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Ron Carlee  
Old Dominion University, rcarlee@odu.edu

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# The Arlington Way: Public Engagement as a Community Expectation

BY RON CARLEE

*Editor's Note: In 1980, Ron Carlee began working in Arlington County, Virginia, as a budget/management analyst. He served in a variety of capacities before being appointed Arlington County Manager in 2001, a position he held until 2009. This essay is based on his years of observing the singular role that public engagement has played in county affairs.*

Civic engagement had long been deeply embedded in the DNA of Arlington County, Virginia, by the time I began working there in 1980. This commitment to engagement came to be known as the “Arlington Way.”

What is the Arlington Way? In its most positive framing, the Arlington Way means engaging with the public on issues of importance or concern (not always the same) in an effort to reach community consensus or, in the lack of consensus, a shared understanding and an opportunity for everyone to be heard. In its negative framing, the Arlington Way was derided as a way to talk everything to death so that ideas are killed or that people are so worn-down by the end that they do not care what happens as long as it is just over. It was quipped that Arlington’s tagline should be, “Process. It’s our most important product.”

During a site plan discussion at an Arlington County Board meeting, someone quipped that a new street within the complex be named the Arlington Way. Without thinking, I too-quickly responded that the street was much too short for such a name. The reality is that the laborious process of civic engagement is what converted Arlington from a dying inner suburb in the 1960s to the thriving model of sustainable urbanism that it is today. Most of the examples in this essay draw from my almost 30 years of living the Arlington Way and seeing engagement literally every day.

## Transforming a Dying Suburb into Thriving Urban Villages

The most likely origin of the term the Arlington Way is from the development process dating back to the 1960s. Arlington had been largely rural before World War II, but with the expansion of the federal government and the construction of the Pentagon in Arlington, the community boomed in suburban growth, becoming the inner ring residential community for the nation's federal workforce. By the 1960s, however, highways, suburban shopping malls, and extensive greenfield development west and south of Arlington took their toll. Arlington's limited retail base was eroded, and the garden apartments built during the war years and early post-war years were showing their age. One of the new highways that facilitated sprawl was I-66, which cut a swath east and west through Arlington and was the subject of an extended lawsuit by residents. The I-66 corridor was to be the location of the new Washington D.C. regional light rail system. The I-66 corridor would make the light rail essentially a commuter train to get people in and out of Washington and Arlington.

The people of Arlington became engaged and united with visionary county leaders to oppose the commuter rail strategy and insisted on an underground subway, as was being designed for Washington, D.C. Even more dramatic was the extensive public process to develop a General Land Use Plan that fundamentally changed the low density, suburban nature of the county's main corridor, Wilson Boulevard – what is now known as the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor. The new GLUP (an acronym known by more Arlingtonians than one would imagine), envisioned dense, high-rise, mixed-use development at the “bullseye” or each subway station, tapering to less dense development beyond a quarter-mile circle. Hundreds of members of the public engaged for months to create the plan. These intensely developed areas would later be referred to as “urban villages,” a term coined by former County Board Member Christopher Zimmerman. From this early intense engagement developed an expectation on the part of the public for high levels of engagement on all subsequent land use and development proposals.

The County Board approved dozens of plans and made numerous amendments to the General Land Use Plan during the early 2000s. Each action involved extensive community meetings, review by a sub-committee of the Arlington County Planning Commission, reviews by various other commissions (such as housing, transportation, parks and recreation, public art, etc.), and a full hearing before the Planning Commission before consideration by the County Board. At the County Board meeting there were presentations by staff, by the

developer, by the Planning Commission, by other citizen commissions, and by the public at large. Reviews before the board could take hours and if the project was controversial, it was not unusual for the County Board to defer action to enable further engagement efforts to achieve consensus. It was an expensive process for developers and a time-consuming process for all involved, especially the citizen volunteers who sit on the various commissions, and time consuming for county staff who attend all of the meetings. It is through this process, however, that Arlington was transformed into mixed-use, high-density, fiscally successful corridors of urban villages that are complemented by the preservation of single-family neighborhoods and many of the historic garden apartments.

### **Affordable Housing: Collaboration Snatches Victory Out of the Jaws of Government Overreach**

Affordable housing has long been a number one priority of the County Board and the community. Arlington in the early 2000s was a victim of its economic success, with rising housing prices and loss of market-rate affordable rental units. Arlington was at risk of becoming exclusively upper middleclass with little ethnic or economic diversity. To expand opportunities, the county had an aggressive housing program which sought to achieve voluntary inclusionary zoning through the development process. Developers were pressured to provide on-site, committed affordable housing in their residential projects and commercial developers were pressured to provide cash contributions into an affordable housing fund.

The Arlington County Planning Commission and the Housing Commission consisted of strong citizen advocates for the policy. The problem was that Arlington had no authority to require the affordable housing actions; it could only negotiate voluntary actions by developers. As the economy grew, the pressure on developers got stronger. In 2004, developers said, “enough.” Developers sued the county claiming that the housing policies were not voluntary, and that the county did not have legislative authority to require compliance with the polices. The court agreed, ruling that Arlington’s inclusionary policies were “invalid and illegal, as they are beyond the scope of the county’s lawful authority.”

As result of the court victory, the affordable housing program was effectively dead, and the County Board was not likely to approve development projects without affordable housing. We embarked on months of intense negotiation between developers and the housing advocates. They were far apart initially but began to realize that the current situation was lose-lose and could

only be changed by a win-win compromise. Eventually a compromise was reached to which all parties agreed, joined hands, and presented a unified front to the Virginia General Assembly. The legislature approved authorization for a mandatory affordable housing program in March 2006. Without the collaborative process involving activists and developers, the legislation would have never had a chance.

### **Donaldson Run Stream Restoration – Street-Level Bureaucrats Who Aren't**

While affordable housing was the most pressing public issue in Arlington during the first decade of the twenty first century, environmental stewardship came in a close second. In 2006, Arlington began construction of its first major, urban stream restoration. Donaldson Run ran through a park and a relatively high-income neighborhood. The restoration required extensive work to reclaim the flood plain and transform an urban drainage ditch back into a sustainable stream. The work involved the removal of numerous trees and replanting native and appropriate vegetation. The project managers, Jason Papacosma and Aileen Winquist, reached out to the neighborhood and involved residents from day one on all aspects of the project.

Unrelated to the stream project, I attended the Donaldson Neighborhood Association meeting for a general update on county government. After a short presentation, the floor was open and one of the first questions came from a resident who had not been involved in the restoration project. He ripped into me about how incompetent the county was and how the county was destroying the park, etc. As I began to answer the question, another resident arose, interrupted me and said, "Let me answer the question." This resident explained how the community had been involved, why it was necessary to remove and then replace the trees, and then offered to take his neighbor on a tour of the project and explain it in detail. Because of the work of line professional staff to sincerely and honestly engage with the neighborhood throughout the project, the restoration was not just something that the county was doing to the neighborhood, it was a community project that everyone owned – owned enough to stand up and appropriately confront criticism from a neighbor who had not been involved.

After I left Arlington in 2009, the engagement work continued at the line level as staff began work on another phase of Donaldson Run. A set of FAQs was produced for the neighborhood in March 2010, explaining the planning process and future impacts. The FAQ flyer included a website for information and listed telephone and email contact information for the county's project manager and a member of the civic association.

Engagement is not just something that elected and senior officials do. It is most effective when line-level public administrators engage on routine work as a normal part of their jobs.

### **Neighborhood Conservation Program: Participatory Budgeting for Neighborhood Improvements**

It is one thing for local government officials to partner with members of the public, it is quite another to turn decision-making over to the public. It requires self-confidence on the part of local officials and a high trust level with the public. Empowerment is government “by” the people. An area receiving increasing attention in the engagement literature is participatory budgeting, which means different things to different people. It may involve community forums or townhalls that go beyond the one-way communication of public hearings but are more illustrative of informing or consulting with the public. For example, my successor in Arlington, Barbara Donnellan, held a budget forum with the large meeting room arranged in round tables. A department director was assigned to each table. Members of the public could rotate from table to table and get more in-depth information about specific budget areas from department directors and share their perspectives. This engagement is very different from a budget hearing during which people get a few minutes to speak and are done.

An example of empowerment is the Arlington Neighborhood Conservation (NC) Program, which captures the intent of participatory budgeting. Members of the public create the rules for consideration of neighborhood projects, evaluate proposals, and make “recommendations” that are de facto decisions. The program preceded my term as county manager by over three decades; nonetheless, I was dubious at first, as were department directors. As manager, I learned that the list of neighborhood capital projects was far longer than what the county could afford. Any recommendations I made and any decisions the County Board made would result in winners and losers – and, the losers would blame us. The NC program provided cover for unpopular decisions: let volunteer members of the community make and own the decisions.

Arlington’s Neighborhood Conservation program now has a 50-year history. The NC program empowers residents to create plans for their own neighborhoods, set priorities for neighborhood improvements based on criteria that the citizens establish, and to receive funding from the county based on recommendations to the governing body from a peer citizen committee called the Neighborhood Conservation Advisory Committee (NCAC). The NCAC is a 48-member, volunteer citizen committee that typically meets monthly.

The origins of the NC program date to 1963, when the citizen-based Planning Commission appointed a committee to study deterioration in older areas of the community. In 1958, the voters had rejected a referendum to create an urban renewal authority and, in 1961, the County Board rejected the idea again. The committee concluded that a successful conservation program would have to be initiated by “representative citizens in the neighborhood involved and supported by some commitment on their part.” The recommendations of the committee were studied by the Planning Commission and neighborhood groups for a year – thus, another illustration of the “Arlington Way.” The County Board adopted the program in 1964, with a budget of \$150,000, that increased to \$250,000 the following year.

The Donaldson Run stream restoration project, which I referred to in an earlier section of this article, had its origins in the NC program, beginning with the civic association initiating a request for a study in 2001.

Public-led processes similar to but less intensive than the Neighborhood Conservation Program were used to prioritize projects for Neighborhood Traffic Calming (now converted to Neighborhood Complete Streets), small parks projects (later park enhancement grants, but suspended in 2016 due to lack of funding), and public art grants. Even in the more routine budget engagement, I remember a year that the Commission on Aging made its top priority an increase in child immunization. Another year, the environmental commission opposed a budget reduction in the tree program but proposed an alternative that had sounder logic than what staff and I had proposed.

### **Concluding Thoughts, Lessons Learned**

Civic engagement cannot hope to successfully achieve lasting and positive change on the hard issues of society if it is not practiced successfully on the small issues. Can we develop a consciousness about engagement such that we process all local decisions through an engagement lens? Can we develop efficient engagement strategies that make public dialogue and participation a common way of working? Can we use the relationships built over time on the small issues to develop a level of community trust that enables meaningful discussions about our greatest challenges?

Idealism and optimism combined with forty years of experience lead me to answer “yes” on the above question.

This essay has stressed the importance of designing engagement with a clear purpose and being honest and transparent about that purpose. This essay has also attempted to show the wide range of local issues where engagement can

add value to better understanding and better decisions to routine business of local government. It is only through engagement that there is any hope of dealing with large societal issues such as race and equity.

The work of engagement is not easy, and the role of the city manager is especially complex, which leads to the following final experience.

### **City Managers Walk a Tight Rope**

Former Dallas City Manager Mary Suhm is someone whom I admire for multiple reasons, and I will always especially value the good-natured way in which she bit my head off when asking about engagement on post-recession budget development. Up to the point that Mary made her comment about city council's not wanting managers to engage with the public, I had only been manager in Arlington where the expectation was that all recommendations be vetted first with the public, but even there the elected officials were ultra-sensitive to the manager getting ahead of the elected officials.

A citizen advocate in an Ohio community once told me about working with the city's elected and appointed officials to develop a participatory budget scenario to get meaningful input. After months of working diligently to develop the engagement, at the eleventh hour, the mayor and council reneged. There were significant priorities that the mayor and council wanted to advance; a coalition of council members had emerged behind the scenes to support a tax increase that would fund the initiatives. The officials didn't want public input because they had made their decisions and did not want to be second-guessed or distracted. Rather than react negatively or cynically to this story, I admired the elected officials for their honesty. Elected officials are elected to exercise their judgment in a representative democracy. They can be well-served by making their decision-making more democratically but have the prerogative and sometimes a leadership obligation to make difficult decisions. In any event, city officials should not pretend to seek advice when minds are already made. City managers must have finely tuned radar to understand these dynamics.

Given divided councils and ambiguous and conflicting guidance from city councils, city managers can find themselves in a difficult spot. City managers, however, do not have to be in the engagement spotlight. Rather than being on-point for engagement, the city manager can create an internal culture of engagement and empower staff at all levels to engage meaningfully with the public, from the person fixing the pothole or repairing the water leak to the senior executive who can engage as subject matter experts sincerely

seeking public involvement. Professionals can be empowered to fully engage with the public on their projects. Young, fresh voices can be empowered to try new forms of engagement. Third party community organizations and civic initiatives can lead the engagement with the city manager and city council stepping back and letting the community express itself.

In my experience as a city manager, the most inspiring engagement has not been that which I led, but was that which I experienced as an observer, watching people of good will respect each other and sincerely work toward understanding if not agreement. Each encounter leaves me with a deeper understanding and commitment to the ideal of government of, for, and by the people.

*Ron Carlee, a Richard S. Childs Fellow, is Visiting Assistant Professor of Public Service and Director of the Center for Regional Excellence at Old Dominion University. He is a former City Manager of Charlotte, North Carolina and a former Chief Operating Officer of the International City/County Management Association. He served as Arlington County Manager from 2001 until 2009.*