

CONNECTIONS

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Governing *With* the People

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Research Exchange Week, 2019**

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**When Communities Embrace
Shared Responsibility**

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Exploring the
Relationship between
**THE PUBLIC
AND GOVERNMENT**

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City Managers: Creating a Collaborative Culture of Engagement

By Ron Carlee

A frequent discussion among city managers is to what extent they, as managers, should lead civic engagement. Given divided councils and ambiguous and conflicting guidance from them, city managers can find themselves in a difficult spot. However, they do not have to be in the engagement spotlight. They can help create an internal culture of engagement and empower staff at all levels—from the person fixing the pothole or repairing the water leak to the senior executives engaging as subject matter experts sincerely seeking public involvement—to engage meaningfully with the public. Young, fresh voices can be empowered to try new forms of



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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 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 left me with a deeper understanding and commitment to the ideal of government of, for, and by the people.

My belief in civic engagement is based on 30 years of observing it in Arlington County, Virginia, where it had been deeply embedded in the DNA long before I began working there in 1980. Engagement came to be known as “the Arlington Way.”

In its most positive framing, the Arlington Way means engaging with the public on issues in an effort to reach community consensus or, in the absence of consensus, a shared understanding and an opportunity for everyone to be heard. In its negative framing, the Arlington Way means talking issues to death so that people are so worn down by the end that they do not care what happens just as long as it is over. The laborious process of the Arlington Way of

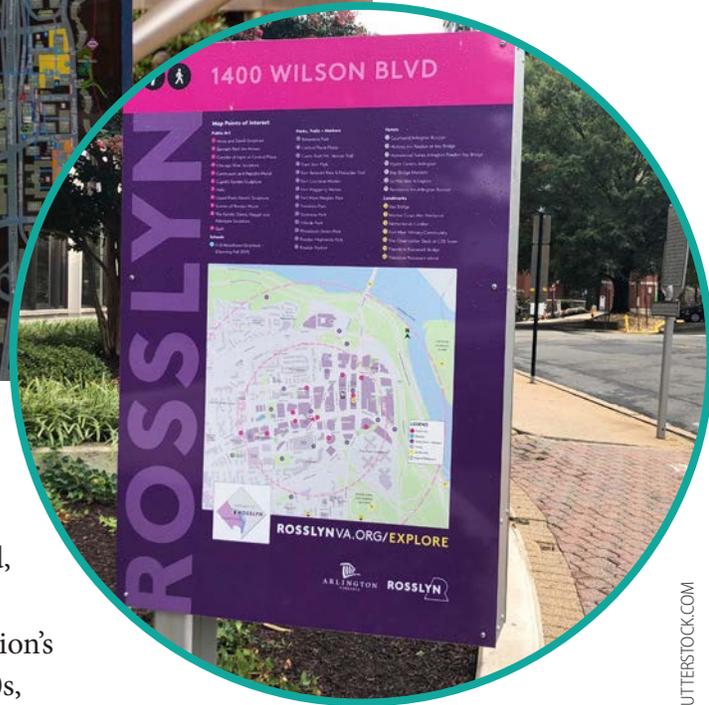
civic engagement is what converted Arlington from a dying inner suburb in the 1960s to the thriving model of sustainable urbanism it is today—chosen in 2018 by Amazon as the location for the company’s second headquarters.

TRANSFORMING A DYING SUBURB INTO THRIVING URBAN VILLAGES

The most likely origin of the term “the Arlington Way” is from the development process dating to the 1960s. Arlington had been largely rural before World War II, but with the expansion of the federal



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government and the construction of the Pentagon there, the community boomed, 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 had taken their toll.

The people of Arlington became engaged and united with visionary county leaders to decide how a new light rail system would be built in the Washington region, what is known today as Metro. Arlingtonians opposed a commuter rail strategy in their community and insisted on a subway, as was being designed for Washington, DC. Through an extensive public process, they also developed a new land-use plan that fundamentally changed the low-density, suburban nature of the county's main corridor, Wilson Boulevard—now known as the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor. From this

early, intense engagement evolved an expectation on the part of the public for high levels of engagement on all subsequent land-use and development proposals. The result is the transformed Arlington of today: mixed-use, high-density, fiscally successful corridors of pedestrian- and bike-friendly urban villages complemented by the preservation of single-family neighborhoods and many of the historic garden apartments.

Three examples of engagement, related to affordable housing, environmental restoration, and neighborhood conservation, are especially memorable. Each initiative was successful because of extensive civic involvement and ownership.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING: COLLABORATION SNATCHES VICTORY OUT OF THE JAWS OF GOVERNMENT OVERREACH

Affordable housing was the number one priority of the county board and the community in the early 2000s. Economic success resulted in the loss of market-rate, affordable rental units. Arlington was at risk of becoming exclusively upper middle class with little ethnic or economic diversity. To expand housing opportunities, the county had an aggressive housing program that sought to achieve voluntary inclusionary zoning through the development process. Developers were pressured to provide onsite, committed affordable housing in their residential projects, and commercial developers were pressured to provide cash contributions into an affordable housing fund.

The problem was that Arlington had no authority to require affordable housing; it could only negotiate voluntary actions by developers. In 2004, developers said, “enough.” They sued the county, claiming that the housing policies were not voluntary. 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 a 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 the developers and the housing advocates. They were far apart initially but began to realize that the current situation was lose-lose and could be changed only by a win-win compromise. Eventually, all parties agreed to a compromise, joined hands, and presented a unified front to the conservative 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 21st 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



Because of the work of 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.

stream. The work involved removing numerous trees and replanting native and appropriate vegetation. The project managers, Jason Papacosma and Aileen Winqvist, reached out to the neighborhood and involved residents from day one on all aspects of the project.

Unrelated to the stream project, I attended a 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 proj-

ect. He ripped into me about how incompetent the county was and how the county was destroying the park. 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 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 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.

NEIGHBORHOOD CONSERVATION PROGRAM: PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING FOR NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENTS

An area receiving increasing recent attention in the engagement literature is participatory budgeting. An example of budget empowerment is the Arlington Neighborhood Conservation (NC) program. The program preceded my term as county manager by over three decades. It empowers

residents to create plans for their own neighborhoods, set priorities for neighborhood improvements based on criteria they establish, and 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 Donaldson Run stream restoration project, referenced earlier, 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 traffic calming, park improvements, and public art. The various commissions, civic associations, and individuals were also highly active in the annual budget process.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS, LESSONS LEARNED

The work of engagement is not easy, and the role of the city manager is especially complex. City managers walk a tightrope. Some city councils do not want their managers to engage with the public. Even in Arlington, elected officials were sensitive about the manager getting ahead of the

elected officials. Returning to the point where this essay started, the manager does not have to lead the engagement but can play the critical role in creating a culture of engagement.

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 and hearing all voices? 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 40 years of experience lead me to answer “yes.” ■

This essay is revised and adapted from “The Arlington Way: Public Engagement as a Community Expectation,” National Civic Review 108, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 25-32.

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