

May 3, 2024

Arlington County Board Democratic Primary Candidate Election

Question 3: County Advisory Commissions

The County Board appoints resident volunteer members to dozens of County advisory boards and commissions, including commissions related to planning, joint facilities planning, housing, transportation, natural resources, urban forestry and more. Some critics believe the commissions are mere rubber stamps for the County Board while others believe that the Board too often ignores their input. Most residents agree the commissions do not reflect the full diversity of our populace.

What do you see as the value of these commissions? Would you support a reform to have one commission per Comp Plan Element only?

How would you leverage these bodies to help shape advance your policy goals if elected?

What commissioner characteristics or traits would you look for in considering appointments?

Are there administrative improvements you could propose for the commissions (e.g., term limits, service on only one commission at a time, no service on Business Improvement Districts or on boards of non-profits that accept funds from the county) at same time as commissions, new methods to engage different socioeconomic groups?)

James De Vita



I support Advisory Boards. I would want to have as many different viewpoints as possible represented.

Julia Farnam



The commissions should be used to complete the leg work for the County Board by representing the interests of the community and ensuring any proposals or permits follow established policies and procedures.

Because the commissions consist of community members, unlike many county employees who do not live in Arlington, my expectation is that commissions offer a perspective that puts the community interests first.

I'd first and foremost look for individuals who have experience in the area covered by the commission. For example, we would want someone on the Board of Building Code Appeals who has some familiarity with building codes. I'd also like to appoint individuals who have a variety of perspectives on the topic area of the board/commission.

The county needs a robust conflict of interest policy for all board members, county employees, elected officials, and commissions. This helps to preserve integrity and trust in the county, its operations, and its governance. I'd very much like to see the county develop an ethics policy, have the county attorneys weigh in on ethical issues (e.g., County Board members profiting from policy decisions they make or sitting on the board of organizations that profits from policy decisions made by the County Board) and I'd like to have clear guidelines on when elected and appointed officials must recuse themselves from certain votes.

Tenley Peterson



As a former Chair of the Fiscal Affairs Advisory Commission and current Planning Commissioner, I strongly believe that the County's commissions are a valuable element of the County's public policy-making process. Each Commission provides the County Board with an essential community perspective on a broad range of issues. Given the incredible wealth of personal and professional talent in Arlington, the Commissions have successfully leveraged this expertise to benefit policy-making in the County. As a citizen volunteer, I learned a tremendous amount about the County from my fellow Commissioners. While serving as Chair of the Fiscal

Affairs Advisory Commission, I made a conscious effort to recruit diverse Commission members. Under my leadership we actively sought diversity of thought, racial background, political perspective, in such a way that represented the diversity of our community.

Natalie Roy



I have served on two commissions and found the experiences valuable but also limiting.

At times it was not clear if senior staff or County Board members were listening to the commissions and to their recommendations. Some commissions have more gravitas than others and some appear to be struggling in terms of membership.

That all said, I believe the Commission system is valuable to County staff, the County Board and the public. Great ideas and discussion are generated regularly by very engaged Arlingtonians at commission meetings. There is no question I would utilize the Commission system as a County Board

member, to get valuable input on a wide range of important issues.

Here are a few recommendations I would explore to improve the Arlington Commission system:

- Create an application process that is better publicized and accessible to residents all over the County, for every Commission;
- Advertise applications more extensively for every Commission across the County via a number of ways (community newsletters, local newspapers, County website, online news and sites, and mailings, etc.);
- Ensure that each Commission brings on members from a wide range of neighborhoods;
- Encourage people with differing views to apply to be Commission members, to foster healthy debate and generate good ideas;
- Explore different times and venues for meetings (i.e. not always have meetings at 2100 Clarendon Boulevard, but in satellite locations such as community centers, etc.);
- Explore term limits;
- Limit Commission membership to one commission per resident at a time to help promote maximum participation; and
- Publicize the work of the Commissions. These are not covert committees. Commissions are public advisory bodies and people are volunteering considerable time and energy when they take on the responsibility of being a Commission member. The County should be promoting the work of these advisory commissions to residents throughout the County.

J.D. Spain



Across Arlington's 50 Advisory Groups and Commissions, community volunteers advise the County and offer high-value input on various efforts.

From the Commission on the Status of Women to the Disability Advisory Commission, these groups provide essential perspectives that supplement the County Board and staff. Good government must work collaboratively, and such groups are a strong example of collaboration. That said, I agree with the need to continue diversifying the groups to make them more representative of Arlington residents.

I am open to discussing a review of the commissions and adjusting as needed, but I am not currently inclined to limit them to be only aligned with Comp Plan elements.

As your next county board member, I will look to these bodies as partners from whom I can receive input and feedback and collaborate to advance the County's policy goals. When appointing commissioners, I would look for professional and lived experience and skill in the subject matter, enthusiasm to support improving Arlington, and an innovative, inclusive mindset. Regarding administrative improvements for the commissions, I trust that they best handle such reforms. However, I support term limits, inclusive processes, robust community engagement, and mitigating conflicts of interest to uphold the County's integrity.