

Dear Arlingtonians, Mr. Chair, dear Colleagues,

What a memorable year 2022 has been. The first year “post-pandemic”: A year of recovery and of transition to the “new-normal”. A year of optimism, facing the future with the experience of the immediate past but also with the energy, resilience and resolve that is so characteristic of the dynamic forward-thinking community we indeed are. Transition is defined as a process driven by purpose, values and a common understanding on the direction and the desired destination, I can’t find a better word to describe what I believe will be the essence of 2023, as a year of transitions.

My focus and priorities in the new year account for this sentiment and reflect areas, critical to the welfare, happiness, safety and prosperity of our community:

Allow me enumerate:

- Address the Climate Emergency
- Evolve Smart Growth to meet 21<sup>st</sup> Century challenges
- Make housing a center-piece of opportunity for all
- Creatively adapt to tackle high office vacancy in a changing economy
- Build upon the new awareness of how critical our social safety net is for our community.

## **Climate Emergency**

I don’t believe there is a need to explain why the Climate Emergency constitutes the commanding, all-encompassing challenge of this generation. Greta Thunberg, in representation of her generation who is about to inherit the devastating consequences of our lack of action, just recently called upon all elected representatives to “end the blah, blah, blah”, meaning that now is the time for action:

Arlington has the brain power, the economic capacity, and the political insight to become an exemplary leader and a hub for environmental innovation in the region and in the nation. What is good for the environment is good for our economy, for jobs and investment, and good for our community and our future.

It is the right time to invest aggressively in electric infrastructure for transportation. But our focus should be centered in putting “public” and marginalized communities first, as we can’t allow that this technical and economic paradigm shift leaves people behind.

The biggest and most efficient EV is Metro-Rail. No charging infrastructure is needed, and one doesn’t need to be driven for over 20,000 miles just to break even on its carbon footprint at production (no externalities included). Modal shift to walkability and to public transit is the most effective decarbonization tool not only because of its very low emissions but because it supports, by orders of magnitude, more energy and resource efficient land-use and economy.

Thus, my invitation to Arlingtonians: before you consider any major private investment in your private electric mobility, please buy and use a Metro-pass first. And consider to walk and to bike a lot more this year. [Vision 0 is literally you, driving less while moving more and more safely]

On this side of the dais my focus will be on bringing ridership back (that includes considering fareless transit for the ART system at the same time we continue to strive to improve service – including but not limited to advancing the long overdue premium transit on Columbia Pike.

It is time to insist in the electrification of buildings and into a new level of sticks and carrots to incentivize energy efficiency in new and old construction.

Preservation and creative re-purposing of existing buildings may be financially challenging in the current economy, but it is the most beneficial choice for decarbonizing our built environment.

This Board provided guidance to the County Manager to institute a new Office for Climate Change tasked with coordination, policy and initiatives at the cabinet level, and to further support and upgrade our AIRE program. I look forward to this new level of executive leadership in 2023 as this is also the point where stormwater management, tree-preservation, public infrastructure, waste management, natural (and re-naturalized) resources intersect with climate-emergency responsive governance.

### **Growing Smarter in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Speaking of intersections: Housing is indeed the most discussed issue in our community because there is hardly any aspect of governance it doesn't connect to. Arlington's prosperity, as a place of opportunity is the product of Smart Growth: of investment in good public schools, services, transit, good responsive governance and one of the best live-work-play balances in the Nation. But we haven't met the mark for producing the appropriate housing supply and the corresponding variability in housing choice.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century roped-in density on transit corridors was the necessary condition for creating a sustaining transit infrastructure and economic development assets on which Arlington's prosperity is based.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the need emerges for a planned transition to a gently distributed density beyond and between our corridors. The emphasis is on "gently" and "long term" and with enough safeguards in place to minimize potential adverse effects but also not to stifle the long term benefits of allowing the market to provide a wider variety of housing choices.

This is not a departure from Smart Growth. This is the logical evolution of it.

New mobility, improved walkability and cyclability support growth that is not only predicated on immediate proximity to mass-transit but also thrives next to assets like parks, public spaces, libraries and recreational facilities, neighborhood retail and service centers and great neighborhood schools.

We are lucky that our geography allows for most human needs to be located within a travel distance of 15 minutes from any given home.

This time we have a more diverse set of tools beyond just zoning that allow us to shape our future. For instance, we have gotten better at incentivizing good context-responsive urban form (we even have experience with applying a Form Based Code) and we evolved significantly on better and safer design for our streets.

This time, we can make sure that we can plan for change that is inclusive, and is based on equity and equal access to opportunity for all Arlingtonians, regardless of their race, ethnicity or socio-economic status.

This is why, I will also continue to focus on

- no displacement and deepening affordability (below 40% AMI), whether this is to keep our neighbors in the Barcroft apartments or at Park Shirlington and everywhere there is an opportunity.
- tweaking our Housing support programs, especially the housing grants program to become more sustainable and effective.
- supporting pathways to affordable home-ownership
- being intentional in supporting the neighborhoods that still lag behind, especially our historic black-American neighborhoods and those with a larger immigrant population.

## **Transitioning our economy**

A town for all is only possible in an economy that works for all.

High commercial vacancy rates in the post-pandemic environment still dominated by remote-work asks for courageous decisions.

Adaptive reuse of existing buildings demands flexible and creative solutions and I am committed to be courageous and test a wide array of reasonable solutions such as flexible uses and potential incentives.

Strengthening Small Business Entrepreneurship is another path. Thousands of good and resilient jobs can be secured and created if we put in place a reliable support framework. During the pandemic, Arlington has stepped up significantly, now is the

moment to establish permanent supportive structures, including facilitating access to operating capital, which remains the biggest challenge.

Even in a high skilled workforce place, workforce development is a critical need and the best path to economic stability on the long term.

### **Final thoughts**

We also learned in the pandemic that a coordinated social safety net is essential: No Arlingtonian should go hungry. No Arlingtonian should lack access to physical or mental health care. Senior services and, childcare on the other side of the age-spectrum should be available to those in need.

In Arlington, every individual is important. And this is particularly true in times of momentous transitions that tend to overwhelm the most vulnerable.

Therefore I invite you to continue to create communities of respect, kindness and compassion and filter all discussions through these common values.

Your local government will be a partner.

Happy new year