

## Discussion of Proposed FY 2025 Budget – March 12

### CONTEXT FOR FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

The program began with a framework for discussion outlined by the Revenues and Expenditures Committee in the *Civic Voice* referencing the county's budget highlights. Key points included:

**Tax rate increase proposal and impact.** The County Board has voted to advertise a potential 2.5 cent tax rate increase, higher than the 1.5 cents proposed by the Manager. This will be about \$582 for the average homeowner or about \$2000 over the past 4 years. The average homeowner bill would be about \$11,255 for taxes and fees. For rental property, this would be about a 6.5% increase.

**Civic Federation resolution.** In a resolution adopted in April 2022, ACCF urged the County Board “to include a provision in its annual budget guidance to the County Manager requiring the manager to take into account the impact of the effective tax rate increase (i.e., increased assessment plus the nominal/base tax rate) on county residents—especially vulnerable populations—and businesses in order to balance new spending with reasonable mitigation of the growing tax burden.”

**Context or priorities related to work plans and staff time.** In the context of the resolution, members are asked to frame their comments to provide priorities for staff time and workplans that support the priorities given a constrained fiscal environment.

**Potential areas for savings to fund priorities.** Potential options for savings include removing the proposed \$150 K for a tree canopy study and using the recent independent study instead, reallocating \$200K earmarked for an unexplained “contingent” for the Northern VA Juvenile Detention Center, which the state may close due to excess capacity, eliminating 150 FTEs of the 200+ added in FY2022 and FY2023 that remain unfilled. Exempt unfilled auditor, revenue-generating and public safety (police/fire/EMS/sheriff's department) positions.

### PRIORITIES BY AREA

#### Stormwater

At least one additional DES position is needed to ensure that stormwater flooding potential and stormwater management opportunities are considered during zoning and special land use reviews and in all potential land acquisitions.

#### Wellbeing and Health

There are serious inequities in public health that are geographically identifiable. Planning should be done now to fund a study with any EOY surplus to address these inequities through neighborhood-based education and services. The study should consider and assess options for neighborhood-based wellbeing services for people living in areas with health disparities. Options to consider should include locations in libraries, affordable housing buildings, and schools. Services to consider include health clinics, and other DHS individual assistance services and outreach.

#### Public Safety

There continues to be a significant critical staffing shortage for ACPD officers. Funding from unfilled positions should be considered to support additional strategies for both retention and recruitment of new officers. There should also be consideration for using the accruals for funding short term non-sworn staff to support officers and increase their ability to be in the field in priority areas.

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### Housing

**Develop housing planning and reporting tool.** Our highest housing priority is to develop a top-level accounting tool reflecting all approved “potential” new housing units based on planning and then continuous tracking and updates of net units to be added when they are approved via site plans. Land use plans and tools are constantly updated, and they all include projections of new housing units, including net affordable units as appropriate. The tool should track the units by likely price points and report how/if they are responding to needs identified by the various household income groups in the county as identified in the AHMP implementation frameworks. This would give us an objective tool that could make data-driven policy discussions a base to consider our County’s overall housing needs/goals, strategies, trends, and outcomes.

**Real Estate Tax Relief.** We support additional funding for the Real Estate Tax Relief (RETR) program, currently proposed for \$5 million. It would be far better to prevent displacement (and eviction, than to start from the front end with homeownership programs (however worthwhile).

**Additional savings to avoid impacts of a tax hike.** Although we applaud the manager’s added \$3 million for ongoing housing grants and the \$1.4 million for tenant eviction prevention, we need to consider savings. Tax hikes have the perverse effect of making housing more expensive for every resident, both property owners and renters through increased rent rates.

**Reassign staff to new priorities.** Since we have just emerged from multiple years of policy changes to add more housing, it may be that implementation could now be done through “steady state staffing” and thus costs for these studies should be decreasing and staff can be repurposed.

### Arts and Culture

The County Manager should follow up on commitments to support our arts organizations. Space for performance and art making continues to be a challenge. The county needs to continue its work started with “A Framework for Arlington’s Cultural Spaces”. Support should include maintaining and retaining spaces such as the Lee Center. There should be increased grants for the Arts Commission to give to artists, more in keeping with the much stronger support by neighboring jurisdictions. <https://arlingtonva.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2019/02/AFrameworkforArlingtonsCulturalSpacesFullReport.pdf>

### Environmental Affairs

The County’s budget does not commit sufficient resources for identified specific natural resource and climate change needs. The Board has identified climate change adaptation as an important focus for FY 2025. The \$1M Climate Action Fund will only target County facilities and staffing in the programs consulting with developers. Although there is additional funding proposed for pruning and maintenance, it is not balanced since there is no additional funding committed for other top priorities in the Forestry and Natural Resources Plan including native tree planting, land acquisition, resources for neighborhoods with lower tree canopy, ecosystem services, or access to natural areas, public education, and training.

### Legislation

Priorities for staff time should include developing specific language for a County legislative package that will provide the authority the county needs to appropriately address stormwater management and maintaining tree canopy.

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### **Parks and Recreation**

Discussion addressed two primary priorities, equity in access to public green space and restoration of hours for keeping the Nature Centers open. Both the Civic Federation and the 2023 Forestry and Natural Resources Plan call for a priority in adding open green space to address equity of access. There should be a specific plan to address this inequity through multiple funding streams. Restoring and expanding the hours for the Nature Centers was identified as a priority by many speakers based on the high value for education and experiencing nature, the relatively low cost, the strong support through volunteer hours, and the high cost-benefit.

### **Planning and Zoning**

Adequate staff time and funding should be provided in the workplan to update the Comprehensive Plan to concurrently examine and include the key components of the process that address the principles and support the framework. One key area is the intersection of the related factors of lot coverage, set-backs, and height, as they impact both density and green space and tree canopy. A study of these areas should be done now to support basic planning. These factors may be set to conflict, or they may be able to work in harmony but, if they are not addressed through intentional planning, the potential benefits of our land assets may be jeopardized.

### **Transportation**

The budget should encourage stronger metrics for Vision Zero to verify what is effective and what is not to guide future remediations. As transportation uses and costs change, there should be more consideration of how to “right size” public transportation modalities for best access and value.

### **Auditor**

ACCF reiterates its 2020 resolution that “asks the County Board and County Manager to identify additional funding and/or staffing resources... to support the County Board Auditor’s ability to complete audits and follow-up reviews within the established audit work plan’s time-frame and to increase overall audit capacity, in order to deliver timely, independent analysis to the County Board and assure Arlington County taxpayers that revenues and fees are being used in the most effective and efficient way possible.”

### **Other**

Other topics discussed included commercial vacancy rates, a perception of increasing homeless population in bus shelters, loose trash in some locations, the value of small historic community spaces such as the Lee Center,