

Susan Cunningham

2024 New Year's Remarks

Arlington 2024: Connecting to Become a World-Class Community

"Arlington will be a diverse and inclusive world-class urban community with secure, attractive residential and commercial neighborhoods where people unite to form a caring, learning, participating, sustainable community in which each person is important."

— Arlington County Board, January 26, 2002

Introduction:

Good evening! On this, my second day in office and first official meeting as your 75th County Board member, I am reflecting on what it means for Arlington to be a "World-class Community" in 2024 and beyond.

What is community?

One definition of community is "a **place** considered together with its **inhabitants**". Another is "a feeling of **fellowship** with others, as a result of sharing common goals"¹. We have nailed the first definition (people and places) and, like most communities, have more work to do on the second (connection).

We sure do have world-class **people** and **places** in Arlington today:

- Our people: 237,000 residents, 214,600 jobs, 27,000 public school students from 149 countries
- Our places: 120,000 homes, 42 million square feet of office space, 1,477 acres of parks, with 99% of homes within a 10-minute walk²

Yet, in 2024, we can and should build a more resilient, world-class community through **connection**. The U.S. Surgeon General has declared an **epidemic of loneliness**, calling for "strengthening social infrastructure" (e.g., parks and library programs) and building a "culture of connection".³ Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) recently proposed a "National Strategy on Social Connection".⁴

Why does connection matter?

1. Connection improves **public health**. and the best antidote to loneliness, hopelessness, and addiction.
 - a. For elders, disconnection increases dementia risk by 50%.⁵

¹ Google/Oxford Languages

² County, NOVA Parks, and NPS - [profile2023.pdf \(arlingtonva.us\)](#)

³ CDC, May 2023, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation,"

⁴ <https://www.murphy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/murphy-introduces-legislation-to-establish-national-strategy-to-combat-loneliness-promote-social-connection...>

⁵ CDC, May 2023, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation,"

- b. In 2021, 57% of U.S. teen girls experienced depression and 30% contemplated suicide.⁶
 - c. We had 69 overdoses in Arlington in 2023, tragically 20 of them fatal.⁷
2. Connection fosters **shared vision**. Planning is crucial to managing change – for both residents and businesses – - from housing and office reinvention to transportation and stormwater. As Chair Garvey mentioned, our last community vision document was penned in 1986, before most Arlingtonians were born⁸.
3. Connection strengthens long-term **sustainability**. Clear priorities, transparent tradeoffs, careful resource use – whether energy and land or tax revenues and time – help us **connect** and sustain a resilient, world-class community.

2024 Issue Priorities:

I look forward to working with my colleagues, regional leaders, and our whole community this year to:

1. **Connect our people**. We will build on existing programs like sports, arts, Arlington Neighborhood Villages, and the Teen Network Board to enhance youth out-of-school programming, volunteerism, public safety investments, mental health delivery, and safety net.
2. **Refine our housing investments and planning**. We must closely monitor and refine the initial expanded housing options (EHO) program and explore other tools (i.e., property tax deferrals, community land trust, reuse) to better meet our broader housing needs; And, revisit our planning priorities (e.g. lot coverage, EFC, Special GLUP analysis, office property reuse), fees, and permit/inspection turnaround time.
3. **Use resources efficiently**. Our budget pressures can help us study priorities, return on investment, and tradeoffs to get the best value for our community (from energy efficiency to service levels).

Closing:

So, **world-class places and people are not enough**. We also need sustained **connection** to be the world-class **community** we envision. That takes invitation, effort, and **showing up** from all corners of our community - that's all of us. In 2024, we need to engage and re-engage with each other – to listen, question, deliberate, and compromise as we work to support our people and steward our resources.

Connection begins with each of us.

On my desk, I keep a photo of Maya Angelou and a teenage student at the Maya Angelou School. It was near the end of Angelou's life and just the start of the student's journey. I can still feel the energy of that evening sitting next to them as they connected and inspired each other. We can all do that for each other as we work together to create and sustain a world-class, **connected** Arlington that is a great place to live, work, and play – today and well into the future.

⁶ CDC, Feb 2023, YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf

⁷ [Opioid Incident Data – Official Website of Arlington County Virginia Government \(arlingtonva.us\)](https://www.arlingtonva.us/office-of-public-health/epidemiology-and-prevention/opioid-incident-data) - as of 12/07/23

⁸ Median age of 35.1 yrs in 2023, ~1988 birth year. [profile2023.pdf \(arlingtonva.us\)](https://www.arlingtonva.us/office-of-public-health/epidemiology-and-prevention/profile2023.pdf)

I'll leave you with Angelou's own words: "I've learned that people will forget what you said,..." (perhaps you have already, that was a lot of speeches!) "...people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them **feel**." As we celebrate the start of this year, let's commit to investing in **connection** to strengthen our world-class community.

Thank you.