

ENVIRONMENT AND ENERGY CONSERVATION COMMISSION
c/o Department of Environmental Services
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 705
Arlington, VA 22201

March 25, 2019

The Honorable Christian Dorsey, Chair
Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

RE: Comment on County Manager's FY20 Proposed Budget

Dear Chair Dorsey:

E2C2 appreciates the opportunity to comment on the County Manager's FY20 proposed budget.

Our comments focus on the importance of continuing to dedicate revenue from the Residential Utility Tax (RUT) to the County's essential work addressing climate change and ensuring resilient energy systems for the Arlington community. We also have concerns about the lack of funding for the planned food waste recycling program, reductions in street sweeping, and possible reductions in nature center staffing and hours.

1. Restoring the Residential Utility Tax as the funding source for the AIRE Program and Community Energy Plan implementation

The County Board and the Arlington community recognize the scientific consensus regarding the urgent need for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and have taken numerous steps in support of climate goals. The most important step has been the creation and ongoing support of AIRE (Arlington Initiative to Rethink Energy) as the expert team leading County-wide efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

AIRE was created in FY 2008 with dedicated funding from the newly instituted Residential Utility Tax. The County Board and the community supported the dedication of this modest tax on energy use to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and meet other energy-related challenges.

The AIRE Program has been successful by every measure. It has reduced the County's greenhouse gas emissions substantially, saved taxpayers far more in energy costs than it has cost in revenue, and gained positive national attention to Arlington as an energy and climate leader, winning state, national and international recognition.

The County Board consistently supported the dedication of RUT revenue to AIRE, recognizing the importance of stable funding for the Program. For example, its FY17 budget guidance to the County Manager provided that *“The County Board affirms that the funds generated by the Residential Utility Tax shall be used solely as a dedicated funding stream for the FreshAIRE Program. This was the original intent when the Residential Utility Tax was established and shall be continued.”* This statement was endorsed unanimously by the Board, including the three current Board members who served on the Board that year.

FY18 and FY19 were difficult budget years. In FY18, the RUT rate was increased, and the increased revenue was shared for the first time with Arlington Public Schools. In FY19, the RUT was increased to the maximum rate allowed under state law and the additional revenue was entirely diverted to Arlington Public Schools and the Affordable Housing Investment Fund (AHIF). At the same time, the non-personnel portion of the AIRE budget was cut by more than half.

The proposed FY20 budget goes even further. It abandons any link at all between the RUT and the AIRE Program. The RUT – an energy tax – would become a fungible component of the General Fund. This action is being proposed just as we’re asking much more of the AIRE Program. The revised 2019 Community Energy Plan (CEP), due for public discussion and Board adoption in the near future, will add major new work around the community-wide transition to clean energy, and set more ambitious energy efficiency goals.

One rationale advanced to justify reducing AIRE funding and eliminating its dedicated funding has been that a “decentralized” approach to climate action will be more effective. This rationale presents a false dichotomy that should be rejected by the Board. ***Effective energy and climate action requires simultaneous centralized and decentralized efforts.*** There remains a large and essential role for a leadership team that tracks data and shares best practices across all government agencies and sectors of the community, and that maintains deep expertise in the specialties necessary for effective climate action. The need for a well-funded AIRE Program has grown along with the need for far-reaching greenhouse gas reductions.

Our request is two-fold:

- **Restore the RUT as a dedicated funding source for the AIRE Program and CEP implementation.**
- **Work with staff to develop bold new plans to move the County toward a clean energy future.**

This approach would increase AIRE’s budget substantially, assuming that the RUT rate and the revenue sharing agreement with APS remain the same. The additional funding for AIRE could be used for a wide variety of important projects, such as developing and implementing large renewable energy contracts for County Government operations; developing plans and pilot programs for electrifying the County’s vehicle fleets; encouraging deep energy retrofits in the commercial, residential and governmental sectors; and supporting nonprofits that can deliver expert advice and communications services to help the Arlington community make the transition to clean and efficient energy.

This is a significant request. The benefits of investing in Arlington's long-term economic, physical, and environmental health in this way will be well worth the cost.

2. Moving forward with residential food waste recycling; elimination of environmental planner position

We were disappointed that plans to launch a residential food waste recycling program this year are not included in the budget. This program is an essential step in Arlington's commitment to reach zero waste by 2038. DES is already collecting at farmer's markets. We encourage consideration of off-cycle funding of a program launch, or a larger pilot program, later this year. If additional planning time is needed to launch this program, we suggest filling or freezing the Environmental Planner I position proposed for elimination in the budget.

3. Optimizing street sweeping operations and elimination of a street sweeper position

DES reports that not enough debris is being collected to justify the current schedule of 7 street sweeping passes per year in residential neighborhoods and 8 passes per year for bike lanes. DES proposes reducing service to 3 passes per year in residential neighborhoods and 5 passes per year for bike lanes, allowing for the elimination of one staff position and one street sweeper truck.

In connection with this proposed reduction in service, we would like to ensure that the following measures are considered:

- Identify and provide more passes on streets and bike lanes where sweeping is cost effective rather than sweeping all streets and bike lanes equally.
- Review best practices for encouraging greater cooperation from residents in moving their cars to allow for effective street sweeping. Extra effort to achieve compliance could be targeted to areas where the environmental benefit and cost effectiveness of sweeping is greatest.
- Until further data is available for review, consider freezing rather than eliminating the staff position.

4. Possible cuts to nature center staffing and hours

We urge the Board to reject any reductions in nature center staffing or hours. Arlington residents identified nature centers and nature center programs as the highest priority programs in the 2016 community needs and priorities survey conducted as part of the Public Spaces Master Plan update. Reduced staffing would have a detrimental effect on programming that would be inconsistent with the priorities identified by the County's research. In addition to their educational and recreational roles, nature center staff support thousands of hours of volunteer work in the parks; without this staff the volunteerism would drop, requiring even more staff hours to accomplish all of the tasks necessary to maintaining the County's park system.

Conclusion

E2C2 urges the County Board to retain the RUT as a dedicated funding source for AIRE, and to approve the budget increase that would result from directing RUT revenue to the AIRE Program. We encourage the County to provide funding for the food waste recycling program as soon as possible, and to look closely for ways to optimize street sweeping operations. We also oppose any reduction in nature center staffing and hours.

We appreciate your consideration of the concerns we have raised.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K. Michael Hanna". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mike Hanna, Chair
Environment and Energy Conservation Commission