

Vice-Chair Katie Cristol's Jan. 4, 2021 Organizational Remarks

A year ago, at our January 2nd Organizational Meeting, inspired by our local and global movements for action on the climate emergency, I gave comments about bringing the energy and clarity of focus that emergencies beget to our daily work in 2020. I literally titled those remarks “Emergency and Urgency.”

I'm not usually a superstitious person. But just in case, I wrote this year's remarks on the topics of relative ease and uneventfulness.

Unfortunately, there is no doubt that 2021 will be just as characterized by the state of emergency forced by the global pandemic and economic crisis. Even with the vaccine rolling out as this year begins, we are seeing the most severe peaks in COVID-19 cases yet. To support this community in continuing the sacrifices necessary to stop the spread, we – this Board, County Government – have to sustain the resources to help keep people in their homes, to keep families fed, to get testing to the uninsured and underinsured in our community, to lend a hand to small businesses through permitting flexibilities and technical assistance that build on prior state and local grant programs.

This darkest-before-the-dawn moment in the pandemic's course also means more incredibly tough conversations, such as when APS students will return to in-person environments and how to shore up WMATA so that the temporary impacts of ridership collapse don't become a permanent transit downward spiral. The lifeblood of federal aid, which the new Congressional agreement will infuse into both schools and Metro, helps. But it won't spare this community the weighing of competing values to make seemingly impossible decisions. Although the County Board may not be the decider on these issues, we have a role: Providing critical information, keeping our regional coalitions strong and aligned, and tackling the pandemic in our borders and region – because these decisions will get easier when case counts are lower and falling.

The other thing we need to end the pandemic? Trust in the vaccine. But ours is the nation of the Tuskegee Study and the Public Charge rule; our past of medical exclusion and worse on the basis of race or citizenship status is not even past. Vaccination hesitation can be a rational response to

these real circumstances that requires an all-out effort, and trusted community leaders, to address with candor and listening. Which is why I'm grateful that our Complete Count Committee – which pulled off the extraordinary task of a complete 2020 Census – is mobilizing again to help our hardest-to-reach neighbors, led by Arlingtonians Wanda Pierce and Elissa Ortiz, joined in leadership by Nancy White of Arlington Free Clinic, get information about and access to the COVID-19 vaccine in 2021. I'm looking forward to working closely with this team, along with School Board Vice Chair Barbara Kanninen, with our rebranded "Complete Vaccine Committee" on a trust-building effort as big as it is important.

At some point in 2021, this emergency will begin to lift. A rebuilding after this once-in-a-century pandemic is an opportunity, unique so far in my lifetime, to think afresh about what kind of future we want for ourselves and for our children, including here in Arlington.

For example, the Missing Middle Housing Study is officially underway in Phase One: establishing common definitions about problems with Arlington's current housing stock and trends. We still have miles to go with the specifics of the study, but already, residents are engaging in a healthy dialogue. Whether it's new "neighbors for more neighbors" groups; a new willingness to look at how policies, lending practices and restrictive covenants shaped the lack of diversity that characterizes too many of our neighborhoods today; or thoughtful questions about trade-offs like lot sizes vs. transit access or off-street parking vs. tree preservation. I'm so inspired to see it: This is a conversation about how the future of Arlington should look, and who it is for, and so it is a conversation for us to have with each another as neighbors – not just for County government alone to lead.

And that climate emergency? There's reason to feel hopeful for action in these early months of 2021; both because of the incoming presidential administration's prioritization, and because closer to home, we'll complete the update of the Community Energy Plan Implementation Framework. That means adding specifics to our big, bold goals for renewable energy and carbon emissions reduction, and more detailed plans for expanding decarbonizing our government activities. I'm looking forward to some spirited discussions about our transition to electric vehicles in the County fleet, helping community members access renewables, and other critical topics. 2021 is also the year of our Natural Resources Master Plan update,

for gathering inventories and planning for the future of our trees, forests, streams and public lands.

Importantly, both plans – for clean energy and for stewardship of our natural resources – are potential “proof points” for us to embed and set higher goals for environmental equity. We know that Black and Latino communities nationally have higher exposure to air pollution and environmental toxins as well as greater risks from climate-induced heat waves and flooding; and according to a Center for American Progress analysis this past year, nonwhite Americans are three times more likely to live in a “nature deprived” area than white Americans. We talked so much during 2020 about racial justice, and so often about how there are no race-neutral policies. In 2021 we should be pushing ourselves, in environmental policy as well as housing, energy and others, to actively undo these disparities.

In short, we may not have seen this emergency coming in 2020, or at least not at the scale and severity it has visited upon us. But in 2021, our challenge will be to see past, through and beyond it, to the kind of community we want to be on the other side of this life changing emergency. If anyone is up to it, I know it's Arlington County.

Happy New Year.