

Takis Karantonis 2024 New Year's Remarks

Dear Neighbors, Dear Arlingtonians, Madame Chair, dear Colleagues,

Indeed, we live in interesting times; And 2023 did not disappoint:

The world has become significantly more violent, unstable, and unpredictable.

Democracy is under assault.

The onset of the climate catastrophe is not a “prediction” anymore, and has become a hard reality for everyone, everywhere.

Artificial Intelligence has emerged as a breathtakingly fast technological revolution, the workings and consequences of which, even it's creators admit to not fully comprehend.

At the same time, kitchen-table concerns remain: The high cost of living; astronomical rents; lack of affordable childcare options; the excessive cost of healthcare; racial and economic inequalities...

2023 was a challenging year indeed. Yet, it was also the year we could clearly see the way forward:

Nothing filled me with more optimism than the emergence of an entire national movement fighting to reinstate women's reproductive rights, which proves the point that civic societies that stand united and fight for what is right remain resilient and eventually prevail.

I always think of Arlington as a place of such exceptionally resilient values. Here at home, 2023, was a year of hard work and significant accomplishments across all areas of local government activity and jurisdiction ([Annual Report](#)), not to mention our leadership role in Northern Virginia and in our Metropolitan Region.

In the new year, I will continue to focus my role and work on translating community priorities into places that invite people in, and take more people with.

While mindful of the fact that in local government, we all are “generalists”, I would identify the following as my 2024 priority areas:

1. Climate Response
2. Housing
3. Metro funding, Transit, Safe mobility
4. Economic resilience
5. Strong social safety net

1. On Climate, I plan to work on two “fronts”:

First: Advancing decarbonization strategies for Buildings, Transit, and Transportation:

As we enter the 3rd year of our Community Energy Plan implementation, this is the moment for:

- For tightening the energy efficiency requirements of our green building incentive policy.
- For positioning Arlington and the Region to absorb as much, as well, and as fast as possible federal climate program dollars (including green banks and other enabling mechanisms that will significantly contribute to decarbonizing our overall energy consumption)
- For getting a sizeable and meaningful electrification pilot of our ART Bus-fleet.
- For making tangible progress on public EV charging infrastructure, with a specific focus on making such infrastructure accessible to the majority of Arlingtonians who live in multifamily dwellings.

Second: Re-naturalizing the urban space:

- From green roofs to achieving our ambitious tree-canopy goals, managing stormwater, reducing the urban heat island effect, and improving our parks: Nature is not an antagonist of the urban system. It is rather a critical component of it.

Again: Climate response is a whole-society issue. And therefore it has to be truly a whole Government issue.

2. On Housing:

Not despite, but because 2024 is a year of competing fiscal priorities: Our commitment to Housing affordability, including deep affordability, should, clearly, rank at the top of our list!

The rent is too-damn-high for most Arlingtonians. Despite significant progress in recent years (and in 2023 in particular), we are hardly delivering on the promise of providing a variety of housing options for a diverse community. The pathway of land and zoning reforms (like the missing middle), while they are fundamental for the future, they are not designed to respond to the pressing needs of today.

Whether or not we can take advantage of short and medium-term opportunities to consolidate and enhance our affordable housing stock critically depends on the health and solvency of our Affordable Housing Investment Fund (AHIF).

Especially in tight fiscal times, where prioritizing our values is not cost- or trade-off-free, I stand for a significant financial commitment to AHIF: I am convinced that a penny and a half of dedicated additional tax support, is an appropriate and timely proposition for the next fiscal year.

3. On Metro and Safe Urban Mobility:

Funding Metro is not optional for Arlington, neither is it optional for Northern Virginia or the Metropolitan Region. Any reduction of the level of service risks reversing Metro's post-pandemic recovery and ridership gains and sending the system into a deadly tailspin, which would inflict major economic harm to us.

Asking for tighter management and improved accountability is logical. However, we are at a point where, together with our regional partners, the Governor, our representatives in the VA legislature and in Congress, we need to agree on a reliable source of revenue for the system, carried by all stakeholders. For our Board, for Arlington, this is a top priority.

2024 also offers a great opportunity to revisit urban mobility in its entirety: The Master-Transportation Plan should be a "re-think" and not "just an update".

Vision-0 implementation brought pedestrian and cyclist safety back to the center of our street design. Streets are only safer when they are designed for people, not predominantly for cars.

When we transform our streets, we really transform our town, our neighborhoods, and our life-style. This includes, making a courageous effort to go beyond the transportation engineering handbooks and dare to transform arterials like, for instance, Carlin Springs Rd into pedestrian-friendly and safe places.

4. On Our Economy:

Persistently high office vacancy rates call for new thinking. And new policies! We already got started in 2023 with the Commercial Market Resiliency Initiative 2.0. - 2024 is an implementation year. But still, more needs to be done, and I am more than committed to the following:

1. Zoning and commercial permitting must become much more flexible and less burdensome.
2. We need to explore ways to support re-positioning struggling and obsolete buildings. Often, the economics of two half-occupied buildings are worse than having one building fully occupied and one empty (and available for other uses), hence consolidation and re-positioning are not out of scope for our economic resiliency policies.
3. Small business entrepreneurship continues to need tangible support. Building on our successful BizLaunch program, we need to improve small entrepreneurs' ability to access capital and human resources.
4. And most importantly, a successful community starts at the employment level. Precarious employment and lack of access to workforce development are real challenges. Our most valuable (renewable!) resource and key competitive advantage, is the skill and professional capacity of our people. Investing in workforce development is one of my highest priorities.

5. Our Social Fabric:

The pandemic years revealed that no policy and no government action can be successful unless embedded in the fabric of social solidarity.

The way we intervene when food- or house- security is at stake, when Mental Health is at stake, or when a drug epidemic severely impacts our youngest, reveals a lot about us, as a community. NARCAN-training saves individual lives. Making sure that a continuum of services and resources is reliably in place, so that no person is left alone and helpless, saves entire communities.

I believe in public-private partnerships, but I also believe in government leadership in delivering programs as part of the aforementioned systemic approach. This year, I will focus on:

1. Reaching out and educating Arlingtonians on the importance of Adverse Conditions of Childhood.
2. The way our social safety net responds to specific needs of our immigrant residents and how we accomplish that Arlington continues to be a safe, welcoming, and fear-free for our most vulnerable neighbors.
3. Revisiting how and how well we serve our residents with disabilities.

Concluding Thoughts:

2024 is a year of inflection for our Nation and likely for the world.

In this presidential election year, we, Arlingtonians, have a special place and responsibility:

In Arlington, we are holding high the values our Police Officers defended on the West Side of the Capitol on January 6th 2020. The values of Democracy, Rule of Law, Equity, Justice, and Liberty for all of accountable governance and of civic and civically minded debate— for all of which, the Chair's, Arlington 2050 community visioning initiative provides a very appropriate and opportune place for civic engagement.

With this in mind, I want to invite you to make 2024 an exemplary year of the civility and humanity that Arlington Values convey. It is not an exaggeration: The Nation and the World is watching us.

A happy, healthy, safe, and prosperous New Year to all!