

2013 New Year's Day Remarks
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Happy New Year!

I have been on the Board for 9 months now and, so far, this position has been all I thought it would beand more. I'm enjoying the work very much.

Congratulations to Walter Tejada on his second County Board Chairmanship. As noted, this is the first time that Walter is the Chair of this Board when a Latina, my good friend Dr. Emma Violand-Sanchez, is chairing the School Board. This is an important milestone for our community.

Congratulations also to Jay Fiset, our new, but very experienced, Vice Chair. Since I joined the Board, Jay has been particularly helpful in showing me the ropes, which I much appreciate. I know we are all in good hands with Jay and Walter at the helm.

I want to add my thanks to Mary Hynes for her leadership as Chair in 2012. I've seen that, just like on the School Board, all Board members work hard, but the Chair does 2-3 times more than the rest of us. That's a lot of good hard work. Thank you, Mary.

And...I'd also like to thank everyone who helps to make this County what it is. Arlington is not perfect, but we've got a lot going for us:

We've got a strong County Board. I appreciate the time *all* my colleagues devote to this work and the depth of experience they bring.

We've got an outstanding Manager and staff: thank you Ms. Donnellan. You and your team are on the front lines every day of the year. Our employees are the people that made those great satisfaction survey results what they were in April. As a board member, I cannot thank our County leadership and staff enough.

We are blessed with an incredibly diverse, talented and committed group of citizens who devote literally thousands of hours to making Arlington work.

Finally, we are blessed with a great business community. This is a group I'm just getting to know. I've found the business community, as diverse as it is, to be, by and large, committed to making Arlington the best it can be.

We have, indeed, many blessings to count this first day of 2013.

Looking ahead for this year, I want to make sure our County board and government function as well as we possibly can. That certainly will mean focusing on important issues such as those our new Chairman will be concentrating on. I agree that his focus issues go together and are important to creating the community we want. Thank you, Walter, for helping us focus on these important priorities.

In 2012, I also agreed with the focus on community engagement that Mrs. Hynes gave during her term as Chair. Important work was done by the PLACE initiative. The final conclusion of the report on PLACE gets it right:

“The challenge for local government is to ensure the right people are having the right conversations at the right time.”

This is, indeed, a crucial part of the work we do as a Board. Ways for us to do this work covered in the report include that

- good ideas can come from anyone, so we assure access to the resources and educational opportunities needed for everyone to participate.
- And that we should not shy away from conflict

All of which brings me to the one issue I guess I am becoming known for: the streetcar project on Columbia Pike.

As you all know, over the past months I've become convinced that a streetcar will not improve transit along the Pike, but will make the situation worse.

A streetcar will not connect seamlessly to other jurisdictions' systems, but will, I believe, impede traffic along one of the most heavily used roads in Virginia.

And it will do this at an exorbitant cost: probably around \$200M more than an effective and attractive alternative that exists, and which our neighboring jurisdictions are pursuing: a Bus Rapid Transit system.

Right now the plan is to lay tracks along the Pike and put up above ground wires where we just, at great expense, put the wires underground. This construction will be disruptive and make it difficult for customers to get to local businesses, some of which are struggling already. I fear many of these small and diverse businesses will be forced to close and never come back.

Today we are talking about priorities. And I believe we all share pretty much the same priorities. But our shared priorities are exactly why I'm so concerned about the cost of the streetcar. Supporting our priorities so we can build and sustain the community we want.... is expensive. There is only so much money to go around in any one community, no matter what tax, fee, bond or contribution that money comes from. Money that businesses or taxpayers must pay for a streetcar is money that is not there for affordable housing, education, infrastructure, the arts.....everything else we want to do.

Now these are my views. They are important to me. But, as a board member, I believe the most important issue for us all should be what our *community* thinks. For this most important and expensive project: the Columbia Pike Streetcar, we've not yet done what our PLACE initiative says we should do.

I know we had meetings back in '04 and '06 that started us on this track. But, while I pay pretty close attention to County issues, I have no memory of those meetings even happening. I'm sure I had a lot going on at the time. We're all busy people. It's hard for busy people to focus on a complex issue that is a decade off at best.

There have been meetings since '06, but the focus of those meetings has been more on how we're going to build a streetcar, not if we should build it

and what the alternatives are. Regarding the streetcar, we've simply not had the kind of community engagement that ensures "the right people are having the right conversations at the right time."

We need to have that right conversation about the costs and alternatives to the streetcar now.

So, looking forward to 2013, I will be working to encourage us all to

1. "have the right conversation" about the streetcar. That means we all need good information: a real, and impartial, cost-benefit analysis. As the PLACE Framework puts it, we need to identify: "the values, facts and policies that underpin" the choice to build a streetcar rather than build something else. Despite statements to the contrary, I believe it's pretty clear we've not done this yet.
2. We need to have the conversation about the streetcar "at the right time": which is now, this year. The conversations of 7-9 years ago got us started on designing a good transit system, but that was then. Much has changed since, including our economic outlook and what transit systems our neighbors are planning.

In 2004, the time was right to have the conversation to begin planning a transit system. Now the time is right for an informed conversation about what vehicle to use on that system and what it will cost. The routes are being worked out, the stops planned. It is the perfect time to look at what kind of vehicle to use. The transit system we're planning can work without tracks and wires. Indeed, in Crystal City with the route and stops planned, we're planning to start the system with Bus Rapid Transit vehicles.

3. And, finally, we need to do all this because the Arlington Way demands it. Because, to quote again from our PLACE report: "as leaders and participants in civic life, we know open collaborative processes are more likely to bring all the voices that matter into important community discussions that result in better decisions for all."

I readily admit I could be wrong in my conclusions about the streetcar. But I know I'm right about the need to have a robust and informed conversation about the streetcar and possible alternatives, *before* we commit our community to a multi-year project costing around \$300M to start with, and then costing more each year in operating subsidies that will go on for far longer than any of us will be at this table.

To quote one last time from the PLACE Initiative report "we do not shy away from conflict, but respectfully discuss our differences." I look forward to discussing our differences, supporting our Chair and Vice Chair in their initiatives this year, and working with everyone on the many issues that will come before us.