



ARLINGTON COUNTY, VIRGINIA
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Statement for the County Board Worksession Session on the County Manager's
Proposed FY 2020 Budget

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon.

I want to stress that the Arts Commission believes that this is a critical pivot point for the arts in Arlington County, and, in my few minutes, I'd like to briefly review some of our recent efforts as well as express our strong concerns about the Manager's proposed budget cuts.

In recent years, as you know, we have created and disseminated a community-wide arts strategy, Enriching Lives. This past year, we built on one of the Enriching Lives goals, ("building essential and purposeful venues and other infrastructure that support high-quality arts activity...") to convene a Cultural Facilities Task Force, comprising community members and members of the Economic Development and Arts Commissions, and we recently issued "A Framework for Arlington's Cultural Spaces." This report identifies key community concerns; creates a Vision Statement for future space considerations; and defines guiding principles and priorities for next steps.

We have participated in the Crystal City BID's strategic planning efforts, which recognize arts and culture as a critical pillar to that area's future economic success and quality of life. Commission members played an active role in the 4MRV citizens' working group, and are now participating in a Technical Advisory Panel to move forward with plans and models for a 4MRV Arts and Industries District.

Last October, we embarked on an effort to address the important issue of cultural equity, beginning with our own Commissioner work and with plans to engage our County's many arts organizations, cultural groups, and artists.

We have become more active in establishing collaborative relationships with other commissions and county-based organizations—including affordable housing, parks and recreation, and planning.

We have revised Grant Program Guidelines in response to listening sessions with arts organizations. In addition to artistic quality and sound organizational management, these guidelines require supported groups and artists to demonstrate how they contribute to community well-being, including through partnerships. And our groups partner extensively and deeply with Arlington Public Schools, and with such non-arts organizations as Arlington Food Assistance Center; Street Sense Media;; Culpepper Gardens and other County Senior Living Facilities; Building Bridges; Girl Scouts of the National Capital Region; Kid Pan Alley; American

Library Association; Boys and Girls Clubs; Arm and Arm; Offender Aid and Restoration; Dances for PD (seniors with Parkinson's disease); the Deaf community, veterans' groups, and many others. Our ethnic and cultural heritage groups are often hubs for whole regional networks—such as the Bangladeshi community and the Hispanic culture and heritage community—and engage partners in schools, social service organizations, and international entities. They, too, mobilize volunteers and bring residents from neighboring jurisdictions into Arlington county for festivals and celebrations.

Time after time, in place after place, in study after study, we are reminded of the value – and connection -- of arts and culture to civic engagement, volunteerism, lifelong learning, health and well-being, and cross-cultural understanding—in addition to their contributions to the creative workforce, economic prosperity, and innovation.

Hence our collective dismay at the proposed nearly half-million-dollar, and in our view, disproportionately high, cuts in the FY2020 budget, which will affect staff, services, and programs. This proposal undermines the Arts Commission's recent efforts as well as the County's nominal recognition of the value of arts and culture to our community, evident in everything from the County's "visit Arlington" web site, which cites The Washington Post's description of Arlington as "...one of the hippest local jurisdictions at attracting adventurous arts and artists."

Or the Economic Development Commission's recent Framework for Economic Prosperity:2.0, which notes that "cultural venues ... and other places that offer comfort, convenience and enjoyment – increase property values and enhance the attractiveness of the community." In addition, "Arts and cultural programming create authentic local experiences and contribute to a sense of community, thereby aiding in the attraction and retention of businesses, employees and residents."

The proposed cuts will do the most damage to the work of many of our longstanding and community-minded arts and cultural organizations—as well as some of the new creative arts entrepreneurs who have been drawn to Arlington because of our County's many positive affordances, but who are struggling to gain a foothold. These are groups without big budgets or deep pockets, spanning different generations and levels of expertise, groups that engage our diverse populations, amateurs and professionals, artists and arts enthusiasts, who build sets in the scene shop, tap the technical expertise of—and longstanding relationships with--experienced county staff, and depend on the costume shop and the mobile stage for their programs, productions, and festivals. Simply put, the activities that occur on that stage, in the scene shop, and at 3700 Four Mile Run Drive, testify to community engagement at its finest and foster cross-cultural, cross-generational creativity, learning, and connection. These have been hallmarks of Arlington's special quality of life. Our neighboring jurisdictions understand this;

there is an explosion of cultural growth in the DMV, and we have already lost some of our most promising groups to neighboring locales.

The proposed cuts continue a downward spiral that has been the story of County investment in arts and culture for several years, including reductions in positions and programs (such as those in the literary arts); the closing of existing or prospective facilities; the decline in grant support and number of grants awarded; and the on-again, off-again (mostly off-again), yet highly successful, challenge grant program.

Further, the proposed \$70,000 cut to the already diminished arts grant program would eviscerate this program. Even in its current state, the program impacts a large number of participants. The projects supported in FY2018 attracted more than 50,000 participants. The audiences impacted by the FY2018 scene shop activities numbered more than 23,000.

In conclusion, we recognize the County's budget burden due to insufficient commercial rental revenue; we are ready and willing to discuss greater budgetary efficiencies, such as more productive collaborations with Arlington Public Schools. We are eager to consider productive and strategic alternatives. But we on the Commission must live up to our charter as an Advisory Body to the County Board, which recognizes "the importance of arts and cultural activities to the health and well-being of all citizens, that the arts play a major role in defining a community," and the County government has "responsibility for supporting the cultural life of a community and for encouraging its growth and development." I submit that the proposed budget reductions directly contradict this responsibility and would grievously damage our arts and culture ecosystem. We have every reason to be proud of our arts and culture practitioners and programs. Don't put the brakes on now.

Thank you very much.

Marsha Semmel

Chair, Arlington Commission for the Arts