

2023 Organizational Meeting Remarks

"In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high." - Thoreau, *Walden*

As we convene this year on the Board, even amid the uncertainty of our immediate moment, we are preparing for decisions that will determine our community's long run future.

Climate and Transportation

There is no long run issue that matters more than climate change, of course. My thinking in recent months has been shaped by David Wallace-Well's description of our paradoxical moment of the revised scientific consensus of 2-3 degrees warming by century's end: "The most terrifying predictions made improbable by decarbonization and the most hopeful ones practically foreclosed by tragic delay." There is still so much human suffering to be avoided with urgent action.

So, we celebrate the news that Arlington County operations now run entirely on renewable electricity: A full two years early. But decarbonizing government operations was always our first, simplest step; our bigger challenge is helping our whole community reach carbon reduction and renewable energy goals. Which is why I'm truly looking forward to seeing the Office of Climate Coordination and Policy go from an idea last year to a fully operational function, catalyzing and organizing, as we start 2023.

At the same time, we'll need to resist the easy allure of just "electrifying the status quo," especially when it comes to transportation. Respectfully, we aren't going to new-car-shop our way out of climate change, and we know our Vision Zero goals, like our Community Energy Plan goals, depends on reducing overall vehicle miles traveled. If residents, workers and visitors are going to change their transportation choices, then public transit has to compete on convenience and ease of use. Rail will always be the backbone of our transportation network, but we're on the edge of some big ideas about bus in 2023: Building on the very successful extension of free ART rides for APS students; thinking about regional bus service more dynamically and interconnectedly with both the WMATA Bus Transformation Project and the NoVA Transportation Commission's Regional Bus Analysis, as getting into the specifics of our own ART system, like improved routes and service levels, as we begin the update to the Master Transportation Plan this calendar year.

Economic Competitiveness

Sometimes our problems present as literal billboards staring us in the face, like the 14-foot commercial brokerage advertisement I saw entering Brooklyn this holiday, pleading "Tired of Zoom?!" in large font. This unsubtle desperation for a return to pre-pandemic in-person work reminds me that we're not only the community wrestling with difficult years ahead as office leases expire – and challenge our local revenues and therefore levels of service. But what about the long game, five or more years from now? How can we hasten, not just hope for, recovery and a more resilient local economy?

The idea of transitioning office buildings to residential is on everyone's mind; in Arlington, this may be likelier, for now, to take the form of redevelopment, like we approved with the Macy's site just a few weeks ago, but the good company in which we find ourselves, regionally and nationally, will give us case studies to consider adaptive reuse potential, too. More specific to our own context, we'll have actions ahead early this year – thanks to our teams at AED and CPHD working together – to update our policies to allow for and welcome 21st century uses, be they micro-fulfillment facilities, blends of traditional office and education functions, or even urban agriculture.

And we must retain our competitive advantage: Our extraordinary workforce. As Terry Clower of George Mason shared in a panel this fall, workforce and talent is the overwhelming driver of business siting decisions, and when talent leaves Arlington, businesses will follow. So, it should be motivating – like, 14-foot-billboard-motivating – to all of us that 2020 and 2021 saw major domestic outmigration from Arlington and NoVA; largely, in Clower's observation, 25-35 year olds. If we are "losing the next generation," as Clower put it, our office occupancy rate is close behind them.

Housing and Zoning Reform

So, if meeting our climate goals demands less greenhouse-gas-emissions-intensive ways of living and sustaining our economic competitiveness hinges on our ability to retain newly mobile talent, then the long run certainly demands our attention to housing.

With some self-deprecation, I share that this is my *seventh* Organizational Meeting speech in a row citing this year as one for action on the Missing Middle (I checked!). The study and its origins have been a long time coming. Yet, patience has proved a virtue on this issue: The symbolism of modernizing our zoning ordinance to conceive of something other than "one house on one lot" throughout Arlington County is significant and engenders strong viewpoints, which we spent 2022 creating novel ways to hear and engage. It's also been worth it to take this time because this change truly is for the long run: Who and what will Arlington be thirty years from now, with a healthy stock of mid-lifespan townhouses and small multiplexes? Or, who and what will Arlington be without them, when another generation of modest homes have been redeveloped into one expensive home on one expensive lot?

And so *this* is the year for action on the Missing Middle, beginning with a Request to Advertise in the coming weeks to set the outer bounds of a possible ordinance change and define the areas for continued debate over the next couple of months. 2023 is also exciting because it will be the first opportunity to think beyond and after the MMHS when it comes to the zoning of our lowest-density neighborhoods. Though lot coverage adjustments cannot address the underlying cause of overly large new properties, which is rapidly inflating land values, there is exciting new thinking from our community and staff about how we can adjust our zoning to better achieve our goals of preserving tree canopy and minimizing impacts on neighboring properties. For example, recommendations from our draft Forestry and Natural Resources Management Plan about how shifting setbacks could protect backyard trees, or new thinking from our Planning Commission about whether shifting our paradigm from lot coverage to Floor Area Ratio could get prescriptive about what we care about most – the volume, shape and spacing of homes – while allowing adaption for changing conditions and greater variety in architecture and design.

To be clear, the former recommendation comes with urgency and the latter is only the beginning of a much more extensive analysis – but both reflect that the ingenuity of this community is up to the challenge of shaping our long-run future.

In short, as we begin 2023, I'm thinking about Arlington in 2033 and 2053, too: Our economy, our environment, our homes, our collective values. I think we "had better aim at something higher" for that future, which is only as bright as our aspirations for it.