

## **County Board Chair Matt de Ferranti's January 6, 2021 Organizational Remarks**

"Take that, 2020." That's what my sister, a Doctor, said when she received her first dose of the COVID 19 vaccine a week ago.

In her words I hear determination—the same determination I saw last year in Arlington as we came together to face the pandemic. Determination to define 2020 by how we respond to COVID 19, not just how it impacts us.

In "Take that, 2020" I also hear the challenges we'll have to tackle this year. To address these challenges, I propose to focus on three themes: stabilization, recovery, and building a County and community that is systemically committed to racial and economic equity.

### **Stabilization**

Just 10 months ago, most of us had never heard the phrase "social distance," hosted a Zoom, or worn a mask. Our lives have been upended by this pandemic.

Last year, in our first meeting of 2020, the Board was celebrating a decline in our office vacancy rate; our budget prospects looked better than they had in years; and we looked forward to a year of investment and prosperity. Tonight, one year later, we are worried about our health, hunger, preventing evictions, and helping our children, who have been distance-learning and isolated from their friends for months.

We can be proud of the work we did in 2020. Our Public Health Department responded quickly, and our community stayed home to flatten the curve so that our hospital and health care system were not overwhelmed.

Three other parts of our response last year stand out:

- The County helped more than 3,000 households avoid eviction by providing nearly \$6 million in rental support and more than \$300,000 to help pay utility costs;
- The County, Arlington Public Schools, the Arlington Food Assistance Center, our other safety net nonprofits, the Cooperative for a Hunger Free Arlington, and individual Arlingtonians stepped up to help those facing hunger and food insecurity;

- We worked with our Industrial Development Authority and three Business Improvement Districts to provide grants of up to \$10K to 394 businesses to help pay their employees, ultimately providing \$2.8 million to help stabilize our small businesses.

We can be also be proud of and deeply grateful for those on the front lines responding to this pandemic—From the bottom of my heart, I want to add my thank you to all Arlington County employees for the work you did in 2020.

As we turn the page to 2021, our health care response to COVID 19 is clearly the biggest issue we face as a community. Arlington's COVID infection test positivity rate is above 9 percent, well above the 5 percent threshold the Center for Disease Control and Prevention uses to assess the risk of a surge. We face daily case and hospital counts that are close to the highest we have seen. We must get the vaccines out quickly to our health care workers, nursing home residents, essential workers, seniors, and, eventually, our community as a whole. And we cannot take our eyes off contact tracing, targeted testing, and providing adequate health care for those in need.

To stabilize our community, we must also prioritize hunger response and eviction prevention.

### **Hunger and Food Insecurity Working Group**

When COVID began, 15,800 Arlington residents were unsure of where they would get their next meal according to estimates from our Department of Human Services. That was 6.8 percent of our neighbors. Today, the Capital Area Food Bank estimates 26,000 are at risk of hunger, just over 8.8%. That's a significant increase.

Our fellow Arlingtonians in need are our families and neighbors. But, despite our efforts, gaps remain in our response. So, to sustain our 2020 efforts and to build a stronger hunger response system, my Chair's priority for the coming year will be addressing hunger and food insecurity.

County Manager Mark Schwartz and Superintendent Dr. Francisco Duran, with the support of the County Board and the School Board, will be forming a Hunger and Food Insecurity Working Group over the coming month to help us better address the gaps and racial inequities of hunger, and to

better collaborate and coordinate to maximize our resources. The Working Group will work with the County's newly hired Food Coordinator over the next 12 to 18 months. Thank you to my colleagues for your support on this, and to you Ms. Garvey for your continued work on food and hunger issues through COG. Details on how Arlingtonians can get involved will be announced over the coming weeks.

### **Eviction Prevention**

Helping those at risk of eviction was also one of our highest priorities in 2020. Each of us heard from many Arlingtonians worried about their rent last year. Our Department of Human Services, community, and safety net nonprofits have all worked relentlessly to help thousands of Arlingtonians make it through 2020 without losing their homes. Over the next 6 months helping those most in need of shelter must continue to be at the heart of how we measure ourselves as a County and as a community. Thank you, Mr. Karantonis, for stepping forward to work on these issues with our Tenant Landlord Commission.

### **Recovery**

My second theme for 2021 is recovery. Saying "Take that" to 2020 is not only about stabilizing our community. It's also about recovery. Because as difficult as this winter will be, spring will come. More and more of us will be vaccinated and a new Biden Administration will lead our nation's recovery.

Our recovery will require full partnership between County government and our businesses to navigate a drastically altered economic landscape. 38 percent of our businesses indicated that they are at risk of closing, according to the survey we completed in October. Now more than ever, we must support our hard-hit businesses and address office and retail vacancies.

So, as we work to recover economically, I want to issue a call to action from my heart to yours: shop local in Arlington this year.

Yes, there will be things you need delivered; we want all businesses to recover. But, let's not forget the livelihoods at stake. Let's keep ordering from our restaurants and local businesses. Because you love your corner restaurant in Shirlington or the dry cleaner off Williamsburg or care about any small business in Arlington, shop local. Because our neighbors matter, jobs matter, and Arlington residents matter.

Our public schools are also at the heart of our recovery. Our children will need to resume in-person learning and return to routines. The County will be supporting and partnering with Arlington Public Schools to address the pandemic's educational consequences and to help them safely reopen. Specifically, we will fully support our School Board and Superintendent as they move through the phases to return to school and provide additional educational services necessary to close opportunity and achievement gaps. My commitment to that goal comes from my own experience as a teacher. I will work to find the resources our schools need to help our students harmed by the pandemic.

Part of addressing the educational opportunity gap that COVID 19 has exacerbated is digital equity and broadband access. Thanks to you, Mr. Dorsey for your early and continued leadership on this. In 2020, the County took numerous steps including investing \$500,000 to help serve the more than 8,000 APS students who live in low-income households. In 2021, we will work to accelerate our efforts to make broadband affordable and accessible for all Arlington residents.

### **Missing Middle**

Along with our economy and our schools, missing middle housing types must be part of our recovery. I want to be clear about what I mean when I say “missing middle housing”. Missing Middle is a type of housing--duplexes, townhomes, low-rise/garden style apartments, and modest mid-rises near our population corridors—that can help make the costs of homeownership in Arlington more affordable for the many people who live here and want to stay, but currently cannot afford a home.

Missing middle housing types are necessary because the status quo on housing is not sustainable. Arlington is a very desirable place to live—the cost of buying a home here has continued to increase over the last 10-15 years relative to wages because demand has been greater than supply. That means that without changes in our housing supply the 60% of Arlington residents who currently rent cannot realistically save up to buy a place. We risk becoming as unaffordable as San Francisco if we do not plan for replacement of existing moderately priced housing and grow in a thoughtful, managed way.

Missing middle housing is inextricably linked to the inclusive, equitable recovery we need. The median income for white households in Arlington is \$134K per year, more than double that of Black households, which is \$58K. Think about that. More than double. That's not right and it's not happenstance: I believe Arlington's decision to prohibit row houses for more than 25 years contributed to that inequity. We must adopt policies and plan for a different, more equitable future. I am grateful for your support on this and to you Ms. Cristol for stepping forward as a liaison and lead on it.

### **Systemic equity**

My third theme for 2021 is systemic equity. I hear in "Take that, 2020," a challenge to us all to recognize and reckon with our failures with respect to racial and economic equity. In 2020, millions of Americans, including many here in Arlington, took to the streets to demand that we do better. We must and we will.

In 2020, we adopted body-worn cameras for our police, Sheriff's, and select fire personnel. We established our Police Practices Group to review our police department's policies and practices and expect to have their recommendations early this year. We appointed a Chief Race and Equity Officer who is committed to creating a County where everyone sees themselves in the work being done. We adopted a framework for implementing Restorative practices for conflict resolution and launched Dialogues of Race and Equity. We set in motion public processes for renaming Lee Highway, changing our logo, and renaming streets, buildings and public spaces whose names do not align with our community's commitment to racial equity.

In 2021, our challenge will be to see these initiatives through, with determination to rise to a new status quo. That new status quo must also create systemic equity on the other priorities I've identified—health, hunger, eviction prevention, economic recovery, our schools, and missing middle housing.

### **Fiscal Priorities**

As we work toward systemic equity, my top priorities for the Fiscal Year 2022 budget will be providing essential services to those most in need while maintaining core services for resident health and safety and laying the foundation for economic recovery. I will work my heart out to avoid

laying off staff. I also want to be honest, though, that we are in a very tight budget this year, and even tighter \$56 million projected deficit for FY 22, which begins July 1st. In light of that shortfall, we will have to focus on what we must do and those most in need.

### **Our Environment**

We must also sustain our progress on our environment, one of the reasons I ran for the Board. I will continue to support 100 percent renewable electricity by 2035 via the Community Energy Plan's Implementation Framework, the plastic bag fee, and our recycling goals.

I want to close where I began, with the phrase "Take that 2020," and a picture of where we are at the start of 2021. The COVID vaccines are the light at the end of a very long tunnel. You might have seen such a tunnel driving the Blue Ridge Parkway, on a train, or in a movie. We don't know how long until we reach the light—6 months, 8 months, or longer—but we do know now that we will get there. If we keep distributing vaccines, social distancing, washing our hands, and wearing masks, we will get as many Arlingtonians as possible to that post-COVID light.

I'm asking all of us to work together to meet the challenges we face with commitment, purpose, and kindness as we stabilize, recover, and build systemic racial and economic equity together.