

Arlington County Public Works History



Arlington County's public works facilities and services have come a long way in a short time. The County wasn't officially named Arlington by the Virginia State Legislature until 1920, but urban development quickly ensued.

Early Arlington was a study in contrasts. The first bus service began in 1921, but the mules that drew county vehicles still were housed in barns adjacent to the Court House. In 1926, the barns were transferred to the new property yard in South Arlington, and the first county water system was opened. Nevertheless, rural life styles mingled with progress: residents still disposed of refuse as best they could, and raw sewage was dumped into streams and the Potomac River. Even in 1932, when today's County Manager form of government was adopted as the first of its type in the U.S., Arlington was rustic with its farms, orchards, open meadows, winding brooks and deep forests. Only the main roads were paved, horses were a common form of transportation.

In 1930, with a population of 26,000, the county boasted only 42 miles of "hard surface" roads (some materials used to cover roads were cinders and crushed oyster shells) and 130 miles of unpaved roads. Arlington's first "hard surface" road was built in 1909; today the county maintains 376 miles of paved streets. Five kerosene lamps mounted in a neighborhood around 1910 are thought to be Arlington's first street lights. By 1930 there were 1,037 street lights, but they produced only 441,800 lumens compared to 1980's 10,226 street lights and their 99,445,500 lumens. In 1930 the average street light was 426 lumens; in 1980 it was 9,725 lumens.

The 1930s were a decade of progress. Before 1930, most Arlington homes depended on private wells or small privately operated water systems which also depended upon wells. In 1930, the county water system had 61 miles of water mains and 3,650 connections; by 1980 the system had 434 miles of water mains and 34,403 connections.

Arlington's sewage system developed in a similar way. Before 1930, most residents utilized pit privies and septic tanks, but gradually a number of small, unrelated sewer lines were installed by subdivision developers. But 1930 was a milestone year in sewer system history: Arlington County became a sanitary district, and in 1933 a referendum approved a \$2.5 million bond issue to construct trunk lines and a sewage treatment plant that went into operation in 1937. In 1930, there were 26 miles of sewerlines; by 1980, 449 miles.

In 1930, Arlington County vehicle registration was 12,008; in 1980 it was 99,043. In 1930, the county had one traffic light; by 1980 there were 181 county traffic lights and electric devices. In 1937, Arlington County hired the first traffic engineer in the state of Virginia.

From 1940 to 1950, Arlington County was rated as the fastest growing county in the U.S., and the development of public works services was intensified to match the pace of urban development. In 1942, the county bought its first trucks and hired its first crews to collect refuse. The refuse was hauled to a dump, and the garbage was sold to hog farmers in Fairfax County. By 1949 county crews were collecting 22,600 tons of trash and 9,100 tons of garbage; in 1980, 101,847 tons of refuse were collected. In 1951 a new refuse incinerator went into operation, but was phased out in 1973 because of new air pollution control standards. The landfill (buried refuse) method adopted in 1973 remains in use today. Before 1928, there were no sidewalks, but by 1943 there were 111 miles of sidewalks. By 1980 the total had increased to 410 miles of sidewalks. In 1947 the first parking meters—236 of them—were installed in Clarendon and Rosslyn; in 1980 there were 1,789 parking meters.

In 1950—foreshadowing the 1970s' programs of natural resource recovery and recycling—the county bought its first leaf vacuum machine to collect leaves; before that, men used pitchforks to shovel leaves into trucks. In 1961, 631 loads of leaves were collected; in 1980, 16 vacuum trucks collected 57,901 cubic yards of leaves for distribution as mulching. In July 1977, Arlington's first Metrorail subway service began, offering the first public rail transportation since the discontinuance of the trolley car network in the 1930s. In May 1980, the average ridership was 43,042.

Through the years, public works services were provided through various departments and divisions as times changed and services were modernized to keep pace with new times. The Department of Public Works as it exists today was created in August 1977 by consolidation of the Transportation and Utilities departments with the Equipment Division of the Property Management Department. The consolidation provided the centralized coordination of services needed for metropolitan public works management. And meanwhile, plans for tomorrow's public works projects are on the drawing board.

PUBLIC WORKS STATISTICS*

22 bridges
376 miles of streets
417 miles of sidewalks
587 miles of curb and gutter
50 miles of bikeways
11,250 street lights
107 bus shelters
1,836 parking meters
189 traffic signals and electrical devices
440 miles of water mains
23 million gallons of water distributed daily
33,579 water customers
454 miles of sanitary sewers
34,506 sanitary sewer connections
21.6 million gallons of sewage treated daily
111,034 tons of refuse collected annually
122,921 tons of refuse disposed of annually
48,186 cubic yards of leaves collected annually
740 automotive equipment serviced
2,723 tons of discarded paper collected for recycling
2,855 fire hydrants
2 million feet of pavement markings

*(Fiscal Year 1981)

Color-coded Parking Meters

Arlington drivers don't have to leave their cars to see how much time is available on the various types of parking meters. A color code conveys the message to passing drivers: ● Yellow Meters — ½ Hour ● Silver Meters — 1 Hour ● Blue Meters — 2 Hours ● Green Meters — 10 Hours.