

To: Arlington County Board

Cc: County Staff

From: Arlington County Water and Wastewater Utility – Rate Study Community Advisory Group

Subject: Letter of Support

Dear Arlington County Board,

We are writing to share feedback on the engagement process and express our support for the Arlington County Water and Wastewater Rate Study. As the Rate Study Community Advisory Group (RSCAG), we were convened to advise the study and provide diverse representation of County interests.

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 2019 – 2021, Arlington County’s Department of Environmental Services (DES) has been conducting a Water and Wastewater Cost of Service and Utility Rate Study (Study), the County’s first since 2004, as a best practice to ensure the continued alignment of cost-of-service principles and community values. As a part of its analysis, the County has engaged with utility customers from a broad and representative range of backgrounds and interests, including residents, businesses, government, commissions, local civic associations, and others.

In support of the engagement and rate study process, the County convened a Rate Study Community Advisory Group (RSCAG) to serve in a representative and advisory capacity. RSCAG members were selected to represent various segments of the County’s diverse water and wastewater utility customer base, including single-family and multi-family residential, commercial, low-to-moderate income populations, environmental, fiscal matters, and the development community. The RSCAG was charged with representing the interests and views of their respective interest groups and communicating regularly with their communities to liaise with and convey the opinions of the interest group to the project team.

Additional information including topics and materials from the six RSCAG meetings is available on the project page at <https://water.arlingtonva.us/water-and-wastewater-utility-rate-study/>.

2. ADVISORY GROUP REFLECTIONS

Reflecting across the study, process, and community alignment, we wanted to highlight some specific reflections, including:

- **Community Values:** The RSCAG identified Conservation and Affordability as our highest prioritized values. Utility Financial Stability and Rate Stability were identified as the second-highest prioritized values. The RSCAG’s prioritized values align with those identified by members of the public and internal stakeholders. The RSCAG agrees that the proposed rate structure strikes a good balance between competing values and aligns with the community’s prioritized value recommendations.
- **Continued Outreach:** If the County Board adopts the proposed rate structure, outreach should communicate the prioritized values first, and then explain how the proposed rate structure aligns with the prioritized values.

- **Engagement Process:** The level of engagement Arlington County provided for the advisory group and members of the public throughout the project is a benchmark for continued County engagement efforts. The RSCAG has been representative of community interests, and we have appreciated the ability to ask questions and provide feedback and input into the process and products.
- **Equity:** While different rate study values are in tension with one another, the proposed rate structure balances these things well including equity among customer classes. The proposed rate structure does a better job than the current rate structure in equitably recovering costs for Arlington County’s Water and Wastewater system. To the extent that additional affordability program options could be offered to Arlington County residents, the County Board could look to incorporate customer assistance programs, billing and collection options, and educational and technical assistance where legally permissible.
- **Project Communications:** Project communications have been very useful in helping the RSCAG understand the complex technical information and considerations of the rate study. Arlington County staff and consultants have explained things clearly, making it easy to become engaged and involved in the process. This level of communication made it easy for RSCAG members to relay materials to their respective interest groups.
- **Wastewater Plant Tour:** The opportunity to tour Arlington County’s Wastewater Treatment Plant was very valuable to connect the rate structure process to the physical infrastructure. We recommend offering additional educational opportunities for the Arlington County community to tour the Treatment Plant.

3. CONCLUSION

The RSCAG shares their support for the proposed rate structure, as well as the level of engagement afforded to the advisory group and members of the public throughout the Study. Robust public engagement and feedback has been critical to the success of the Study. Incorporating representative community interests and robust engagement opportunities into the Study process has enabled the County to develop community-informed rates that support a safe, reliable, and environmentally-sound water and wastewater service.

“I think the community values of Conservation and Affordability are well reflected in the rate structure. Using the winter time use for determining fees meets the issue of not penalizing those who water their trees and that was the concern of the Urban Forestry Commission.” – Nora Palmatier

“The County Water and Wastewater Rate Study was conducted in a clear and transparent manner with an engagement process which persisted through COVID related challenges. The RSCAG quickly went online to continue its business and reach a broader community audience.” – Rafael Sampayo

Sincerely,

The Rate Study Community Advisory Group
Water and Wastewater Utility Rate Study

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