

Statement of Arlington County Board Chairman Jay Fisetto on the Future of the Arlington-Fairfax Streetcar Project

November 18, 2014

In 2006, the Boards of Arlington and Fairfax counties took their first votes supporting the Arlington-Fairfax Streetcar. Those votes came after a lengthy planning process along Columbia Pike that identified streetcar as the transit option that best supported the community's vision for the Pike.

I am proud of that vote. It was in the Arlington tradition of building community by planning for the long-term, marrying land use to transportation and investing for the future.

Over the years, the vision evolved, with the addition of a second streetcar segment, stretching from Crystal City to Potomac Yard, and meeting the Columbia Pike streetcar in Pentagon City. This streetcar system would spur high-quality, mixed-use development, add jobs and revitalize several core neighborhoods. It would provide the capacity we needed to handle the growth in jobs and population that we know is coming to these areas ... and better connect Arlington to the regional rail system.

To those of us who have worked on this project, its benefits seem clear. Particularly now, at a time when Arlington faces increased regional competition – when our neighbors are pursuing their own Smart Growth planning – we believe that a streetcar system would provide the economic stimulation and place-making that would keep Arlington competitive for decades to come. It would help fill the vacant offices in Crystal City and increase tax revenues -- not only paying for itself, but for additional schools and services that our community needs.

We have secured funding for the project without needing Arlington homeowners' taxes – through the legislature's landmark transportation funding package and the McAuliffe Administration's exceptional pledge to fund 50 percent of the project's cost.

But we cannot ignore the political realities. On November 4, Arlingtonians went to the polls. They rejected the candidate who supported streetcar and voted -- convincingly -- for the candidate who made opposition to streetcar a centerpiece of his campaign. This was a powerful message to this Board.

How did we arrive at this point? We -- the Board members who voted for this project, the County Manager and staff – were caught flat-footed when organized opposition to the streetcar surfaced in just the last year or so. We did not effectively make the case to our community. We needed to communicate more clearly how a streetcar system would benefit our entire community and how we could pay for it without diverting funds from other priorities, such as schools. We were unable to persuade a majority of voters that a streetcar system is Arlington's next generation of transit, and that we can afford to build it.

In Arlington, we have something called the Arlington Way. It means that this community makes the big decisions together, through a long process of consensus building. It may seem mysterious to those outside our community, but the Arlington Way is the glue that holds us together. It is a civic process that has helped Arlington make the dramatic transition from a car-oriented suburb with an aging commercial core to the vibrant and thriving community it is today.

I believe that debating the streetcar issue further – with continued discord and dueling facts – will not serve our community and will distract us from addressing other pressing issues before us.

I have come to the conclusion that the only way to move forward together – to rebuild the civility and consensus that have been the hallmarks of our civic life and community success for decades – is to discontinue the streetcar project.

After close consultation with Ms. Hynes and Mr. Tejada, with our partners in Fairfax and in Richmond, and with members of the community, Ms. Hynes and I have agreed that all spending on streetcar must end.

Later today at our Board meeting, I will offer a [motion to discontinue the streetcar project](#), and I fully expect that motion to pass. The County Manager will begin the process of ending our contracts in an orderly manner, of shutting down the program and of providing the Board with options for improving bus service to the greatest extent possible. We also will direct the Manager to assess the impact of this action on the adopted land use plans and the ability to meet our affordable housing goals.

In the year to come, we need to focus on the most pressing issues facing our community. We need a community conversation about how to maintain one of the finest public school systems in the world without starving the rest of our budget for funds ... how we broaden our commercial base as the federal government, and private businesses, continue to shrink their office footprints. We need to talk about sustainability ... about how to share our limited public space ... about how to ensure that Arlington remains diverse and inclusive ... and how our children and their children will be able to afford to live here.

We remain committed to the community visions for Crystal City, Pentagon City and Columbia Pike ... as more transit-oriented, walkable and sustainable neighborhoods. And we remain committed to working hard and strategically with our business community ... to both enhance our competitiveness and improve transit throughout our County.

I want to thank all those who have worked so hard on the Arlington-Fairfax streetcar program -- the residents and businesses and developers who believed in this project. The elected leadership and staff of our neighbor Fairfax have been stalwart partners from Day One. I also want to thank our state partners at the Virginia Department of Transportation and the Department of Rail and Public Transit. And most importantly, the County staff who have given their heart and soul to this project. I know how committed

you have been and how this project epitomized the innovation that drew you to Arlington. There is more exciting work to do.

Our community has a long history of solving complex problems. I challenge Arlingtonians to step forward, to embrace this opportunity, and to recommit to our progressive vision and to the collaborative civic engagement that has brought us such success. If we do, we will continue to thrive and meet any challenge that comes our way.

- [Read the motion.](#)
- [View a video of the press conference.](#)