

2022 Organizational Meeting | Chair's Remarks

The poet Amanda Gorman writes:

“Grief commands its own grammar.

We often say:

We are beside ourselves with grief.

We can't even imagine.

This means anguish can call us to envision

More than what we believed was carriable.

What we carry means we survive.

It is what survives us.”

March 13th will mark two years since the pandemic first shut down our community. Since then, we've been called on to make sacrifices beyond what we could have envisioned. Now, as the Omicron variant rips through our community and national shortages of tests call to mind the earliest days of the pandemic, it's hard not to feel beside ourselves. But truly, we are stronger now than we were then, as individuals and as a County. More than 86% of eligible Arlingtonians – and 94% of adults – have received at least one dose of the vaccine, a showing of collective commitment to one another that really is working: Even in this peak, our hospitalization numbers remain in the very low single digits. And if we keep getting vaccinated, getting boosted, masking up and maintaining our social responsibility, we will get through this. Not as fast as we all had hoped, nor with the finality we have all longed for. But we will.

And so, in this uneasy moment of the pandemic, I've been reflecting on the things we will carry from this state of emergency. I hope it's not only our anxiety and grief. If “what we carry is what survives us”:

What we carry should be the importance of home.

Over the past two years, homes have become workplaces, schoolhouses, oases. If we've ever doubted that housing should be our first priority as a community, the pandemic should erase that doubt.

Since the adoption of the Affordable Housing Master Plan seven years ago, our guiding measure has been the quantity of affordable housing: Establishing, through policy and unflagging prioritization of money, committed affordable apartments to prevent displacement of our low-income and working-class families. As a Board, staff, and community, we demonstrated this just a few weeks ago with an unprecedented financial commitment to the acquisition and stabilization of thousands of affordable homes at the Barcroft apartments.

But we've also learned a hard lesson in the quality of affordable housing; one taught by tenant leaders at the Serrano apartments in 2020 and 2021. Much of Arlington's committed affordable housing stock is aging, which demands new approaches to keep apartments in good repair and help renters get their housing problems addressed. New steps are already underway, including inspections and a comprehensive Capital Needs Assessment. We will hold landlords accountable using new terms in our Affordable Housing Investment Fund loans and improve support and outreach for tenants. Because it shouldn't require a stay-at-home order to know that staying in a safe, healthy home is a human right.

We also learned over these past two years that our neighborhoods are strongest when they are integrated: Not only in the traditional sense of racial and ethnic integration, but also in ages and stages of life. Consider the young professional who could grocery shop for the at-risk seniors in their neighborhood; the Baby Boomers who had a room for their adult children to move back into while maintaining some independence; the college student who could take a break from their online classes and give a break to the parents of a virtual kindergartner next door. Consider the types of housing that support these multi-generational interactions: Renters next to longtime homeowners; basement apartments and backyard cottages; modest starter homes; duplexes and triplexes. We know our housing stock doesn't support this kind of integration in large swathes of Arlington, and that legalizing forms other than one house on one lot is an important act to better integrate our neighborhoods. I can't wait to take clear, legislative action on the Expanding Housing Choice study in 2022 to do exactly that.

What we carry should be all that we learned, and newly resolved to address, about care.

This pandemic has exposed what we have always known to be true: Our country is a hard place to raise children. Arlington alone can't fix all the obstacles facing families, but we can continue to make progress on our own vision: "All Arlington County families have access to high quality, affordable childcare."

In 2018, we learned that collaborative action on childcare *works*. In the three years since we enacted policies and programs recommended by the multi-sector Childcare Initiative, licensed capacity at childcare centers and home daycares has increased – by forty percent.

In 2022, we will convene some of the stakeholders who made the 2018 Childcare Initiative a success, to renew our specific focus on childcare as a lifeline for low-income families. We want to grow the number of childcare providers *and* eligible families in Arlington that participate in the state subsidy. Working together, we can identify and tackle the barriers to participation on both sides of the program, like helping streamline paperwork and addressing hidden costs to accepting the subsidy, and get more low-income kids into high quality childcare environments.

Back in 2018, we also discovered a big gap in our childcare landscape: Only 4% of the County’s slots offered care after 6 pm, and only 2% offered care on weekends. As the future of work changes, and our families of *all* incomes struggle to match their needs for care with limited options in the market, we have an opportunity to make a big impact by focusing on childcare during nontraditional hours.

Care, of course, is much more than support for our littlest Arlingtonians and their families. One of the aftershocks of the initial pandemic year, which reverberated through 2021, is the unbelievable strain it placed on our mental health: Of elders experiencing isolation; of our K-12 students experiencing deep stress and anxiety; and of our neighbors experiencing crises of addiction and other illness. Expanding services for all these Arlingtonians will require even more attention from all of us in 2022 – including regional collaboration and advocacy and deeper partnership with Arlington Public Schools – as well as valuing and preserving the professionals who deliver these services.

What we carry should include the new, deeper respect and value we found for one another’s labor.

Neither economist nor futurist, I can’t say where this spectacular upheaval in how and where we work, whether and for what wages, will land. I’m as eager as anyone for stable answers about the future of commuting and office leases, so that we can resume the kind of long-term planning on which good budgeting practice and effective transit investments rely.

Here’s what I *do* know, after the last two years: Our fiscal year 2023 budget must demonstrate the value we place on the work of others. Last year, we took historic legislative steps to recognize the power of collective organizing and to commit that anyone whose hands build a community center or bus maintenance facility in Arlington County should earn a prevailing wage that supports life in our region. And,

after two years of effective stagnation in County employee salaries, we committed to significant increases beginning this July and backdating part of those increases to begin now, months ahead of even a proposed Manager's budget. All these commitments must be funded in our budget this year, and they will be the baseline, not the ceiling.

Given uncertainty in our commercial revenues, these commitments almost certainly mean less funding available for implementing new priorities or programs. But after two pandemic years, it's time to put our money where our "thank you, essential workers" window signs are. And, it's time to redouble our efforts to urge the private sector to join us, to highlight the achievements of construction projects like Amazon's Metropolitan Park that pay family-supporting wages and protect workers from labor abuses, and to emphasize opportunities for our other major employers to similarly rise to the moment.

Because what we carry from these pandemic years, from this tectonic shift in our economy, depends upon those whose labor builds this County.

Above all, what we carry should be the importance of community.

We've all noticed with regret how the collective spirit of the early days of the pandemic waned as its discontents wore on into another year. I hope 2022 will be a year to renew that spirit.

Because we not only have a lot of work to do together; we're also trying to innovate *how* we do it. The call to a more racially equitable Arlington will be woven into everything we do this year, not just the big projects of standing up the Community Oversight Board and reforming funding and engagement to better reflect the lived truths of those experiencing discrimination. We will take a similar approach to climate action – the Community Energy Plan provides a blueprint, but truly doing our part to address this existential issue requires not a set of initiatives or projects, but a lens through which we make all decisions.

What these two values – sustainability and equity – have in common is that they require us to see beyond our own immediate interests and to value our community, as a whole, in all its diversity and for its future. I know we can do that in the year ahead.

By no means is this pandemic over. But since it's clear that COVID will provide us no respite for reflection, we'll have to make our own. Consider: "what we carry is what survives us." So, let us carry not our burdens, but our best.