

## *REEVALUATING THE ROLE OF ARLINGTON INDEPENDENT MEDIA (AIM) AND ARLINGTON TV (ATV)*

Arlington County has long supported public access and government access television, both through its cable channel, Arlington TV (ATV), and through operating subsidies to Arlington Independent Media (AIM), a non-profit partner organization. With increased competition in the media industry, the explosion of social media, and the wide variety of ways for consumers to receive information, however, the role of these entities is changing.

An independent study of the respective roles of ATV and AIM, carried out in 2018 at the request of the County Board, found that ATV and AIM serve fundamentally different purposes. The study's findings led the County Manager to recommend in his Proposed FY 2020 Budget the integration of video production and other related ATV activities into the Communications and Public Engagement team within the County Manager's Office (CMO), and a slight decrease in funding to AIM as a step toward transitioning the organization away from its reliance on governmental funding.

### **Identifying Alternative Funding Sources for AIM**

The Manager recognizes that AIM has long been dependent on financial support from the County as well as from Public, Education and Government (PEG) funds, which are paid by cable franchises for capital expenses in support of public access and government access programming. Due to a changing media landscape, funds from cable franchises are declining. Additionally, the new franchise agreement signed with Comcast in December 2016 eliminated rent support provided by Comcast to AIM.

As the County continues to support AIM in their transitional period, AIM must work to diversify their revenue streams and re-evaluate their position in the ever-changing media industry. To help with this, consistent with the findings of the independent study, the County strongly encourages AIM to develop a set of performance metrics that can help demonstrate its community impact and contributions, which could help it attract new strategic funding partners or like-minded community nonprofits with which it might share staffing or other resources.

The Manager's Proposed FY 2020 Budget includes funding for AIM of \$415,240, a 5-percent decrease in ongoing funding compared to FY 2019. It also proposes that ongoing net support be reduced an additional 5 percent each year over the next three years.

### **Integrating ATV into County Communications and Public Engagement**

The study concluded that ATV cannot rely on PEG funds in the long-term, either, and that the use of cable television for distributing information has diminished. This latter point was reinforced by the findings of the County's 2018 Community Satisfaction Survey. The study also observed the importance of ATV's role in advancing the County government's communication goals and objectives, and its unique positioning within existing structures

of oversight and accountability necessary to handle politically delicate or time-sensitive issues.

The Manager's proposal includes integrating the budget and operational oversight of ATV into the Office of Communication and Public Engagement within the County Manager's Office. This change will allow for better use of video products and content into the County's newsroom, virtual engagement strategies and other communication initiatives. The integrated team will continue to livestream meetings, including County Board meetings and work sessions, as well as Planning and Transportation commission meetings. They will also continue tracking metrics on video views through YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms to aid in strategic planning and decision making on County communication efforts; and produce and deliver virtual events and engagement sessions that offer participants an opportunity to engage with the County without leaving their homes.