CLIMATE CHANGE, ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT COMMISSION

c/o Department of Environmental Services
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 705
Arlington, VA 22201

April 15, 2023

Honorable Libby Garvey, Chair
Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: FY 2025 Budget

Dear Chair Garvey,

The Climate Change, Energy, and Environment Commission (C2E2) urges the County Board to make 2024 the year that puts Arlington County on an accelerated path to meet its carbon neutrality goal, which requires phasing out fossil fuels for its energy needs. Last year was the hottest year ever recorded and temperatures so far this year are setting heat records. Life-threatening heat waves, almost year-round wildfires, intense storms, and flooding are becoming the norm and Arlington has not been immune with erratic weather, flooding, and weeks of poor air quality due to wildfires in Canada.

The FY 2025 budget, however, does not reflect the urgency of the climate crisis and, in fact, is unclear on how it advances the County's goals. C2E2 appreciates the County's recent efforts to expand rooftop solar on County buildings, transition its sedan fleet to EVs, and expand the availability of publicly available EV chargers. While important, these measures are not nearly sufficient enough to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions from County operations or directly influence a countywide transition to energy efficient, all electric buildings, flexible transportation options powered by clean energy, or overall lower carbon lifestyles.

Overall, the budget lacks transparency in how (or even whether) proposed spending will reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reflecting our larger concern that the County still lacks a whole-of-government approach to addressing the climate crisis. C2E2 strongly recommends that the County develop a plan and timeline to phase out the use of fossil fuels in its own operations and clearly indicate how proposed budget spending and the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) advances the plan. Budget information from all departments should address how each contributes to County goals.

- For County buildings, a publicly available inventory of all facilities to include energy use intensity with comparisons to standards and best practices for building type, and fuel sources as well as key information related to expected building renovations and replacement schedules for key building systems would be the starting point for a long-term plan to improve energy efficiency, eliminate on-site use of fossil fuels, and as feasible support roof top solar and microgrids. For the FY 2025 budget, details of the nine projects identified as in the design or construction phase and what impact they will have on reducing the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions should be spelled out.

- Similarly, an inventory of the County's vehicle fleet and planned replacement would provide the foundation for a plan to shift to electric vehicles at the earliest opportunity. The County has already exceeded its target for shifting its sedan fleet to EVs, has started the transition of the ART fleet with the decision earlier this year to replace 8 ART buses with battery electric buses, and is planning on testing a pursuit-rated police vehicle. The FY 2025 budget should clearly note this progress and the expected savings in GHG emissions but also identify purchases of internal combustion vehicles and the reasons for not shifting to a zero emissions equivalent.

- More broadly, the County should develop comprehensive metrics tied to goals for GHG emission reductions, energy efficiency gains, renewable energy, vehicle miles traveled, and growth of EV charging capacity to track the implementation of the Community Energy Plan. Performance metrics included in the budget should be updated to provide more meaningful data to track progress in overall GHG emission reductions, eliminating use of fossil fuels, and meeting specified targets for buildings and operations.

Programs and associated spending to support the critically important reduction of GHG emissions in the private sector remains limited and the budget for the AIRE Team, the office responsible for advancing the CEP goals, has been stagnant for several years and spending remains below the $2.2 million FY15 budget not accounting for inflation. Ninety-six percent of all GHG emissions are generated by the private sector and hundreds of thousands of individual decisions will need to be made if we are to reach our goals. C2E2 welcomes the addition of $1 million to the Climate Action Fund, but if spent over three years as with the first tranche, the funds are minimal given the magnitude of the challenge. C2E2 recommends that all of these funds be spent in FY 2025 and that they be allocated to specific programs or initiatives to support transition of the private sector.

- Most of the funds should be allocated to develop and expand programs to educate, encourage, and incentivize the private sector and the public to meet our urgent climate goals. The CEP roadmap indicates that proposed actions such as Energy Ambassadors and a revamped Green Home Choice program are contingent on staffing and funding and years 3-5 (we're actually in year 5) offer additional action items.

- Programs should be available to all but priority should be given to low to moderate income residents and affordable housing initiatives should include retrofits and building upgrades to reduce the energy burden for residents. Outreach efforts should also include businesses that can support the transition to educate them on the rebates and credits available to their customers and identify skill gaps. Working with these business and local educational institutes, the County can encourage programs to fill gaps and offer good paying green jobs for County residents.

- Programs should not wait for outside funds but be designed to be expandable to take advantage of federal and state funding and other financing mechanisms such as a Green Bank which the County is currently pursuing.

- Continued use of these funds for building out publicly-accessible charging infrastructure should be based on a multi-year plan with key goals identified. Costs for essential energy upgrades for County buildings should be integrated into project investment costs and not treated as an add on, requiring supplemental funds.

C2E2 regrets the proposed mergers and elimination of a few ART bus routes but understands the rationale given the low ridership. Providing residents with alternatives to their cars to meet their transit needs and reducing vehicle-miles-traveled is essential to meeting the County's carbon neutrality goals and now is a good time to start reimagining our existing transit structure. We are encouraged that the Transit Bureau is planning a study for a microtransit pilot and encourage them to look broadly on how our existing transit structure can be enhanced by integration of microtransit and, working with APS, explore how ART and Metro can meet most of the transportation needs of middle and high school students.

A few additional comments on the Budget:

- C2E2 appreciates and supports the proposed increase in spending on tree care and invasive removal and increasing funding to VCE. We also endorse the calls from other Commissions and residents for returning the operating hours for the nature centers to pre-pandemic levels.
- We wonder at least about the optics of eliminating the vacant Chief Equity Officer position. Addressing climate change and meeting equity goals go hand in hand and having positions devoted to both issues under the County Manager can best facilitate coordination.

Sincerely,

Joan F. McIntyre

Joan McIntyre
Chair, Climate Change, Energy and Environment Commission

CC: Mark Schwartz, County Manager
Bill Eger, Chief Climate Coordinator
Greg Emanuel, Director Environmental Services