Arlington 2050

Report prepared for the Arlington County Board

Prepared by the
Arlington 2050 Project Team

December 2024

"What Should Arlington look like in 2050?"

My ideal Arlington in 2050 looks like...

Letter from the Chair

As we began 2024, it was clear to the Arlington County Board that our community and the world was still adjusting to the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, as well as other economic, political and climate changes. Given these tremendous shifts in life today, we wanted to provide the community with an opportunity to look to the future. This could help us be more clear about where Arlington is going as a community and more clearly intentional about how we get there.

Arlington 2050 was designed to be an opportunity to ask residents to think about future change in a positive way, to envision what an "ideal" Arlington should look like by then, only a little over a generation away. If people have a sense of where they are going, and are reminded and empowered to have an active role in deciding the routes they want to take, change can become less of a challenge and more of an opportunity.

The last time Arlington tried to look into the future as a community was 1986 (*The Future of Arlington: 2000 and Beyond)*—and Arlington and the world have changed quite a bit since then. To capture the various views in our community, we believed the usual ways of engaging with our residents needed to be expanded. Different than the 1986 report, our approach strived to be more open-ended and with community engagement "evolving" in response to feedback we received in real-time.

To try to be more equitable in gathering different perspectives and views on the future, we also focused on tapping into local events that served or celebrated communities whose voices are typically underrepresented in community engagement. When necessary, we adjusted our engagement and innovated in our approach throughout the project. But innovation involves risk. Rarely do you get things right the first time. We thank our staff and our community for being willing to take a risk on our Arlington 2050 project. We think the results confirm it was a good risk to take.

The project started in February 2024 with a large dinner and panel discussion after which "postcards from the future" were distributed. Participants filled out with their personal visions of a future Arlington. Postcards were collected throughout much of the year in addition to other in-person engagement efforts to gather views from residents. These efforts and what we learned are described in the report. All the postcard responses we received are available in the appendix for anyone to see and analyze for themselves.

We were pleased to see how many people recognize that our greatest resource is each other. A majority of those responding said, in various ways, they want a strong sense of community. The acknowledgment of the importance of community and the need to strengthen our social cohesion will serve us well in the likely turbulent years ahead.

As a somewhat unexpected side product, we learned new ways of engaging people and analyzing the data received. We think this project and report give next year's Board and our community a good basis to work from as the Comprehensive Plan is renewed and, perhaps, a future strategic plan is considered.

Libby Garvey, Chair
Arlington County Board

I. Executive Summary

The Arlington 2050 Project was launched on February 5, 2024, and designed to be a year-long effort to ask Arlingtonians a simple question: "What do you want Arlington to look like in 2050?" Central to asking this question was the "Postcard from the Future" exercise. Residents were asked to imagine they lived in Arlington in 2050 and then to write to themselves in the Arlington of today, in 2024. They were asked to describe what was so great about their "ideal" Arlington in 2050. Both physical and digital postcards were provided. Over 1300 Arlingtonians from about ages 8 to 80 participated.

The Arlington 2050 project had three main purposes:
1. To serve as a partial update to the 1986 Commission on Arlington's Future. That report—*The Future of Arlington: the Year 2000 and Beyond*—was researched and written by 100 prominent Arlingtonians of that time;
2. To "check in" with residents today to see what they hope for in the future after several years of immense social, cultural, and economic shifts; and,
3. To help prepare residents to support County thinking about planning for the future in efforts such as the 2025 Comprehensive Plan Update and a possible overall strategic plan.

The project was designed to be a very different form of engagement and report from the one in 1986. It was "open-ended" about the results, with minimal guidance from the Board or staff, to allow for evolving community-driven discussions around the topic of Arlington's future. This meant engagement was iterative. Feedback from residents and volunteers informed the planning of each new engagement.

The second section of this report describes the feedback process and engagement methods. The main engagement of this project ran from February 5 to September 30. The project began with a Kickoff event where over 200 community leaders and members of the public gathered to hear from a panel of experts on the future of business, climate, demography, and education, followed by a visioning discussion using the Postcard from the Future exercise. Given the success and ease of access to provide holistic feedback to the project that the Postcards provided, it was decided that this exercise would be the focus for community engagement. Postcard Drop boxes were stationed at every library, and a digital version was published online. Every pop-up event that followed would also serve as a collection point for postcards. Midway through the project, a communications specialist was added to the Board office, increasing capacity to do pop-up events, have relational interviews with community leaders, and to collaborate on experimental projects with organizations like Arlington Public Schools & Libraries. More than a dozen Arlingtonians also volunteered for the summer engagement events, even helping to hand-transcribe and organize written postcard feedback.

The third section details how the data were organized and analyzed. Feedback was collected in three main formats (written, digital, and audio) and ultimately organized into a master spreadsheet. Because qualitative analysis was the main method of reviewing feedback, the findings and discussions are not statistically valid representations of all of Arlington—but indicators of conversations that were "energized" among participants. Part of the value of these comments is their ability to provide context to better understand why certain priorities matter to participants and highlight relationships and associations that members of the community make

between issues. Further, these conversations were framed and defined entirely on constituents' own terms—a unique lens that can potentially help the County communicate in the language most likely to connect with residents.

The final section identifies a few of the most salient topics of discussion: Community, Affordable Housing, Green Space, Public Transportation & Walkability, and Density. Each one of these topics receives an in-depth qualitative review where sub-themes and community values are explored. Representative postcards are shared to illustrate these points. Some of the key takeaways by topic are:

Community

- The word "Community" was mentioned 392 times by commenters;
- Postcards detail an Arlington where residents know their neighbors and feel a sense of belonging and connection;
- Many of these comments celebrate diversity in all of its forms;
- There is a desire for this feeling of community and diversity to manifest *physically*, as a differentiated sense of place and local identity.
- There is also a desire for social and socioeconomic *integration*, interconnection across differences, and for more productive navigation of contentious community issues.

Affordable Housing

- The most common two-word phrase that surfaces in the dataset is "affordable housing" (95) followed by "housing, affordable" (21) and "afford, live" (19).
- The postcards themselves are limited in their ability to define "affordable housing" and in identifying who is providing the comment (whether a renter or homeowner).
- A very common sentiment is that Arlington should be a place that "*everyone* can afford," and where people from "*ALL incomes and backgrounds*" are able to make a home.
- In conversations, younger residents were more likely to view affordable housing as impossible.
- Some comments spoke of the desire to grow old accessibly and affordably in the community they care about.

Green Space

- The phrase "green space" or "green spaces" occurs ninety-one times (not including mentions of "tree canopy," "trees, parks," "lots, green," "community garden," "lots, trees," and "green, roofs.")
- Notably, the desire for green was mentioned at every Arlington 2050 engagement during this project. Being among plants, trees, and other natural features was highlighted as fundamental to Arlingtonians' quality of life.
- Responses included a strong thread of environmental sustainability and concerns about climate change. Many residents emphasized protecting and increasing the tree canopy to prevent heat islands or described literal "green buildings" with native gardens on every rooftop and in every crevice.

- Another category of green space comment associates increasing density with the removal of trees, and the presence of concrete. Among these comments, visions for green space often take the form of tree canopy in residential neighborhoods.
- A third comment category is focused on green spaces primarily as social gathering and recreation spaces. This was a common theme at in-person engagements among kids and their parents, and also among Spanish-speaking residents.
- Many residents stressed the importance of *public* green space that all residents can access.

Public Transportation and Walkabilty

- The phrases "Public, transportation" (41), "Bike lanes" (32), and "Public transit" (24), all rank high on the list of word pairs.
- There was emphasis on more accessible and frequent public transportation, a network of safe and connected bike lanes throughout the county, and human-scaled mixed-use neighborhoods with pedestrian-only streets and nearby shops and amenities, in which cars are either not needed for most daily activities or absent altogether.
- Cars remained a salient part of many participants' lives in 2024—and some residents, while acknowledging the need for better transit, still imagine a future that includes cars.
- Drivers expressed frustration with traffic and commute times, the availability and cost of parking, and the quality of roads.

Density

- Certainly, the most animated question around which visions of Arlington in the year 2050 diverged is the County's future density.
- Concerns around density included the loss of neighborhoods' distinctive histories and identities, a reduction in tree cover, and added strain to shared resources.

An important output derived from this project is a list of commonly held community values. Where the "Discussions" section explores priorities and desired outcomes that surfaced frequently among Arlington 2050 participants, the "Community Values" section attempts to capture the root motivations that underpin these priorities. This report identifies fourteen values that, together, largely encompass most of the comments received.

1. Art & Culture;
2. Accessibility;
3. Climate & Environmental Sustainability and Resilience;
4. Diversity;
5. Equity
6. Economic Opportunities;
7. Economic Stability;
8. Effective, Equitable & Inclusive Governance;
9. Green Space;
10. Health & Wellness;
11. Safety;
12. Sense of Place/Local Identity;
13. Social Connection & Community Belonging; and,
14. Youth and Family Wellbeing

II. PROJECT OVERVIEW AND ENGAGEMENT

Purpose

Arlington 2050 served multiple purposes, and revolved around a simple question the Board posed to residents: "What do you want Arlington to look like in 2050"? Arlington has done similar work before. In 1986, the County Board created an ad hoc Commission on Arlington's Future to author a report entitled *The Future of Arlington – the Year 2000 and Beyond.* This commission aimed to deliver several items to the Board (including a vision of what Arlington ought to be in 2000, challenges to that vision, and suggested policies and strategies to achieve that vision). Similar to Arlington 2050, this 1986 report sought "to stimulate creative thinking and raise expectations for a bright future...". Thus, this 2050 project serves to provide an "updated" conversation, building on the past work of this commission.

Arlington 2050 allowed an opportunity to "check-in" with the community today, gaining an understanding of what residents' thoughts, feelings, and hopes are for the future. This topic seemed increasingly relevant given the enormous social, cultural, and economic shifts that have occurred in the past 5 years. The global COVID-19 pandemic, for example, brought an inordinate amount of change and uncertainty to nearly every sector of industry, government, and, of course, daily life—change that has lingering impacts today and, likely, for the foreseeable future.

Finally, Arlington 2050 hopes to prime residents for impending community engagement regarding updates to the Comprehensive Plan in 2025. The Comprehensive Plan serves as the County's premier coordinating document, guiding departments, and their policies from affordable housing to public spaces to transportation. The findings and conversations captured in Arlington 2050 will help inform this process next year.

Scope

The County Board decided the scope of Arlington 2050 should be somewhat "open-ended", allowing for evolving discussions around the topic of Arlington's future. Like the 1986 report, the project did not aim to deliver a definitive plan on future change. Instead, the focus was on engaging the community in a process of "envisioning" with minimal guidance from the County Board's engagement staff. The benefits to this approach were intended to be two-fold: first, residents were allowed a near-complete freedom to articulate what they believe Arlington should look like by mid-century. As opposed to a survey with pre-determined answers or statements, an open-ended question offers participants an opportunity to answer more holistically and in their own words what they believe to be most important when it comes to envisioning Arlington's future. The second benefit is the flexibility offered to engagement staff to conduct and iterate upon community engagement.

This flexibility in community engagement was intended to help stimulate discussions that were community-centered and driven. It was understood that iteration and even experimentation would need to happen to investigate conversation threads sparked by the envisioning process. As detailed further in the "Engagement Methods" section, what began as a simple question to an audience at the Arlington 2050 kickoff in February soon evolved into multiple in-person

meetings with community leaders, pop-ups at summer events, and data projects with students to analyze Arlington 2050 postcard feedback.

Of course, engaging in such an open-ended and iterative manner has limitations. Unlike a traditional survey or finite-choice method of engagement that is standard across a project, feedback collected during the Arlington 2050 Project came in multiple forms, whether it be written, digital, verbal, or even through voicemail. Feedback was also wide-ranging in length and topic. Any analysis would need to be mostly qualitative in nature. Further, the findings from feedback collected cannot be presented as generalizable, as would be possible with a statistically valid survey. Instead, any presentation or categorization of feedback in this report should be viewed as a "snapshot" or "pulse" of a community conversation rather than an objective, representative view of all of Arlington.

Another challenge identified early in the scoping of this project was how to ensure engagement of a diverse range of perspectives and populations. With few exceptions, there were no self-identifying demographic questions (such as homeownership status, race, or gender) asked of the participants. This was by design, as earlier iterations of project engagement were physical postcards with a finite amount of writing space. However, this limited the project's ability to answer the questions, "who benefits", "who is burdened", "who was missing" and "how do we know", which are core evaluative components of the County's Racial Equity lens. The project's engagement was adjusted to prioritize physical in-person engagement in areas with diverse populations. Further, leaders of community organizations that focus on and serve traditionally underrepresented groups were consulted to inform proceeding engagement.

Lastly, although Arlington 2050's scope was meant to be a one-time engagement effort, the project highlighted an opportunity to increase community engagement capacity in the Board Office for the long term. Historically, community engagement on Board initiatives and policies was coordinated by departmental communications teams or the County Manager's Community and Public Engagement (CAPE) team. Board guidance on community engagement usually flowed through the County Manager, then to Deputy Managers, Department Directors, and finally communications teams. On a smaller scale, individual Board member engagements often took the form of community meetings which they would attend themselves. As a result of the project, the Board is considering how to expand and support its own community engagement, and in collaboration with CAPE and the County Manager.

Engagement Methods
This section briefly details the different engagement methods used during the Arlington 2050 Project and presents them in a somewhat chronological order, although some strategies occurred concurrently and continued until the end of the project. Each section will also provide details on the outputs of each strategy, but analysis, observations, and discussion are represented in section IV of this report. It is important to note that these methods evolved over time due to the iterative and experimental scope of this project.

Most strategies used for community engagement centered on or around the "Postcard from the Future" exercise. Initially created to be an icebreaker for the February kickoff event, this exercise was adopted as this project's main strategy due to its simplicity and scalability. Participants were asked to imagine that they live in an "ideal" Arlington 25 years from today and describe that

future on a postcard to their current self. These cards (in whatever format) were turned into the County Board Office. By design, this postcard exercise was meant to be simple to ensure that it remained engaging, accessible, and easy to complete.

Kickoff

The first main event of the Arlington 2050 Project was its February 5, 2024, Kickoff, hosted at the Merlin Amazon building in National Landing. The event featured a panel discussion moderated by Chair Libby Garvey, which included Steve Hartrell (Vice President of Public Policy at Amazon), Hamilton Lombard (a demographer at UVA's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service), Jason Samenow (meteorologist and weather journalist at the Washington Post), and Gregory Washington (President of George Mason University) to speak on business, demography, climate, and education, respectively. This was followed by the Postcard from the Future envisioning exercise with attendees. Attendees originally only included leaders from civic, community, non-profit and business organizations that served Arlington. This was expanded to include any Arlingtonian interested in attending and participating. The event was livestreamed to allow for virtual participation and recorded for future viewing.

The event lasted nearly 2 hours, and over 230 individuals participated in person. County Board Office staff retrieved 164 postcards from the future and distributed another 500 for participants to share with their networks, neighbors, family and friends. Chair Garvey noted that participants could pick up and drop off postcards at any of the eight Arlington libraries at designed drop boxes. A digital version of the postcard went live at the conclusion of the event.

Digital Postcards
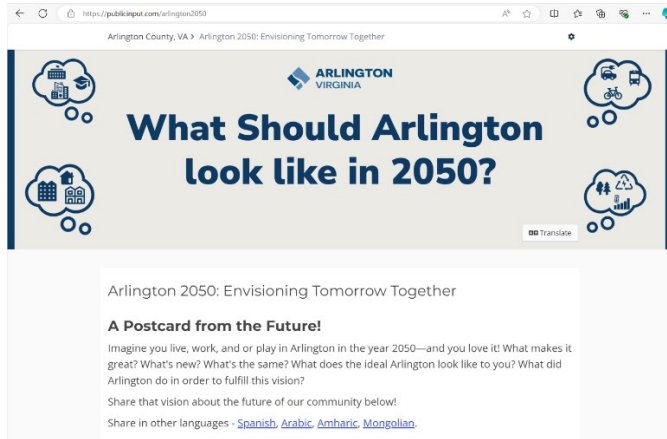
Available in Amharic, Arabic, Mongolian, and Spanish, a digital version of the postcard ran from February 5 to September 30, 2024, using the Public Input platform. This method was meant to be a passive means of collecting feedback. The link to this postcard was featured on the County's Engage Page, distributed via email and was highlighted by the Chair during her Recessed Board meeting reports. At the conclusion of the collection period, nearly 400 individuals participated, offering over 670 comments.

Library Drop Boxes

Another means of passive postcard feedback was the use of transparent drop boxes at all 8 Arlington libraries. From February 5 to September 30, County Board Office staff would routinely receive notice from library staff of either a need to refill these drop box locations or retrieve postcards when the boxes became full.

Notably, the majority of feedback from children were collected at these drop boxes, likely due to library summer or afterschool programs and events. 341 postcards were collected across all Arlington libraries.

Relational Interviews

The Arlington 2050 Project presented an opportunity for experimentation with community-led engagement methods. To this end, a major component of the project design was consulting with a variety of community leaders to better understand potential barriers to project participation among diverse groups in Arlington, and to surface community connectors, third places, events, and other strategies and opportunities for reaching new participants.

A number of leaders starkly underlined the importance of accounting for known logistical barriers that prevent people in many communities from engaging meaningfully with government. Such barriers include language access, transportation, digital literacy challenges, the costs of time away from work and finding childcare, a lack of familiarity with traditional County communication channels, and broken trust among historically marginalized groups.

Beyond this, however, many leaders placed special emphasis on the importance of relationality and warmth, and creating sensory and context-rich experiences that would be meaningful and interesting events for participants in and of themselves. Examples included not just providing

food but centering conversations around a shared meal, and setting up a physical space that centers the residents themselves (as opposed to County Staff or officials). One leader spoke of conversations she had led in which participants were invited to bring a symbolic personal item with them to the conversation that represented the issue at hand, so as to invite a person's stories and lived experience into the room. She also suggested giving a small relational gift at postcard pop-up events—for example at a food distribution line, thanking participants with a reusable grocery bag, a small jar of herbs or spices, or even a flower, to acknowledge the value of their input.

Building trust and rapport, and working in relatively safe and trusted spaces, was another recommendation. Leaders mentioned that while many community members have important and valuable experiences to share, it can feel unsafe at first to share them in public spaces with unfamiliar people. Caucusing within an identity group, and facilitation by a trusted community member, were common recommended strategies.

While not every recommendation was possible to immediately implement on this project's timeline, these conversations have shaped many elements of the 2050 engagement approach.

Pilot Listening Session
An in-person pilot listening event in July at Lubber Run Community Center explored the viability of in-person conversations about the future between residents of different ages and life experiences. A hope was that such conversations might give additional detail and insight into sentiments shared through the postcards, help spark questions and ideas between constituents, and especially, lead to participants thinking with greater complexity about the big picture, with the experiences of others in mind.

This pilot group contained thirteen participants, about half of whom were volunteers ranging in age from mid-teens to early 60s, and half of whom were leaders and other interested community members recruited at events or by introduction. Participants were provided with poster paper and markers to generate ideas and brought through a series of activities using a draft facilitation guide. Mindful that such intergenerational and cross-community events have been contentious in the past, this format was designed to encourage participants to ground their concerns and priorities for the future in their own personal stories. The conversation resulted in rich, wide-ranging, and nuanced discussion.

Community Pop-ups & Events
The addition of a new communications specialist in the Board Office in late May created new capacity for in-person resident engagement on the 2050 Project just in time for a number of summer community events. These in-person events allowed connection with a more general audience that might not have been familiar with, or inclined to weigh in through, the traditional County communications channels—and also to prioritize outreach to some

diverse and historically underrepresented communities to ensure their perspectives were represented.

The primary mode of in-person engagement was a "Postcard Pop-Up" model, in which a team of volunteers engaged event attendees in conversation and invited them to participate in the "Postcards from the Future" activity on site. These pop-ups primarily took place at planned community events such as Juneteenth celebrations, the County Fair, the Hispanic Heritage Festival, and Green Valley Day, and resulted in the collection of 330 additional postcards, as well as dozens of in-person conversations that added useful context and nuance to what was being captured in written comments.

In addition to a static/passive tabling setup, volunteers were equipped with a conversation starter guide, and a mobile kit with pre-stocked clipboards enabling them to move around to different locations and engage residents in a "canvassing"—style approach, allowing the team to further branch out beyond those who might proactively approach a County Government table on their own.

Other Community Collaboration

Teachers
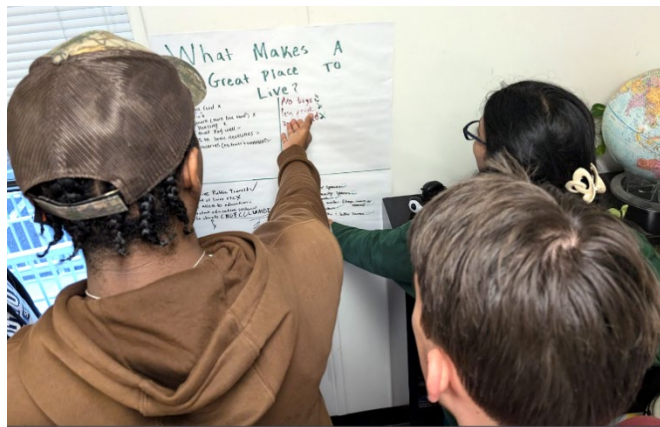
Today's first-year high school students will be 40 years old in the year 2050—so featuring youth voices in this conversation was an early priority. The primary strategy pursued for engaging teens was a partnership with Arlington Public Schools. A dedicated coffee and donut hour for educators, as well as word-of-mouth introductions through teachers' networks, resulted in several educators organizing class discussions and even entire units of study connected with Arlington 2050. Central to the success of such projects was that they were "bottom-up" in nature. Teachers with creative ideas, and a gut read on what activities would best engage their own students, devised activities tailored to their subject's required standards of learning and aligned with their curricula. Two notable projects initiated in 2024 included:

- A collaborative unit on Arlington's future that spanned three classrooms and subject areas (English, Math, and Government) and resulted in the collection of seventy-three postcards

- A computer science unit on qualitative data analysis and machine learning that analyzed preliminary Arlington 2050 data. Each student researched a different process—from traditional qualitative data tagging to data cleaning, natural language processing, sentiment analysis, bi-grams and tri-grams, word clouds, K-means clustering, and supervised machine learning—and then found and/or wrote their own code to perform these analyses. These methods very closely aligned with the approach that the Arlington 2050 Project ultimately used, in collaboration with Arlington's Department of Technical Services, to perform its own data analysis.

In progress for next spring is an Urban Planning Cornerstone for 9th graders at Arlington Tech, in collaboration with Community Planning, Housing, and Development, in which students will do an area walk and then weigh in on the implementation of the Columbia Pike Area plan.

Potentially even more valuable than the collection of postcards for this specific project phase, educators surfaced rich context and insights about student needs and concerns, as well as ideas for future learning collaborations with the County that, if acted upon, could simultaneously forward a number of Arlington County's priorities for youth wellbeing.

Community Partnerships
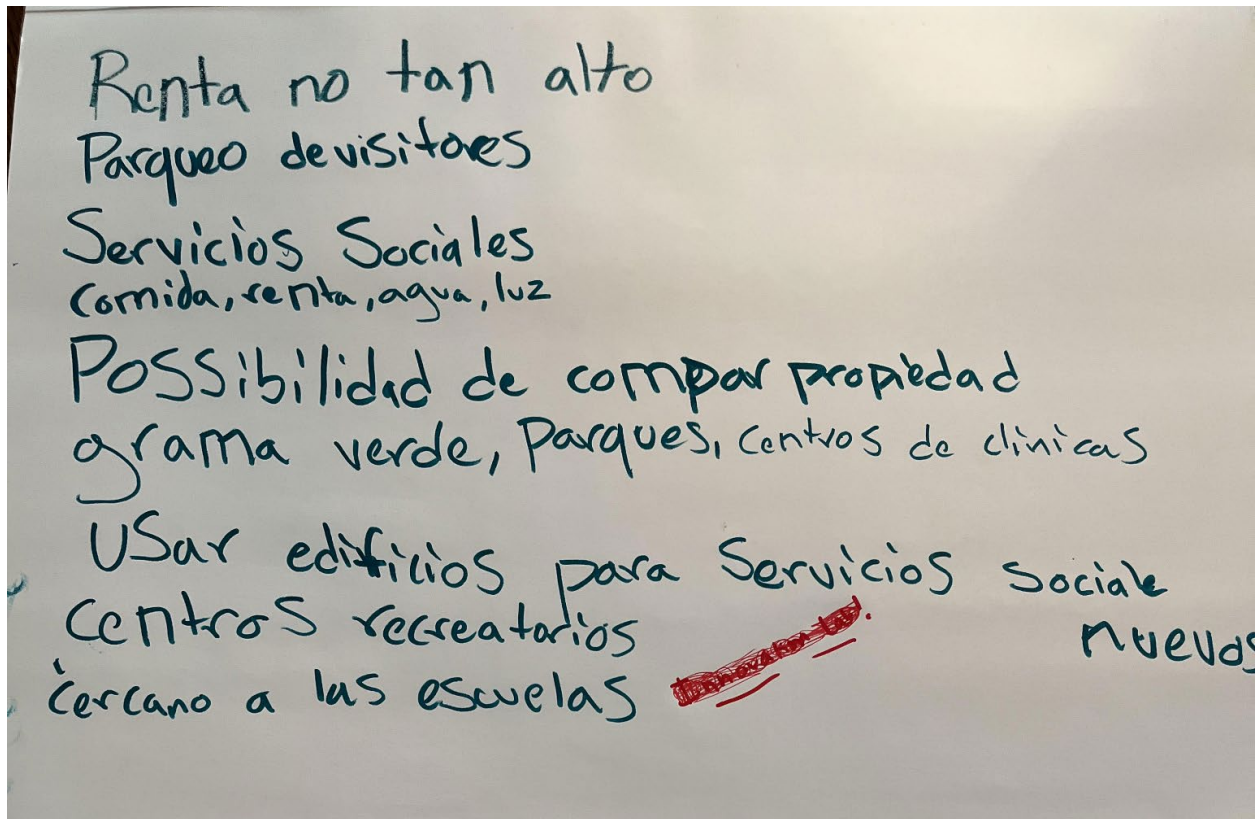
One notable postcard engagement was an event at Gates of Ballston's Charlie Rinker Community Center, organized by Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance (NVAHA) in collaboration with Buckingham/Gates of Arlington Tenants' Association (BU-GATA). NVAHA reached out to the Board Office directly in July to ask for 2050 postcards to bring to a Spanish

language civic "self-advocacy training" for residents—for which they had just received a $750 microgrant from Arlington Neighborhood College. Interested in what might be learned from the conversation and hoping to replicate this event model, the CBO's communication specialist attended in order to listen and offer assistance. Notably, the event provided meals, childcare, and interpretation for well over forty attendees, making the opportunity much more accessible to participants, a number of whom were mothers with young children. Twenty-four written postcards were collected altogether. Many of these had been taken down from dictation on a sheet of notebook paper by teenage volunteers of Buckingham Youth Brigade, each comprising responses from multiple participants who had felt uncomfortable writing on their own. During the group discussion residents spoke passionately about the need for more youth programs and school safety measures to protect children from exposure to drug use and bullying, a desire for more parks and outdoor spaces, assistance with rent and home ownership, and daycare for special needs family members as well as children.

After noticing that digital engagement was a significant barrier to many participants—and at the encouragement of community leaders who recommended a more sensory-rich and experience-oriented approach to engagement—a 2050 volunteer suggested experimenting with a "telephone booth" to capture residents' "Voicemails from the Future." This strategy was first piloted at the Hispanic Heritage Festival in Tyrol Park, in collaboration with Libraries staff. Inspired by a suggestion from the event's organizer, the Library Truck was decorated as a "phonebooth." The strategy was employed again at Green Valley Day with a traditional table setup and a blue telephone handset—and ultimately collected twenty-six voicemails. While some additional practical iteration will be needed to fully realize this as an engagement method, the auto-transcription and translation features built-into the Microsoft Teams voicemail app were an immediate time-saver compared with the handwritten postcards—and the opportunity to creatively collaborate with Libraries resulted in other meaningful cross-pollination, to be discussed in depth later in this report.

Volunteers

Finally, it is essential to mention the extent to which this project benefitted from the labor and insight of volunteers who were recruited in collaboration with Arlington Neighborhood College, Volunteer Arlington and The Leadership Center of Arlington's "Inspire," program, Teen Network Board, youth leaders from the Arlington branch of the NAACP, and Arlington Partnership for Youth, Children, and Families. Far beyond staffing events (and hand-digitizing, transcribing, and organizing hundreds of postcards), these volunteers brought an incredible range of expertise—from organizational psychology to group facilitation, to youth concerns and teen engagement. Events and actions throughout this process were greatly enriched by innovations they brought to the table, and conversations among the volunteers themselves (which spanned multiple generations and a wide range of life experiences) brought insights that have deeply informed this report and its recommendations.

III. ORGANIZING AND ANALYZING FEEDBACK

Feedback collected came in three main formats, written, digital, and verbal, and was organized into a master spreadsheet. To track each postcard, every event (like the February Kickoff) or passive collection location (like individual libraries that had postcard drop boxes) was treated as an individual collection point and were recorded on separate data sheets. Postcards collected were given an "Event" tag, identifying the collection point, and a unique "Postcard ID" number, to represent the sequential order in which they were received or recorded within each collection point. In total, there are twenty-six collection points in the master spreadsheet. An overall "Index ID" number was also assigned to each postcard when all data sheets were merged.

Index	Event	Postcard ID	Comment
635	Kickoff	K146	100 more parks. 10 more community centers/libraries. Better income diversity across neighborhoods. Drive less cars. Tech/apps to coordinate deliveries. Tree oasis, bet federal, bet federal, state country. Better recycling, less waste. Better integration of Potomac river.
636	Kickoff	K147	Arlington is a community that combines a rich legacy of forward thinking citizens with resources that support all ages and stages. Residents have access to services, education, and a community that exists to secure diverse groups to provide a high quality of life to all ages and economic levels. Transportation.
637	Kickoff	K148	Arlington has many more metro stops to serve the entire population adding stops in Columbia Pike/Shirlington/around Route 66! Arlington has created more open public spaces for play, art, and leisure. County wide initiative to support residents in home ownership, with clear guidelines and equitable application process. Eliminating disparities.
638	Kickoff	K149	It is a walkable diverse county with green spaces in every development. We have solved the housing crisis with innovative policies regarding salaries, profit management, and helping the community members. Arlington is fantastic now because the county systems listen to their young people, just as they did that one time 25 years ago. Diverse thought and opinions are prioritized in order to make Arlington a place where people can live comfortable and, at time during difficult conversations.
639	Kickoff	K150	We have built a community where all age groups are valued for what they bring and its buildings and spaces welcome them. Greenspaces are important so we have great bike/running trails and shared XXX space. Transportation is reliable.
640	Kickoff	K151	ALL children, youth, and families thrive in a community that values empathy, support, collaboration, and kindness

The County Board Office ultimately decided against tagging individual comments by themes or topics, despite a few attempts to find an appropriate tagging structure. The challenge was two-fold. First, the open-ended and broad nature of feedback led to reviewers struggling to identify individual tags that could balance the level of detail across postcard submissions.

Lists of higher order categories generated for the 2050 Project typically included fifteen to twenty "primary tags." An example of a tag at this level of granularity was the broad theme "Economy"—which encompassed comments about higher wages, concerns about inflation, a desire to attract corporations with jobs to the County, supporting small locally-owned businesses, reducing the commercial vacancy rate, and forcing multinational corporations to "pay their fair share" of taxes. The breadth of these statements spans such a disparate variety of economic concerns that it renders such a category unhelpful in telling what postcards tagged this way are actually asking for—beyond pointing to a cluster of comments for deeper human review.

"Sub" tags were considered to try to reflect this nuance within larger tags, but as more feedback was collected, more topics were introduced and the practice of trying to iterate on sufficiently accurate tags became unsustainable.

A second compounding factor to the challenge of tagging was that commenters did not just speak to one issue. The majority of comments covered several themes and topics, which could have their own tags and sub tags. Consider the following comment and hypothetical main tags in brackets to illustrate:

> **P165:** *"Lots of trees and parks* **[Green Space]** *and walking/biking spaces* **[Transportation]**. *The ability to walk to local restaurants and shops - mom and pop stores rather than chains* **[Economy]**. *Places to meet and congregate with friends or to run into people you haven't seen in a while* **[Third Spaces***]. Art facilities (music, pottery, painting.) & active art scene* **[Art & Culture].** *I want to take classes, green space with grass (not artificial turf), Sit in a park and read or picnic***.** *Not much traffic. Reliable services. Open and inclusive government structures and spaces for comments* **[Government]**. *Active and influential civic associations* **[Community]**. *Lots of diversity* **[Diversity]**. *Small, good schools that are diverse and well-integrated. Appropriate openings in magnet programs* **[Public Schools]**. *Ability to play on sports teams and tennis, pickleball, etc."*

While assigning multiple tags to each comment was certainly possible in theory, it quickly became clear that doing so would be prohibitively time intensive with the available tools—requiring a reviewer to work through each sentence of a postcard one by one and discern for each individual sentence which of the 20 or so higher order tags best applied—across 1300 datapoints.

Once the collection period ended in September, and reviewers compiled and merged all data points into a master spreadsheet by mid-October, little time would be left for 2050's small team to conduct such a process and would likely be done at the expense of any qualitative data analysis.

Given these constraints, an approach that was explored with the help of the Department of Technology Services was the use of a Microsoft Copilot AI, as one tool for analyzing and characterizing the data. One hope was that Copilot might assist in generating an appropriately sized list of high-level categories to fit the dataset, and then apply those as tags to each comment in the spreadsheet. The first half of this experiment was somewhat successful. Copilot was able to generate lists of tags of differing lengths that broadly captured a majority of the topics constituents had written about—as well as convincing definitions for each. Ultimately one of these AI-generated lists was chosen to be refined and edited.

When it came to applying these tags, however, Copilot faltered, somewhat. Tags like "environmental sustainability," which are associated with predictable keywords ("green space," "trees") were applied most frequently, and were often overapplied—while more subjective tags, like "local identity" were frequently omitted. This ultimately undermined confidence in the tool and meant that fully coding the master dataset was not feasible in time for this phase of analysis.

One final question was whether AI might be useful in a more" narrative" analysis of responses— essentially by writing composite vision statements "in the voice of" different zip codes or specific engagement events. While this remains a tantalizing idea—and experiments with other AI tools like ChatGPT have demonstrated a much better capacity to do this on similar projects— attempts to do this with Copilot fell somewhat flat, with the software often using nearly identical wording for vision statements representing populations with quite different priorities and characteristics.

After helping to conduct a number of such experiments, collaborators at the Department of Technical Services suggested a slate of much more concrete tools—ultimately using various Python libraries to generate word clouds for all zip codes and proxy demographics, as well as "bi-grams, or pairs of words that occur frequently together such as "affordable, housing." These tools, along with traditional word filters in Excel, ultimately provided the strongest jumping-off point to focus qualitative analysis.

All this being said, experimentation with Copilot proved immediately useful for cleaning the master dataset—for instance, by helping to identify instances of personal contact information that needed to be redacted for public consumption—and surfaced a number of other potential reliable uses for AI.

IV. DISCUSSION OF FEEDBACK

What the Numbers Can't Tell Us, and What they Can
There are things the numbers and findings in this report can and cannot tell us. Beginning with what they cannot: the Arlington 2050 engagement process was meant to be a community conversation starter, not a statistically valid representation of all of Arlington. While in the proceeding sections this report may highlight some figures in the discussion of certain topics, these should not be viewed as concrete "votes" indicating the popularity of specific policies or actions.

What the numbers can indicate is where a conversation is "energized" among residents—particularly when it is mentioned across a wide variety of zip codes or constituencies. Beyond that one quantitative utility, this report argues that the real value of these comments is in their ability to:

- Provide context to better understand the reasons *why* certain priorities matter to residents;
- Point to the language that residents use when they are thinking about these energized issues in the context of their daily lives;
- Highlight relationships and associations that community members make between issues that cut across different County departments and topic areas;
- Highlight concerns that cut across demographic and age divides—and that might be potential community unifiers (or that at least add helpful and healthy complexity to a polarized conversation); and
- Reveal places where residents on opposite sides of one policy issue have other shared interests.

These conversations are framed and defined entirely on constituent's own terms—a uniquely valuable lens that can potentially assist the County in communicating in the language most likely to connect with residents.

One final utility of this dataset is its potential use as a community engagement or civic conversation tool in and of itself. It presents a rare opportunity for residents to directly encounter the perspectives of neighbors they have never met, from all walks of life and of differing opinions, in a way that's personal and contextualized. Even more so, the handwritten physical postcards remain as potentially powerful artifacts for deeper community investigation and the building of shared ground.

Discussion
Due to the wide breadth of community aspirations and conversations that the Arlington 2050 engagement process surfaced, any discussion of insights will necessarily be only the tip of the iceberg. Led primarily by the most prevalent keywords and word pairs surfaced by the data analysis, attempted below are highlights of just a few of the most salient topics on participants' minds, drawing out what may be potentially actionable insights or interesting opportunities for moving conversations forward.

COMMUNITY
Looking through the postcards, a reader is immediately stuck by the emphasis residents place on how they would like to relate to each other. By far the most prevalent single word across the entire dataset, with 392 mentions, is "Community." Postcards detail an Arlington where residents know their neighbors and feel a sense of belonging and connection—with a prominent undercurrent of caring for vulnerable community members. They express a desire for shared public spaces and events, leafy public parks and outdoor spaces to get together for shared activities and recreation, a robust system of libraries and community centers where residents can gather for free, and tons of music and cultural festivals in which they can mingle in the real world and experience the vibrance and creativity of their neighbors.

DO06: *"The murals, mosaics, and public art are fabulous! ==The city nurtures its residents. There are community gatherings that feature the creativity of our citizens- and the food is great! There are also lots of places where people can hang out for free.== The historic district has actual pre-21st century homes! No kidding! Irreplaceable treasures!"*

CF67: *"The green spaces and trees are bountiful and amazing. The communities are close knit and neighbors treat each other like family. We stopped focusing on the big business and went back to focusing on community and caring for each other!"*

JTA10: *"UNITED" Loving the seen and unseen"*

PI-32: *"Living car free is the preferred lifestyle because of how easy it is to get around on foot, bike, scooter, and bus. ==Where children know the names of the other kids on the block and knock on each other's doors to see if they're available to play. Why? Because they met playing outside at a play structure and their parents met at the local hangout spot right nearby."==*

One very prominent theme that jumps out from these comments is a celebration of diversity, in all its forms. Postcards frequently describe an Arlington that enthusiastically embraces and relishes the rich texture of diverse cultures, languages, ethnicities, cuisines, ages, backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, political perspectives, and general vibrancy that this region has to offer. While this sentiment is frequently interwoven with themes of equity, it is worth noting that the tone of the postcards is markedly different from the tone of many institutional conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion, which often frame diversity as the *means to* a more just and equitable society. In postcards, it is diversity that is the desirable end *in and of itself*—in fact in many ways, equity is understood to be a precondition that makes a diverse and vibrant society possible. In short, the diversity and equity discussion, in the voices of residents, is as much a conversation about what kind of society it just feels great to live in, as it is a conversation about "doing the right thing."

PI-26: *"Arlington is the place to live and enjoy life for residents, commuters, and visitors alike. People of all ages and backgrounds love to call this county their home. Delicious flavors, fragrant smells, happy noises, and beautiful sights fill our days."*

CF-70: *"High-level diversity. It increases the level of understanding and unity. Show beautify [sic] as well. Like a garden full of different colors."*

CF-37: *"Arlington is so fantastic because of how inclusive the community is. By holding events where the community is able to experience other cultures through food/clothes, etc."*

On a separate but somewhat-related note, there is a desire for this feeling of community and diversity to manifest *physically*, as a differentiated sense of place and local identity. Participants wanted their physical spaces to feel organically rooted to—and to visibly reflect—the distinct personality, culture, history, and social memory of their neighborhood, both past and present. A common thread of this is the preservation of historic homes and buildings and preventing the

proliferation of McMansions and "cookie-cutter development." However, it also manifests as a desire to prioritize small local businesses—or in a neighborhood's devastation at the loss of a beloved ethnic grocery store that held the memory of birthdays and holidays flavored by a particularly hard-to-find soda. Importantly, it is also what motivates a fierce desire to hold together and bring back the tight-knit African American communities whose stories—given their incredible centrality to American history and this County's understanding of itself—have far too easily and too often been scattered. While not captured in the postcards themselves, public engagement, and conversations with residents of historic Black neighborhoods provided more context to this theme. The idea of "sense of place" is discussed in this section because, while issues of local identity are often framed as aesthetic preferences, the deeper motivation underlying them often appears to be a desire for communities to feel "seen."

Another notable thread is a desire for social and socioeconomic *integration*, interconnection across difference, and for more productive navigation of contentious community issues. What is notable here is that most often the emphasis is not on avoiding the unpleasantness of conflict; instead, residents seem to value the variety of lived experiences, perspectives, expertise, and wisdom of others, which they would like to see better leveraged in service of finding creative solutions to Arlington's challenges. One of the important insights of this engagement process is seeing how much Arlingtonians feel that the community's most precious public resource is *other Arlingtonians.*

> **JTC14:** *"We have the most rich and colorful community! We thrive on learning and celebrating each other's differences. My home rocks!"*
>
> **GVD-07:** *"There is so much diversity and cultures to learn from. The people are working more closely together with less division. How we got there: Prayer, Faith and Hope."*
>
> **WL-38:** *"Diverse community with renters and homeowners respecting each other. plenty of parks and libraries and community centers. How we got here: encourage conversations over changing policies."*

While these postcards provided every opportunity for residents to envision a world transformed by advanced technologies like AI, hovercraft, and cures for cancer—overwhelmingly, they describe human-centered and relational concerns. This is perhaps not surprising. In a recent survey of DMV residents by Gallup and the Greater Washington Community Foundation, the strongest predictor of whether residents reported they were "thriving" was a sense of belonging.

In conversations with individual residents, it was notable how much energy and interest many had in discussing issues of community concern, even when that interest was not manifesting in engagement with Arlington County. A number of them described a desire for more bottom-up modes of interaction with government—in particular, opportunities for involvement with community-driven initiatives that utilize residents' lived experiences, creativity, and agency.

> **PI-107:** *"Arlington is a global leader in biophilic design and practices. Even as our economic activity and population have grown, our environment has become cleaner and greener than it was in 2024. We have more and healthier native biodiversity and attract*

ecotourists who come and marvel at our nature. By applying imagination and creativity to achieve brilliance at an affordable cost, Arlington has totally re-done the Trades Center and the Water Pollution Control Plant. Both operations perform their former plus additional functions well and major land footprint has been recovered for new uses. <mark>*Arlington engages with its people as genuine collaborators, recognizing that its people harbor a tremendous reservoir of creativity, knowledge, skills, and experience that enables creative problem solving*</mark> *where public involvement is proactive rather than reactive, respect is the norm, no surprises."*

LIB40*: "*<mark>*It supports local initiatives such as entrepreneurs, schools, non-profits, and business and government institution by actively finding areas of connection to inspire growth such as collective impact models.*</mark> *Also public transportation is added and more townhouses, condo, and small lots for middle and low income earners."*

K105: <mark>*"Because the citizens in 2025 made a decision to set aside money for an innovation fund to develop many pilot projects to solve our greatest problems*</mark> *(inequality, resource scarcity, crumbling democracy, weak civil society) by developing experimental projects, monitoring results, and then aggressively promoting adoption of the ones that work so that other communities with less financial and educational capital can benefit from our idea incubator."*

MISC-01: *"Arlington has learned to tap into its uniquely capable residents to form a true partnership, revolutionizing its planning processes while capitalizing on the knowledge, skills, and experience of ALL its people. No longer is there a reactive, performative 'engagement' process. Arlington realized it needed to and could work with its people to co-create solutions to challenges -- solutions that could never have emerged from the old ways of doing things. As a result, Arlington is recognized world-wide as the leader in the exciting approach of harnessing its people to be equal partners in co-creating solutions."*

CL33: *"First of all, we've all transitioned into 100 percent renewable energy! We have arts and literary electives in schools, so that whether you are in 1st or 12th grade, you can develop your creativity as well!* <mark>*The people we elected as leaders and representatives of our community listened to our ideas and values, and helped us develop initiatives that brought these ideas to reality! Keep going, Arlington 2024, you can do it too!"*</mark>

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The rising cost of housing, or housing that is affordable, was a major recurring pain point to participants. The most common word pair that surfaces in the dataset, is "affordable housing" (95) followed by "housing, affordable" (21) and "afford, live" (19). This is not surprising, given that in 2019, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments produced a report noting that nearly 320,000 housing units needed to be added in the region, between 2020 and 2030 to meet increasing demand. The postcards themselves are limited in their ability to define "affordable housing" and in identifying who is providing the comment (whether a renter or homeowner).

Some commentators do explicitly mention wanting to own a home one day, and others imply that they are struggling to pay rent:

WL40: *"I want to be able to afford a house and have a wider range of age groups afford a house. Less retirees more young families and diversity. More parks and pickleball courts! More family-owned businesses. How we got here: Lower residential and commercial rents. More affordable housing. Less priorities given to developers, more given to historic preservation."*

PI-238: *"People from various incomes are able to own or rent in the same areas in Arlington. Rather than providing affordable housing options only to extremely low income people, Arlington found way to provide support for people in a wider spectrum of lower to lower Middle income to be able to get housing. Here is how we did it: People could apply to do community service hours in exchange for reduction in rent which was facilitated through government credits, subsidies, or tax breaks to participating rental and housing companies. This gave housing options for people like myself who work for nonprofits with lower income"*

JTB6: *"Affordable rent and housing, food, and utilities"*

Most often, however, when commenters spoke about "affordable housing" they did so in the abstract—frequently offering only that one phrase as either an immediate need they have, or a general social value they hold.

This is not to say that some commenters did not have their own ideas of how to fix the housing crisis. Among commenters who prioritized affordable housing *and* offered solutions, some suggestions were large-scale government intervention—either through re-zoning or general densification, or through deep government subsidies or rent caps. In in-person conversations with commenters there was often an air of resignation accompanying these ideas. There is a real skepticism that such measures will actually be employed on a large enough scale, or that they'll work on a timeline that will make a meaningful difference *for them*.

What the postcards are particularly good at telling is the *outcome* that residents want, and *why* they want it. A quite common sentiment in the dataset is that Arlington should be a place that "*everyone* can afford," and where people from "*ALL incomes and backgrounds*" are able to make a home—an idea that dovetails with the diversity conversation above. Another common affordable housing comment, for example, expresses a desire for "teachers, firefighters, and police officers" to be able to afford homes here. Comments about aspirational home ownership often have this flavor—which corroborates the overall impression from conversations with residents that is that this is not predominately a conversation about economic opportunity (i.e., the opportunity to purchase a home in Arlington to *build wealth)*. This is a conversation about economic *stability*—the ability for a resident to make reasonable predictions about their future without the constant fear that the ground might drop out from underneath them next year. Commentators understand this to be a necessary precondition for residents to be able to put down roots and invest in this community.

In conversations surrounding postcard engagement, there seemed to be a trend that the younger a resident was, the more likely it was that home ownership in Arlington (and sometimes even housing affordability altogether) was impossible. For example, an Arlington Tech math teacher

who hosted a 2050 conversation in her classes asked students to list on a poster what elements constitute a good life in Arlington, and which of those elements were most worth putting energy towards. When reviewing postcards from this engagement, there were a number of red X's next to the words "affordable housing." The teacher explained that "students thought it was simply not possible. It was not something worth working toward because it is off the table. The gap between what you can earn and what a house costs has gotten so wide that they did not see any hope for closing the gap. They did not see a lot of earning potential increase, but they saw numbers for housing just out of control. Even for renting, not just ownership." One participant at the Pilot Listening Session further highlights this sentiment, noting, "I'm about to go to college, and if I wanted to come back here to find a job… I don't know if I would be able to."

This being said, affordable housing is clearly not just an issue for young people; some comments spoke of the desire to grow old accessibly and affordably in the community they care about— which requires an ability to either pay rising property taxes on a fixed income (and relying either on paid care workers or family members who are able to live nearby), or to rent in an assisted living community.

> **PI196:** *"Lower property taxes. It's hard enough to afford to buy a home in Arlington, but it's almost impossible to stay the way taxes keep going up. Allowing Dominion to trim trees along power lines to prevent power outages. Trees are great, but if they are not well cared for and periodically pruned they can cause serious damage to power lines, homes, and lives."*

> **PI65:** *"I am 99 years old in 2050 and am still worried about the low priority for affordable and assisted living for low-income seniors. I am still enjoying living here in my car-free, walkable and free-transit planned development community in 2050! I'm glad that there aren't 100 cars with parents bringing their spoiled brats to school - waiting in line with engines running since they are too privileged to use the free transportation that the rest of us taxpayers provide."*

GREEN SPACE
The phrase "green space" or "green spaces" occurs ninety-one times (not including mentions of "tree canopy," "trees, parks," "lots, green," "community garden," "lots, trees," and "green, roofs.") What is most salient here, though, is how seemingly ubiquitous a desire for green is felt across a wide variety of constituents from every background engaged throughout this project. The need to be in the presence of plants, trees, and other natural features could be characterized as fundamental to Arlingtonians' quality of life. References to green space seemed to fall under three general categories of motivation that potentially track to different resident profiles.

Very prominent among these is a strong thread of environmental sustainability and concerns about climate change. Many residents emphasized protecting and increasing the tree canopy to prevent heat islands or described literal "green buildings" with native gardens on every rooftop and in every crevice. These comments were often among the most aspirational and "futuristic" visions in the 2050 dataset—frequently describing new green technologies and urban designs that had made Arlington resilient, beautiful, breathable, and sustainable despite a much warmer climate. Electrification and freedom from fossil fuels are often part of the equation—and

frequently (but not always) these comments coincide with requests for better public transit, networks of bike lanes, or even the total elimination of cars. This suggests these authors have some comfort with greater population and building density—notable because it signals that even among proponents of a more urban Arlington, the presence of trees and other natural features remains a clear priority:

> **PI-28:** *"Transportation services undergrounded or covered over for protection from heat, rain, wind storms; all buildings literally green--i.e., plants growing on their roofs and down their sides and none of them constructed from concrete; large native-plant parks and community gardens; social centers.; Zoning ordinances designed to enable people to work and live "on a human scale" in community settings encouraging interactive engagement rather than in high-rise, stratified, 4-walled boxes. Quiet outdoor spaces, places for reflection and contemplation, places for native wildlife and places for personal pets; libraries, schools, religious centers, medical facilities, market places, places for outdoor adventuring, businesses."*

> **GM-26:** *"Arlington is much more walkable and less car dependent. How we got here: Free public transportation. More forested and / or walkable areas. More freedom in education."*

> **LIB66:** *"There are trees everywhere, including beautiful rooftop gardens. The air is clean because there are no cars, just light rail and electric buses!"*

By contrast, another category of green space comment associates density with the removal of trees, the presence of concrete, and the absence of nature. Among these comments, green space often appears to take the form of tree canopy in low-residential neighborhoods.

> **LIB64:** *"Unsustainable density will tax infrastructures, lead to removal of more old growth trees, increasing pressure on schools, services, and public safety. Keep the remaining open/green spaces. Focus development along main corridors- keep the promise to residential neighborhoods to keep them desirable."*

> **PI-316:** *"In 2024, the County Board re-thought their Missing Middle rezoning, and did not appeal the ruling. They prioritized our tree canopy so that we exceed our minimum canopy (40% in the adopted the FNRP in 2024) in every neighborhood in the County. Here is how we did it: The County found a different way (different than MM) to address the housing wanted for our police and fire fighters, and our teachers and county employees to be able to live in the County they serve..."*

> **PI-213:** *"Please save the pollinators, rabbits, foxes and other animals -- or what is left of them. Please stop paving over the land. Rosslyn is now basically Crystal City. Here is how we did it: Resist the propaganda from developers. A few tree circles does not help with runoff into the Potomac and preserving what we have left of wildlife."*

A third comment category is focused on green spaces primarily as social gathering and recreation spaces. At in-person engagements, this was a common theme among kids and their parents, and also among Spanish-speaking communities.

AFAC25: *"Improving the parks, as there are none in some areas, and enhancing the bus services. How we got here: I have to do everything possible."*

F07: *"It is a very pleasant place to live with many recreational parks for kids. Schools are very good. Transportation as well. Excellent.*

AFAC1: *"I love Arlington. I would like there to be more parks for children."*

These three interpretations of the idea of Green Space imply different visions for how that space will manifest. Decisions will be made along the way that will impact how much of the County's green space in 2050 will be in fenced backyards, the gardens on the roofs of luxury apartments, or along residential streets that primarily benefit a neighborhood's own residents—and how much will take the form of public parks and gardens, soccer fields, and forested areas. Many residents seemed quite cognizant of this and stressed the importance of *public* green space— distributed equitably around the County as a ubiquitous feature of life in Arlington—so that all residents can access its social and health benefits.

CL57: *"The tree canopy in the country is increasing every year. Every citizen has access to the shade and clean air trees provide. Once-bare spots along sidewalks and roads are filled with pollinator gardens, beautiful native grasses, and even flowers and fruits for us to eat. The children love to be surrounded by nature's beauty and bounty. And, our non-human neighbors are thriving."*

WL11: *"We've restored more of the tree canopy throughout Arlington! A lot more shaded streets and parks that cool us down and bring birds. We created cool public spaces where people from all backgrounds meet to talk, read, eat, make music, and play games. Arlington is beautiful."*

CL35: *"Low-rise walkable neighborhoods, small commercial nooks such as Westover, many children can walk to school, lots of shade from the canopy, parks nearby to all. Don't let developers control the future- trade-offs for development that are true public amenities (not "public" roof deck for a restaurant, for example)- no more 1 and 2 bedroom apartments, but more condo options for 1st time buyers and downsizers."*

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION AND WALKABILITY

A major point of discussion in the 2050 postcards is how participants hope to get around in the future; the phrases "Public, transportation" (41), "Bike lanes" (32), and "Public transit" (24), all rank high on the list of word pairs.

As mentioned above, comments often emphasize a desire for more accessible and frequent public transportation, a network of safe and connected bike lanes throughout the county, and human-scaled mixed-use neighborhoods with pedestrian-only streets and nearby shops and amenities, in which cars are either not needed for most daily activities or absent altogether. While often dovetailing with environmental concerns, many of these comments simply emphasize the convenience and accessibility these neighborhoods would bring as a value in and of itself:

CF20: *"I can do everything go anywhere without a car! ...even more so than in 2024! Let's develop a long-term plan to make the county car-free. Good for environment, public safety, public health, community, local businesses, affordability, everything! Start with*

pedestrian-bike only streets lived with plenty of housing over retail so people who have their car walk everywhere they need to go."

PI-137: *"Can you believe it, Arlington is a bike, pedestrian and transit haven! I can travel anywhere easily anywhere safely. Arlington is now 90% car free, most roads only allow residents and service vehicles so the county is so quiet but so alive. Business is booming, the residents are thriving. Arlington has a street car network and made most of the streets transit, bike and pedestrian only! It's incredible how fast and safe it is to travel around Arlington now. No longer do we have to pay tens of thousands of dollars to buy a vehicle to take us 1 mile because it was the only way. Arlington has removed most residential zoning and parking minimums so now there's ample affordable housing. Can you imagine we almost killed missing middle? That was a baby step but Arlington took the risk and everyone loves it. You can access services and recreation so easily now."*

AH07: *"There exists a biking and walking atmosphere and culture, supported by an extensive network of beautiful paths, that it rivals Amsterdam."*

Cars remain a salient part of many participants' lives in 2024—and some residents, while acknowledging the need for better transit, still imagine a future that includes cars.

SL15: *"It is diverse, with housing for all income types. People can afford to live here and it's walkable around hubs. Even though it is walkable, there is plenty of parking for people who travel here to enjoy Arlington's parks, beautiful landscaping, and events. And parking is free. Shirlington is my favorite hub especially since they expanded the shopping and entertainment across the bridge on four mile run and I love parking at Shirlington and walking over the bridge to my favorite pub."*

JTC3: *"Access, travel out points, parks, accessibility. Private transportation, but public transportation is an option because easier walkable. Access."*

SL37: *"There's plenty of housing. Public transit goes everywhere personal cars can go and runs frequently. There's plenty of wide sidewalks and protected bicycle lanes. The parks are plentiful and clean."*

This being said, cars were frequently discussed in terms of their associated pain points, including by the people who drive them. Drivers expressed frustration with traffic and commute times, the availability and cost of parking, and the quality of roads (specifically on "Columbia Pike"— which at 45 instances was the fourth most common word pair in the dataset, largely owing to ongoing construction). Pedestrian safety, particularly among parents, is another common concern.

CF78: *"Lots of more affordable housing. Parks. Parking for cars. Hard part is commuting."*

F22: *"We need more health services and consumer representation. We like the parks, shopping is very accessible. Traffic has gotten bad with the Columbia Pike construction work. When is that going to get done?"*

F37: *"From Columbia Pike to Carlin Springs Road on 7th Road South would like more [speed] bumps and stop sign on S. Florida St. and better another stop sign. How we got*

here: By voting for better streets and parks. I am very happy for all changes in South Arlington."

DENSITY

All of the themes and priorities discussed up to this point—from public transit and walkability to housing affordability, to the kinds of green space that are prioritized, to the quality of Arlingtonians' relationships with one another—tie back in important ways to the central issue of the County's future density.

For added context for future readers, the County Board voted in 2023 to eliminate single-family zoning after a multi-year Missing Middle Housing Study, and litigation surrounding the associated Expand Housing Options policy is still pending, which is likely energizing community conversations around density significantly:

> **PI-143:** *"Missing middle has ruined Arlington's residential neighborhoods. Once peaceful neighborhoods are beset with noise, trash and crime. Home values and the county's tax base have badly deteriorated."*

> **PI309:** *"Hello! Here we have affordable housing and more walkable/bikeable roads! Here is how we did it:* ==*To get affordable housing we finally implemented missing middle ((PLEASE YALL))*== *and we added more protected bike lanes and sidewalks!*

> **PI101:** *"Arlington is in love with density! Stop it! Be sensible. As you well know we already have over 20 % office vacancy and that probably doesn't include leased space but not filled. You have allowed significant density away from metros. Maintain the single family neighborhoods; What makes it great is preserving, protecting, maintaining, stabilizing single family neighborhoods. Don't start the so-called missing middle zoning. What is allowed with setbacks, etc. is plenty. Defeat blockbusting and spot zoning proposals like Melwood on 23rd Street South. Stop density creep."*

> **F34:** *"Walkable neighborhoods. Support for public transit. Excellent schools,* ==*Missing Middle!*== *Support for invested housing options and affordability."*

There are several concerns that are frequently noted in postcards opposing density increases, which include: the removal of mature trees and diminished green space, the destruction of Arlington's historic buildings or the signature characteristics of its residential neighborhoods; concerns about lot coverage and impermeable surfaces that increase the risk of flooding; decreased property values resulting from too much traffic, insufficient parking, overcrowded schools, or the overtaxing of public services and infrastructure.

Several comments mention concerns about overcrowding in a way that does not seem to be explicitly framed through a zoning lens or connected with the Missing Middle conversation:

> **CL43:** *"More green space, lots of trees, fewer people"*

PI-97: *"Fewer people, fewer cars, less traffic, more affordable housing, more housing options, more green space, less-crowded schools, well-maintained playgrounds (still), more after-school programs, more workforce housing, more room to breathe."*

Although not always captured in the cards, concerns about preserving the distinct history and identity of certain areas were particularly salient when engaging with members of Arlington's historic Black neighborhoods, for whom new development could sometimes underscore a feeling that their community is disappearing.

JTB1: *"==I would like to see less buildings. It currently looks too crowded.== And I would like to see black owned business owners return to Arlington."*

GVD7: *"I love Arlington. ==I do not like all of the development that is happening. It's destroying a lot of history.=="*

While a number of comments expressed a relative comfort with dense high-rises along the metro/transit corridors, others emphasize the importance of distributing housing throughout the county.

PI79: *"Arlington is thriving by continuing to develop along the transportation corridors and protecting the tree canopied, single family, residential areas."*

GVD-04: *"To even out development there are far too many multi-unit housing units in the south and not enough in the north. It has negatively impacted schools. Roads are way overcrowded and travel lanes are continuously reduced."*

LIST OF COMMUNITY VALUES
An important output derived from this project is a list of commonly held community values. Where the "Discussions" section explores priorities and desired outcomes that surfaced frequently among Arlington 2050 participants, the "Community Values" section attempts to capture the root motivations that underpin these priorities—essentially, the "why" behind any "what." Such a list is necessarily interpretive—however, given this project's sampling and methodological constraints, it was a more feasible deliverable than a ranked "Top 10 List" of community priorities. Furthermore, it potentially serves the purpose of moving the public conversation forward, by providing shared language upon which to ground future policy discussions.

A hybrid AI-human approach was used to develop and refine this list of values. First, Microsoft Co-Pilot was used to analyze every piece of feedback and then to identify as many unique "themes" as possible. Reviewers, referencing feedback, postcards, and engagement with community members, then revised these themes into the list of fourteen Community Values below. Each value section provides a simple definition, followed by examples in feedback for context. These values are not meant to be exhaustive but are intended to be as inclusive as possible in encompassing the feedback received through the postcards.

Art & Culture: The space and opportunities to either create or experience art, or to engage in cultural events.

> The ability to participate in meaningful and enriching programs (including activities like art, music, cultural festivals, educational programs, and sports).

Accessibility: The ability to get around Arlington and access daily needs comfortably, efficiently, and conveniently regardless of physical ability.

> This value is often the deeper motivation underpinning priorities like: Walkability and "Bike-ability"; Connected, timely, and easy to use public transit; "Human-scaled" mixed use areas that one could walk in 15 minutes; Support for people with limited mobility; and, well-maintained roads and transportation infrastructure, and adequate parking where necessary.

Climate and Environmental Sustainability and Resilience: The strong stewardship of local ecosystems and infrastructure in the context of global climate.

> This includes: Decreasing or eliminating carbon emissions, waste, and other pollution; Reducing dependence on fossil fuels; Preserving native biodiversity and expanding the tree canopy to mitigate heat islands; "Greening" and improving the efficiency of buildings and infrastructure; Investing in climate-friendly technologies; and ensuring Arlington's community health and resiliency on a warming planet.

Diversity: The enthusiastic embrace and celebration of Arlington's wealth of diverse cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives.

> This is often connected with a desire for: Deeper integration and interconnection across different cultures, languages, cuisines, ethnicities, ages, socioeconomic statuses; and leveraging those differences to address shared challenges and generally to enable the community to see a fuller, more complex, and healthier picture of the whole.

Equity: the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings, and a belief that all people deserve equal rights and equitable access to resources and opportunities.

> This often underpins calls for: Equitable health and education outcomes; Care and resources for vulnerable populations; and the dismantling and repair of harmful and inequitable systems.

Economic Opportunities: The environment and ability to advance individual careers.

> This includes: Education for workforce readiness; Opportunities for career advancement; The ability to start small businesses, wealth-building, and investment opportunities; Generally, an economic environment conducive to job creation, and innovation that strengthens the overall economy.

Economic Stability: A stable and predictable financial foundation that allows residents to meet their basic needs and the needs of their families.

>This value frequently underpins priorities like: Housing affordability; Pathways to home ownership not as a commodity/investment but as foundation for building a life and investing in community; The affordability of essential services like childcare that permit participation in the workforce; Incomes that keep pace with cost of living; Predictability and agency in economic decisions (i.e. non-precarious employment); and, the ability to affordably age in your home community.

Effective, equitable, and inclusive governance: A system of government that is approachable, transparent, and equitably responsive to constituent concerns, and that provides well-maintained infrastructure and timely and effective public services.

>Concerning residents, this value connects with a desire for agency—the ability to act with others to make their lives, communities, and government better, and a trust that that action will be seen by others and have a meaningful impact. A preference for democratic, representative, and participatory decision-making is implicit in this value. Often, this can extend to a distaste for non-transparent structures perceived to wield disproportionate power, or be driven by incentives and priorities that are not necessarily centered in human or community wellbeing (i.e., corporations, etc.)

Green Space: The presence and accessibility of plants and other natural features for the benefit of human wellbeing.

>Participants deeply valued: the tree canopy; native gardens, plants and grass, public parks; access to natural forests; and equitable public spaces (rather than fenced, private ones) that allow people from all different walks of life to gather freely, exercise, and recreate.

Health and Wellness: A commitment to the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of Arlington residents.

>This underpins resident priorities such as: Access to affordable healthcare and behavioral health; Opportunities for physical exercise and recreation; Creating an environment and diet free from toxins or pollutants; Access to a healthy diet; and Access to plants and natural features that promote psychological wellbeing.

Safety: The desire to live in a holistically safe environment.

>This value underpins: Crime prevention; Care and prevention of drug use and mental health crises; Traffic and pedestrian safety; Relationality with (and general presence of) law enforcement; Connected social infrastructure that facilitates community trust and vigilance; and emphasis on preventing crime that impacts *people* as opposed to the "security" of property.

Sense of place/local identity: An ability to see the distinctive fingerprints of history, personality, creativity, and community memory of the people who inhabit a place, reflected in its physical spaces and culture.

> This encompasses: The preservation, commemoration, and or celebration of important historic buildings and the prioritization of local small businesses; Respect and reverence for other loci of community meaning and memory, including beloved ethic grocery stores or other public gathering spaces; The continued presence, visibility, and celebration of distinct identity groups and communities who have made an imprint on Arlington— particularly Arlington's historic Black neighborhoods; and the desire for the community to see itself and feel seen.

Social Connection and Community Belonging: The ability to naturally connect with others in Arlington, and to care for and be cared for.

> This is often represented by comments indicating a desire to: Know one's neighbors; Feel seen; Gather in the real world in "third places,"; Respectfully and productively navigate conflict; Socially integrate across different spaces; See oneself reflected in physical and social context, trust, communication, and collective efficacy.

Youth and Family Wellbeing: Concern for the unique needs of children, teenagers, and the parents who care for them.

> Priorities connected to this policy might include: Youth safety; Universal access to food; Healthcare and quality education for minors; Opportunities for youth learning; Safe and affordable childcare; Parental leave; Opportunities for youth enrichment; Recreational activities and social connection; and youth mental health.