

Commentary on Community Facility Study

The starting point for the CFS were several disputes about finding appropriate locations for schools and other facilities, and about the prioritization among different needs. But the study took a unique approach that made it dig much deeper into the underlying fundamentals, and focus on the big picture of the County's ability to meet our needs for the longer term.

Demographics

- Did you know that Arlington's population is expected to grow by 30% to about 283,000 by 2040?
- The key will be the demographic mix, but the County seems to have no specific notion of what would be an ideal mix, let alone any plans for how to help achieve it;
- While it is positive if Arlington remains so attractive, this population increase will create huge new needs for facilities and services, perhaps especially as regards schools;
- Although the Land Use Plan suggests that we could absorb the increase, it is not clear if we will have the housing stock to match the needs of low-income earners, young professionals starting families, and senior citizens who want to 'age in place';

Revenues

- Arlington is used to getting a very high proportion of our revenues from commercial tax revenues; this is what has helped hold down the tax rates for individual homes;
- We are currently coping with a dismal office market situation; the vacancy rate is record-high, and many plans for new office buildings have stalled; employers also cut back on office space;
- The result is that, as already has been hinted for 2016, either tax rates for individual home owners will be going up, or the only alternative would be to conclude that we must make do with less resources at a time when the needs are increasing;

Assessment of needs and prioritization among needs

- For a long time, Arlingtonians have been used to having most of their needs met, either immediately or with some slight delay; but now we are more likely than ever to have to reassess all the different needs and to make tough choices among competing needs;
- While the County and the residents have been preoccupied mostly with the issue of where to locate new facilities, the issue will increasingly be whether and when we can afford them in the first place;
- Resource allocation issues have traditionally been complicated by a lack of coordination and synchronization between the autonomous school system and the rest of the County government, in terms of basic mindsets, planning horizons and methodology; this situation must be improved;
- By law, school seats simply have to be provided, and Arlington also views the reputation of the schools as a major asset, so what does this mean for the allocation of resources for all other needs, such as open space, infrastructure and maintenance, community centers, and the whole range of social services?

Scarcity of land

- Increasingly, the precise location of public facilities, such as schools, fire stations or maintenance facilities, has become a controversial topic; to some extent this is because single-family neighborhoods have been used to being immune to the intrusion of such facilities; a new model for participatory siting processes is being proposed;

--However, the basic reality that Arlington is the smallest County in the nation, and therefore has very limited space, will always remain an obstacle; ironically, Arlington's 'Smart Growth' concept may also have had a 'flip side'; such a huge proportion of the scarce land has been set aside for single-family homes, so that the flexibility on the remainder of the land remains very limited;

--New methods will have to be employed to hold down usage of land: for instance, by building taller facilities instead of having larger foot prints; by undergrounding facilities wherever possible; by using space on top of buildings and other structures; by relying less on 'brick and mortar'; and by doing more sharing of facilities and services with adjacent jurisdictions;

Increased citizen engagement and improved communications

--Clearly there is a need for a new framework for the processes where needs are assessed and prioritized, at the level of the two Boards and obviously involving close collaboration between their respective staffs, but perhaps above all with a much increased scope for genuine citizen participation;

--If taxes go up, and some needs still cannot be met, then there will be no trust in 'black box government;' diverse interests will be competing with each other, and people will want to be heard; residents are likely to demand more influence in the prioritization and planning processes;

--There is already an increasing dissatisfaction with the County's scope and methods for communications, as regards both substance and methods; it has been noted that it is not enough for the County to go out and inform, or to go out and listen to griping in a 'wailing wall' fashion; residents want to participate in a dialog about visions, long-term plans, and countywide policies;

--New methods must be found to engage busy and hard-working residents in the decision-making; modern technology must be used to give people a chance to participate, in ways other than spending time on coming to numerous and time-consuming meetings;

The implications of diversity

--Arlington has justifiably taken some pride in having a diverse population, a situation which is likely to bring many advantages to a community and should be embraced; however, there is increasingly a realization that it may also have some drawbacks or 'hidden' aspects;

--First, there is a great deal of geographic segregation, particularly in terms of affluent vs. low-income segments of our population; this causes differentiation as regards aspects such as school situation, living environments and access to retail and services;

--Then there is a sense of polarization between the high-density, urban areas, which have multi-family residences and an abundance of office buildings, and the much larger, essentially suburban areas, with single-family homes and their front/backyards and 'leafy' streets';

--The reality is that not only do the life styles differ substantially between different types of neighborhoods; there is also a conspicuous lack of mutual awareness and understanding; as greater emphasis is being placed on a countywide needs assessments and prioritization of needs, the lack of cohesiveness may become an added challenge, unless the County makes a determined effort to bring about an increased sense of unity and a willingness to 'pull in the same direction;'

--One conclusion may well be that the County must see this as the moment when its overall vision for the future needs to be revisited, in terms of basic aspects such as land use; can we afford the prevailing split between 'urban' and 'suburban' areas, if we are to maintain our ability to meet the overall needs of our residents with available resources; and can we afford a situation where the areas (such as Crystal City) constituting the 'economic engine' of Arlington are not given sufficient attention and support?