleven actions*

1. Recommit to the Arlington Way
2. Host more live, conversational meetings at more convenient places and times
3. Clarify how feedback shapes policies
4. Investing in long-range planning
5. Improving the county's website
6. Surveying to capture full range of views
7. Posting meeting minutes and records promptly
8. Increasing transparency and training for county advisory groups and liaisons
9. Conducting and publishing retrospective studies
10. Enabling free public access to data and other information relied on by the county
11. Offering language translation more widely



# How does the NAACP's amendment improve the resolution?

1. **Recommit to the "Arlington Way" principles and processes** by 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 – by providing more opportunities at the decision-making table, by ensuring that its engagement methods adequately inform residents of policies in development and fairly capture the range of diverse views within the community<sup>3 4</sup> incorporate and address public concerns and ideas; acknowledge and address substantive public criticism; encourage a diversity of thought and information in all processes; improve accessibility of information about policies in development, explaining how public input shapes those policies, and engaging with more residents—including renters, lower-income residents, disabled residents, and residents of color fully answer the public's questions and concerns (providing all relevant information/documentation whether or not it supports the County's position); provide a full accounting of support and public participation; identify areas of common objectives to build genuine consensus in order to produce outcomes that better serve the community's interest and are perceived as legitimate, unbiased, and fair; improve engagement timeframes; hold regular meetings of the County Board and advisory groups in neighborhoods of historically marginalized residents, provide information in advance with proper notice; create neutral survey tools to collect statistically valid, unskewed results; improve transparency of the Board's monitoring of the implementation of policy; create an equitable balance between development interests and residents' interests; relax public comment requirements and reduce reliance on both Consent Agenda and Closed Sessions; and further expand the Six Step Guide beyond Capital Projects, such as planning and zoning initiatives; expand public notice, engagement times, engagement timeframes and languages; revisit prior recommendations to improve civic engagement; and realign the County Ombuds role to allow for independence from County operations;

Block paragraphs



Short points

1. Recommitting to the Arlington Way by publicly pledging to improve the County's methods for engaging with its residents, in collaboration with the Arlington County Civic Federation and other community groups;
2. Hosting more public meetings with opportunities for live, two-way conversations with County Board Members, the County Manager, and County Staff, including by holding some regular meetings of the County Board and advisory groups in neighborhoods of historically marginalized residents and at more convenient times;
3. Responding promptly to public feedback on County policies in development, with sufficient specificity and clarity that the community can understand whether, how, why that feedback will shape policy;
4. Investing more resources in comprehensive planning and developing a more sophisticated, data-driven toolkit for anticipating, addressing, and communicating likely impacts from County policies;
5. Updating and maintaining the County's website to fix broken links promptly, highlight major initiatives, and make pertinent information about County policies more accessible;
6. Presenting feedback opportunities that minimize jargon, allow expression of a wide range of viewpoints, and generate participation from residents representing Arlington's diversity;
7. Ensuring that minutes and recordings of meetings of the County Board and advisory commissions are prepared and posted within 24 hours to the County's website;
8. Reinvigorating County advisory groups by advertising vacancies more prominently, sharing more information about selection criteria, selecting candidates to capture the diversity of residents' views and backgrounds, and updating and training on handbooks for members and staff liaisons;
9. Conducting retrospective studies on major County policies to determine whether they achieved their goals or had unintended consequences, and publishing the results;
10. Enabling free public access to all data, third-party analyses, and other information relied on to develop policy recommendations, without requiring FOIA requests; and
11. Making real-time language translation services more widely available at public meetings.



It's clearer

# How does the NAACP's amendment improve the resolution?

✓ It's accurate

The Claim	The Truth
<i>"the 'Arlington Way' ... resulted in robust community discussion, producing <u>consensus-driven outcomes</u>"</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Many outcomes have not been "consensus-driven"</li><li>• "Consensus" has been a consensus of the few</li></ul>
<i>"Arlington County Board, County Manager and staff conduct processes frequently <u>led by outside consultants</u>"</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consultants have never "led" county processes</li><li>• What's needed is oversight and more transparency</li></ul>
<i>"the current community engagement process is perceived by many to <u>marginalize or stifle substantive criticism</u> ... by ... encouraging advocacy group support"</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• One group's participation doesn't "marginalize or stifle" engagement with anyone else</li><li>• We should want more engagement, not less</li></ul>
<i>"the outcome of land-use planning and development processes appears to focus almost <u>exclusively on increasing density and satisfying developers' goals and interests</u> "</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The county wants to increase affordable housing</li><li>• Footnoted examples follow the recommendations of the 2015 Affordable Housing Master Plan</li></ul>

# How does the NAACP's amendment improve the resolution?

## ✓ It's representative

- Embraces consensus on improving public engagement
- Avoids discord on land-use policies
- Reflects views of groups under-represented within CivFed

NAACP Draft (4 March 2023)

### An AMENDMENT in the Nature of a SUBSTITUTE to be offered in discussion of the 'Resolution to Increase the Public's Confidence in Arlington County Governance'

Whereas, a signature feature of Arlington County governance is the "Arlington Way," which relies on bottom-up community engagement to build consensus and make policies with community support.<sup>1 2</sup>

Whereas, in keeping with the Arlington Way, the County must ensure that its engagement methods adequately inform residents of policies in development and fairly capture the range of diverse views within the community.<sup>3 4</sup>

Whereas, on September 14, 2021, the Arlington County Civic Federation approved a Resolution observing that "the perspectives of all communities including all racial, cultural, philosophical, and economic backgrounds, all sexual orientations, and all capabilities have not been historically represented in the viewpoints in civic engagement."<sup>5 6</sup>

Whereas, the Missing Middle Housing Study and other land-use planning initiatives have highlighted shortcomings of the County's methods of engaging residents.<sup>7 8 9</sup>

Whereas, these shortcomings have given many residents the impression that the County pursues predetermined outcomes, stifles public feedback, ignores criticisms of policies in development, and makes far-reaching decisions without incorporating residents' views, addressing their concerns, or reaching community consensus.<sup>10 11 12</sup>

Whereas, the County can increase public confidence in County governance by providing more opportunities for two-way conversations, improving accessibility of information about policies in development, explaining how public input shapes those policies, and engaging with more residents—including renters, lower-income residents, disabled residents, parents of young children, non-native English speakers, and residents of color.<sup>13 14 15</sup>

**Therefore, let it be resolved,** the Arlington County Civic Federation calls on the County Board and the County Manager to improve their engagement with the public and prioritize these actions:

1. Recommitting to the Arlington Way by publicly pledging to improve the County's methods for engaging with its residents, in collaboration with the Arlington County Civic Federation and other community groups;
2. Hosting more public meetings with opportunities for live, two-way conversations with County Board Members, the County Manager, and County Staff, including by holding some regular meetings of the County Board and advisory groups in neighborhoods of historically marginalized residents and at more convenient times;

# Why not compromise?

The NAACP tried to compromise with the sponsors

- Invited sponsors work out differences between the documents
- Participated in two work-session style discussions
- Revised the amendment to incorporate more of the sponsors' ideas
- Provided an "after-action" report responding to the resolution

***But...***

The sponsors did what they accuse the county of doing

- Pursuing their preferred, pre-determined outcome
- Serving the interests of only a select few in the community
- Refusing to make substantial changes in response to criticism
- Insisting on moving to a decision despite lack of consensus

# What's at stake?

Passing the resolution without the NAACP's amendment would:



- Pit CivFed against the county
- Reduce prospects of effective change
- Alienate under-represented groups



# NAAACP<sup>®</sup>

## *Arlington Branch*

Thank you

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