

July 12, 2022

Dear Chair Cristol and Members of the Arlington County Board,

A key component of the mission of the Joint Facilities Advisory Commission (JFAC) is to "...provide input to the Boards on capital facilities needs assessment, capital improvement plans and long-range facility planning for both the Arlington County Government and Arlington Public Schools." The JFAC advises on APS and County facilities decisions with a broad and long-range vision that takes into consideration the needs of all Arlington County residents.

The JFAC met on June 29, 2022, to discuss the County CIP during our monthly meeting. We received a presentation from County staff on the facilities portion of the County's 2023-32 10-Year Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). This letter reflects the discussion and subsequent input from JFAC Commissioners.

### **General JFAC Observations on the County's 2023-2032 CIP**

- The JFAC notes that this CIP addresses pent-up demands, as the County has experienced two years of abbreviated CIPs due to the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and previous to that had provided a decade of prioritizing funding of APS needs brought on by rapid, increased enrollment. We endorsed the prioritization of school needs in prior years and acknowledge that this County CIP balances new projects with addressing deferred maintenance.
- The County Manager and staff are consistent and transparent in laying out funding priorities, identifying individual projects, and describing the County's adherence to its CIP principles and policies, especially in showing how the CIP meets the ratio of debt per capita to per capita income (no more than 6%), outstanding debt as a percentage of tax base (no greater than 3%), and debt service as a percentage of overall expenditures (below 10%).
- Each year, the County improves its communication about CIP projects to Arlington residents, employing a number of visualizations (like infographics and mapping tools) to categorize projects and make them available online.
- Of note is the County's [CIP Interactive Mapping tool](#) for understanding significant projects currently underway or adopted in the last CIP. The map overlays and color-codes the map of Arlington with project names and locations and provides a variety of project views and filters. Of particular interest are those by type of project (Parks, Transportation, Facilities Maintenance, Facilities Construction Projects, etc.), Civic Associations served by projects, and which projects are planned for areas populated by people of color (POC) to assess equity in spending and applying resources to historically underserved

communities. The JFAC commends this tool to Civic Associations and all Arlington residents wanting to understand where capital funds are being spent on already adopted and funded projects across the County.

## **JFAC Principal Considerations and Recommendations Related to the CIP**

Commissioners' recommendations to the County about this CIP fell into four major categories:

### **1. There remains a need for comprehensive, transparent, and long-range facilities planning.**

Considerations: The County has seen continuous growth and change over the past several decades, and proactive planning has allowed Arlington to guide much of that change. The Commission recognizes that growth is a hallmark of a healthy and economically viable community and is what has enabled Arlington County to provide high-quality services, a strong school system, and a variety of safety net programs for Arlington residents.

The JFAC was formed to facilitate creative thinking on how to co-locate uses on existing public land, and advocate for increased collaboration between APS and the County in terms of public facilities planning and land use. It is difficult to plan for long-term and holistic use of public land when facilities planning is done area-by-area or site-by-site. Without comprehensive and consolidated facilities assessments and planning, the County will continue to be locked into planning that is site-specific and limited in terms of co-location opportunities. In addition, interim site uses will continue to take neighborhoods by surprise and create tensions with the community, as has been the case with recent interim uses that have been poorly communicated and managed.

In addition to the annual budgets and bi-annual CIP processes, growth is guided by a network of adopted elements of the County's Comprehensive, Sector, and Area Plans, recognized Neighborhood plans, and through long-range and phased development planning studies. What is missing is a holistic inventory and assessment of public facilities; a long-term Schools and Public Facilities Master plan is needed to provide a roadmap for how the County envisions maintaining and/or improving residents' access to public facilities, and positions facilities to keep up with the growth envisioned for the County. There is a lot of information about plans and priorities available to citizens, but it requires a great deal of time, effort, and advanced knowledge of County planning processes for the average resident to piece together.

## Recommendations:

- Include a needs assessment for County Facilities in the upcoming annual workplan for the County's Department of Community Planning, Housing, and Development (CPHD). Note that the School Board will be receiving an APS Facilities Needs Assessment for all school facilities in Spring 2024. Work on the APS assessment is currently underway.
- Commit to starting the Schools and Public Facilities master planning process, as envisioned and scoped in 2019.
- The Trades Center clearly offers future opportunities for more efficient uses of its large footprint that also are consistent with good financial management and consideration of community values. It is not clear that there is a long-term plan for the site, though its future does seem linked to uses at the Quincy Site. In addition, it isn't clear what actual work is planned for "Phase 2" as proposed for funding in the CIP. More information and planning are needed.
- Communicate interim uses of public land early and often. Confer with Commissions and communities impacted by recent interim use decisions with a goal of creating a plan or playbook for timelines the County will follow with future interim use notifications to neighboring civic associations and residents.
- The proposed funding areas related to Natural Resiliency and Emerging Uses appear to hold great promise. Additional information about what is being contemplated under each category is desired, and we note that these types of opportunities may be addressed as part of a strategic, long-range planning effort.

## **2. Land acquisition needs more focus and funding in future CIPs.**

Considerations: JFAC members expressed support for the land acquisition funding included in this CIP. Building on the land constraints discussed above, Arlington County should make a more concerted effort to fund land acquisitions. In recent years, properties have become available, and the County has not had the funds to acquire them. While it is true that the County has moved quickly to make deals and borrow funds for once-in-a-generation opportunities to preserve affordable housing units, like the ones at Buckingham (in the early 2000s) and Barcroft Apartments (2021), this is not a long-term strategy and, with rising interest rates, could be a more costly one. Putting aside additional funding in the CIP will better position the County to take advantage of properties that become available – especially those that abut current parks, open space, or existing facilities - and are a solid investment in the County's ability to provide for future needs.

Recommendations: In future years, allocate more funds to acquire available properties, with a particular focus on the acquisition of properties abutting current parks, open spaces, or existing County and APS facilities.

### **3. Continue to improve communication and collaboration on planning efforts between the County and APS.**

Considerations: This year the JFAC had concerns with the inconsistencies of CIP presentation and planning between the School and County, detailed in the JFAC presentation to the School Board at its June 7th CIP Work Session and in our subsequent letter to the School Board.

Collaborative planning between the County and APS is critical as the entities share a 10% debt service limit, space within a land-constrained county, and CIP policies directing expectations. Commissioners recommend ensuring that communication on the CIP principles and goals from both Boards is as consistent and clear to the public as possible.

Recommendations:

- Schedule a joint public session during the APS planning cycle (which usually precedes the County CIP planning by a few weeks) to discuss the Superintendent's proposal and understand both Boards' priorities and assumptions earlier in the process.
- Facilitate closer collaboration with key finance Schools and County staff so priorities, assumptions about projects, and available bond funding are agreed upon and clearly understood.
- As Arlington develops plans for the Rosslyn boathouse facility in conjunction with the National Park Service, we encourage that co-located uses receive strong consideration. At a minimum, educational features should be considered, and the County should ensure that APS is involved in the planning process. This is another area where DEI considerations should be prominent so that the boathouse does not become a facility that primarily benefits the most affluent and privileged users.

### **4. Accelerate the planning timeline for the Arlington Nature Centers.**

Considerations: Arlington's two nature centers – Long Branch and Gulf Branch - are wonderful old facilities that are valued by their communities. However, both facilities are 50 or more years old and have undergone minimal modernization during their long lives. These historic structures present significant limitations and challenges, with ADA compliance being but one of many. While it is encouraging

that the CIP proposes \$500K for nature center planning in FY2030, that is far too distant in the future. The last ten years have seen significant changes that increase the demand for the services the nature centers are uniquely positioned to deliver. Extensive literature has emerged that demonstrates the crucial role that exposure to nature has on childhood development and on general well-being for children and adults. Appreciation for native plants and pollinators has blossomed. Arlington has committed to being a biophilic community. And, perhaps most of all, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to an explosion in use of our parks. Many residents discovered their local natural areas for the first time and found solace in the natural environment. Even as pandemic concerns have waned, the more extensive visitation to natural areas has continued.

Our present nature centers are not able to meet the demand. (We note with approval the increased external outreach into communities the nature centers have been undertaking. This is a positive enhancement, but not sufficient.) No other class of community facilities has been as systemically neglected as the nature centers. Further, there are DEI issues. Long Branch Nature Center is in an underserved area. Gulf Branch Nature Center has a unique Native American education area that is in sore need of modernization. The nature centers need planning and modernization soon.

Recommendation: Funding for initial planning should be targeted for much sooner than FY30. As a Board member commented during the June 14 work session, "What should the Nature Center of the future be like?"

**5. Conduct a series of public conversations to provide information, discuss planning priorities, and obtain resident feedback on a 2050 Shared Vision for Arlington.**

Concern: Arlington County remains a desirable place to live, but not all residents understand or buy-in to the County's stated goals and priorities, and many long-term and new residents are not fully informed of County plans or feel a part of the conversation for balancing County goals, increased growth, and quality of life for residents. Over eight years ago as part of the Community Facilities Study, the County conducted a series of public education and feedback sessions with statistics about our community, information on past and future planning, and exchanged ideas for managing future growth. Specific issues were identified, and recommendations were made in the report issued by the study group. Among the recommendations was the creation of the Joint Facilities Advisory Commission (JFAC) to assist with collaboration, co-location, and joint use of APS and County facilities resources and planning.

Since then, we have experienced a once-in-a-generation pandemic, the relocation of company headquarters to Arlington by Amazon and other businesses, a marked decline in civility in public discourse, and pressures on land use which have increased since the time of the Community Facilities Study. Do the experiences of the past three years change any of the assumptions that were made as part of that process?

What is currently missing is a shared vision for the next generation of Arlington – one that communicates and builds on our goals, hopes, and dreams for future generations of residents. The absence of a shared vision has led to increased tensions and lack of understanding of planning that was put in place a generation ago. We should ask ourselves: What is our history and who built the community that is Arlington County? What are our shared values? What are the demographic trends and projections for Arlington? How do we create a sustainable and resilient community? What are the County's goals, how do we realize them, and how do we measure progress in achieving them? Can our graduates and children live here to contribute to the community that educated them? What are the hallmarks of an economically and culturally thriving community? What does it mean to be a welcoming community? Is diversity important and how do we define and achieve it? Who has been left out of the prosperity of Arlington and what actions have we taken to promote equity? What will public facilities of the future look like, and how might the service delivery model change and improve over time?

#### Recommendations:

- Plan for a public conversation with the community to communicate goals, projections, trends, and forecasts to formulate consensus on a shared vision for the next generation(s).
- Create an accessible, honest narrative that provides a baseline about the history of Arlington in key areas. Collaborate with trusted community partners (many of whom have already documented aspects of the Arlington story\*) to form a comprehensive narrative that informs and educates about the County's history, outlines key challenges, and identifies the planning tools developed to address those challenges.
- Use the expertise of various Commissions and community leaders to assist staff in conducting focused public conversations on challenges, hearing and incorporating the public comments, and arriving at a consensus on principles that inform Arlington planning and a shared vision for the future.

- Identify how our current plans, planning processes, communications, and public input mechanisms can contribute to an articulated vision and enable us to move forward with a shared vision for the future of Arlington.

*\*Note: Arlington County Library and its Center for Local History have put together several research articles, digital collections, and online exhibitions on aspects of Arlington history, as have Arlington Public Schools. Other important resources and contributors may include Arlington Independent Media (AIM), the Arlington Historical Society, the Black Heritage Museum, arts and culture groups, a variety of Arlington non-profits, and those groups representing ethnic and special interest communities throughout the County.*

Thank you for the opportunity to weigh in on the County's Capital Improvement Process (CIP) and for considering these recommendations from the JFAC.

Sincerely,

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