

Arlington County Board Member Katie Cristol's January 2 Organizational Meeting Remarks: Emergency and Urgency

The Oxford Dictionary named "climate emergency" the word of the year in 2019, which seemed appropriate for a year marked by fires, flooding and hurricanes - not to mention emergencies of political natures, as well. Reflecting, at last year's end, on all these crises and the urgent advocacy they spurred, it strikes me that there is a certain appeal to a state of emergency. Regular life and its restraints are set aside, creating the opportunity for extraordinary action and rapid response. Lumbering bureaucracies mobilize to deliver swift relief; neighbors act selflessly, even heroically, to help one another.

It's tempting to wonder if we could operate this way all the time, at least on the most exigent issues in our community. But the reason the state of emergency works is because the competition for resources – time, money and attention – that characterize the democratic process are temporarily suspended. Decisions made to respond to a crisis are the opposite of the enduring, structural change we seek. For 2020, I've been thinking about how we maintain the urgency and clarity of focus that accompanies an emergency, while making changes that we can sustain for the long run.

This will certainly be needed when it comes to addressing our local state of emergency of last year: flooding that was historic by precedent but will not be historic in terms of storms to come. Stormwater infrastructure, specifically the kind of large-scale projects that can remediate last century's suburban development practices, will be one of the major discussions of our capital improvement planning exercise this year, but they will be neither easy nor inexpensive.

And urgency paired with sustained prioritization is equally needed when it comes to the cause of the flooding – climate change – and our response to it. I am proud of the big, audacious goals we adopted with the Community Energy Plan update, and in 2020, we begin to make the hard decisions necessary for implementation: How we will transition our fleet to electric vehicles in a financially sustainable way; how we can help create the market conditions for advances in renewable energy generation and storage while reducing energy consumption in all our municipal operations. On a regional scale, our Commonwealth ended 2019 on the precipice of a transformative passenger rail infrastructure investment; I'm looking forward, in my VRE and Northern Virginia Transportation Commission roles, to helping see it through, and to dramatically cutting the transportation emissions of tens of thousands of Northern Virginians every day.

When it comes to housing, since the 2015 adoption of the Affordable Housing Master Plan, we have been tackling our community's deep need for committed affordable rental housing with an energy and dedication befitting the emergency that it is – an urgency that we must maintain. Yet we have been painfully slow to address the evolution of many of our low-density neighborhoods into expensive enclaves out of reach for all but the wealthiest homebuyers. We have been too slow to confront the role that our own

zoning ordinance plays in keeping our housing stock homogenous and unaffordable in too many corners of the County. This may be my fourth year in a row of calling for legalization of the "missing middle" of moderate density ownership housing forms in Arlington, but with our study kick-off set for this spring, I'm encouraged that action will finally be upon us in 2020.

Lastly, I am excited that 2020 will finally be the year when we apply the same urgent clarity of focus we bring to short-term school construction projects to long-term, as in *really* long-term, facilities planning: for the next thirty years and beyond. As our Joint Facilities Advisory Commission helps us draft a long-range Public Facilities Plan, our planning staff have concluded an assessment of available County-owned land, identifying more than two dozen locations that could be appropriate for school sites. My enthusiasm about this 2020 planning work is personal (as the parent of the APS Class of 2037), but also because it is a genuinely exciting opportunity to recognize that Arlington does have room to grow, and that we are constrained less by our 26 square miles than we are by our own imaginations.

After a 2019 of emergencies, it's probably too much to hope that the 2020 word of the year will be climate *action*, or any other action. But it can be a word to characterize our year ahead here in Arlington County. From our schools to our housing to our infrastructure, this will be a year to step up, with urgency and with commitment.