

Libby Garvey 2024 New Year's Remarks

Happy New Year! Welcome to the January 2, 2024 organizational meeting of the Arlington County Board.

I am glad to have everyone here with us, either in person or virtually, and I am delighted to welcome our 2 newest Board members: Susan Cunningham and Maureen Coffey. The last time there was a majority of women on this Board was 1983, 40 years ago. And I'm not sure there has ever been such a wide generational span on this Board, given that Maureen is the youngest to ever serve on the County Board, and, if I am not the oldest, I'm certainly close. Every New Year is a transition, but this feels like more transition than most.

As I was preparing my remarks for today, I could not help but think back to January 2020, when I last became Chair. We had just finished the agreement with Amazon. Our commercial office vacancy rate challenges were over. Our Vice Chair, Erik Gutshall, and I were looking forward to accomplishing good things for Arlington. I said then that Equity, Innovation, and Resilience would be my focus for 2020. It was going to be an easy year.

Then Erik became ill in February and he never returned. In March, the pandemic shut down the world. We *all* innovated. No one could do exactly what they'd done before. We set up studios in our homes for virtual meetings. In April, instead of budget work sessions, we held Covid briefings to share new information ...which information changed constantly. Businesses closed. Practically overnight, many Arlington employees changed their jobs. Vaccination centers were set up. Permitting was changed for outdoor dining. Non-profits adapted to new needs. Residents created new assistance networks. Everyone turned to helping our community survive economically and literally. The focus was on Equity to make sure everyone's needs were met. We innovated constantly to meet changing needs and circumstances. And... we became more resilient.

So here we are four years later. The Board is back together in one room, but virtual work is here to stay. Our office vacancy rate is a concern... again. Federal pandemic assistance is done, but we still have people needing homes they can afford, food and medical care. Our needs are up and our revenues are down. We continue to innovate, but this year will not be easy.

But Arlington is up to the challenge.

We should be. We have many resources to meet our challenges. We have economic resources even though that crucial pandemic financial help from the Federal government (thank you, President Biden!) has ended. And we have great human capital, which is... us, *all* of us. We were resilient during the pandemic because our whole community, our government, and our residents pulled together to make sure that everyone, not just the wealthy, had food, shelter and medical care. We did things differently. A resilient community can adapt and care for everyone in it.

So, as we continue our transition this year to whatever is becoming normal, Equity, Innovation, and Resilience will continue to be my general focus areas.

However, there are two particular areas on which I will concentrate to make us more resilient:

First, especially when times are tough, social resilience is critical. We need to all pull together as we did during the pandemic. However, the Missing Middle debate showed last year, that we do not have a clear vision for our future as a County that many people understand. Arlington has not done an overall future visioning process since the 1986 report "The Future of Arlington: The Year 2000 and Beyond."

It's a good report, but we are now well beyond the year 2000. I believe it is time to think again about where we want to go as a County, about what the big issues and challenges will be for us in, say, the year 2050. A socially resilient community knows where it wants to go. If we are clear about where we want to go, we can figure out what we need to do to get there.

As much as possible, this visioning process needs to come from our community. This year, using a variety of techniques, we will gather thoughts, suggestions and ideas directly from as many people as possible telling us what they want Arlington to be in the year 2050. I'm sure there are many different visions of what our County should be in 2050 and some of them are mutually exclusive. But I suspect most will fall into 2-3 general vision buckets, which we can present at the end of this year.

To start things off, on February 5, we will host a panel discussion with a climatologist (Jason Samenow of the Washington Post), a demographer (Hamilton Lombard of the Weldon Cooper Center) and a business executive (Holly Sullivan of Amazon). Each will talk about what they see for our region in 2050 and what that might mean for us now. Invitations will be going out soon. While attendance is limited, the discussion will be live-streamed and recorded for later viewing.

My second specific focus for this year is energy resilience. In all the news of horrible natural and man-made disasters this year, a constant storyline is the lack of electric power. Modern life depends on electricity. We need it for our communications, transportation, food and water, medical care, and to keep our homes safe for us in cold and hot weather. Modern cities depend on electricity for life. Without power, people die.

Arlington has been focusing for years on energy conservation and on using more renewable energy to help our environment. While not moving as fast as we might like, we are making progress. But still...whether it comes from wind, a solar farm, or from a source that uses fossil fuel... nearly all our energy comes to us through a large and complex power grid.

Watching the news this year with my 95-year-old mother, I started to think about the grid on which we all depend. There are redundancies in the system, but we have outages every year. There are a lot of vulnerabilities in a big complex system with miles and miles of wires and many transmission stations. What is the possibility that we will never have a really big storm, a paralyzing cyber attack, a coordinated physical act of violence, or just plain old human error to cause a major power failure? The probability of any specific event may be low, but it is quite likely that something will happen to cause widespread power outages, if not this year, within the next decade. Since I've been on this Board, we've experienced the Derecho of 2012 and the flash flood of 2019.

And what if it happens during severe cold or very hot weather? And lasts a long time?

We would all be pretty uncomfortable at best, but for the very young, the very old like my mother, and those in poor health, a long power outage could be fatal.

We are not energy resilient. Those with the fewest resources would be the most vulnerable in a long power outage. It's great that there are more and more solar roofs in Arlington, but few of those roofs are connected to a battery that can send power back into the home. When the grid goes down, most of those homes cannot access the power they are producing. There are backup generators in some public and private buildings, but not many. And most of those generators require fuel deliveries to run for very long.

We are not energy resilient. But we could be. We just need a little more innovation with an eye to equitable energy resilience.

On the government level, we can do a lot more to make our County and school buildings energy resilient, so they could help our residents should the grid not function. And, grid or no grid, we could save money and energy. Energy resilience is good for us and the environment.

On the individual home level, those with solar roofs could get batteries to store and then provide back the power they produce. Battery power for a whole house is pretty expensive, but a smaller battery for a few crucial things is not so much. Those without solar roofs could have just a single small panel and a small battery to, again, run some crucial things, such as charging a cell phone and computer, a light, or a small window air conditioner.

Today, this is not easy for anyone to figure out, especially on a tight budget, but it's not rocket science. With some good information and some help, I think many of our residents could be energy-resilient if they would like. We need to provide them with good information and support.

We can do this. Future Resilience, both social resilience and energy resilience, is the goal. Equity and innovation can get us there.

I'm excited about this year. I'm looking forward to working with our great staff, this new multi-generational Board team, and our residents to make Arlington better and more resilient than ever.