



August 13, 2024

POTENTIAL CHANGES IN ARLINGTON COUNTY'S FORM OF GOVERNMENT

YOU ARE INVITED:

Arlington County Civic Federation (ACCF) meeting on Arlington's form of government

Date: Tuesday, October 15, 2024, Noon-5 p.m. and 7-9 p.m.

- a. **Locations:** Noon to 5 p.m. meeting will be in Conference Room 311, Ellen M Bozman Government Center, 2100 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington.
- b. 7-9 p.m. meeting will be in the County Board Room, Suite 307, Ellen M Bozman Government Center, 2100 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington.
- c. ACCF also invites your responses to the issues raised here by email to formofgov.chair@civfed.org at any time up to October 20.
- d. Check back closer to the event on <https://www.civfed.org/about-us/committees/legislation/formofgov/>, the CivFed Form of Government website for information on how to view the meeting both in real time and recorded.

Please attend! Feel free to forward this invitation to other concerned Arlington County citizens

2. **CONTEXT:** Arlington County has requested that ACCF sponsor a discussion on Arlington's 1930 form of government (hereafter, FoG) and on suggested changes for the 'Arlington 2050' document. This meeting will elicit citizens' opinions on possible changes, both for enriching the FoG discussion in the Arlington 2050 document and for consideration of how to go forward from the present (<https://www.gazetteleader.com/arlington/news/not-everyone-sold-on-arlington-governments-governance-proposal-9104692>). This document announces that meeting.

We need your input to help drive change or determine if no change is required. Below you will find more detail, here is a summary of topics to be discussed:

- a. **Use of Ranked Choice Voting for County and School Boards**
- b. **Size, Term Length, and Pay of County and School Board Members**
- c. **Use of Primaries**
- d. **Potential to change Arlington County to a City**
- e. **Proportional Representation**
- f. **District versus At Large representation**
- g. **Advisory Neighborhood Commissions**



3. HOW WE GOT HERE:

Arlington's FoG – five Board members elected at large and nominated in partisan primaries, day to day administration by a County Manager - is largely unchanged since 1930. It was put in place in reaction against our then system of three district commissioners, whose control of activities in their parts of the County many found onerous and who weren't up to the modernization needs for infrastructure and administration in a County which had tripled to 25,000 people since the turn of the century. Civic Federation was involved in lobbying the legislature to enable the changes, which were enacted after a citizen referendum.

Effects of the 1930 FoG include that the dominant faction in the dominant party tends to control all the seats. No one not white was elected to County office between 1930 and 1980 and electeds were overwhelmingly from the North of the County. This was not seen as a problem at the time.

(<https://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/1995-3-At-Large.pdf>)

In the years since 1930, Arlington has garnered a national reputation for good government. Its land use planning has been copied around the country. Its educational system and its history of resistance to Virginia's attempts to maintain school segregation are widely admired. Its fiduciary prudence has kept its bonding costs low. Many have copied its County Manager FoG.

Despite Arlington's overall success, however, several groups have been thinking whether Arlington's mechanisms for representation can be improved. Issues about which concerns have been raised include:

= proportional representation

= the usual function of partisan primaries in winnowing candidates for a final election is less responsive to public will in an essentially one party jurisdiction

= partisan primaries/caucuses generally exclude residents subject to the Hatch Act from seeking public office

= adequacy of a five member Board to respond to the issues of a 230,000 resident polity.

= staggered terms/single candidate elections tend to result in failure of any candidacy not from the dominant faction in the dominant party, as well they tend to slow the effect of voter feedback on important policy decisions. In part as a result of this slow feedback, bitter controversies within our community have been beset by claims from losers that the prevailing position is not legitimate (e.g., school desegregation, Columbia Pike trolley, proposals to upzone districts).

= Virginia law controls Arlington government with a high degree of precision and does not permit local enactment of many of the advocated changes.

4. ADVOCATES FOR CHANGE:

Those asking that changes to improve representation be considered have included Civic Federation Task Group (TiGER, Task Force in Governance and Election Reform), League of Women Voters, members of the Arlington delegation, Arlington NAACP, Arlington-Alexandria League of Women Voters. The TiGER



report is at https://www.civfed.org/newContent/2022-06/2022-06%20ACCF%20TiGER%20Res_on_Recommendations_2022-06-08-REPORT.pdf. NAACP has expressed a high level of concern about nomination process for School Board <https://actionnetwork.org/letters/lack-of-equity-and-fairness-in-school-board-endorsement-caucus>. League of Women voters has been supportive of ranked choice voting <https://upvoteva.org/blog/lwv-ranked-choice-voting-succeeds-in-arlington>. Delegate Patrick Hope (HD1) introduced legislation to enlarge Arlington's authorities to make changes of its own initiative, including some of those sought by the TiGER (<https://www.arlnow.com/2024/01/25/hope-files-bill-permitting-form-of-government-changes-but-county-board-says-more-discussion-is-needed/>).

5. THIS DOCUMENT

This document invites you to think about proposals designed to improve Arlington's governance, and to weigh in on them both before and during the October 15 meeting. It's long! and we have tried to write it so many readers will be able to find their issues and will not necessarily need to read the whole thing, depending on level of interest. We expect that most readers will view it on a computer and have included URLs for sources of additional information throughout.

How to respond: we have provided a page of questions at the end of the document which we hope you will use to provide input to CivFed for our preparation of a report to the County Board and the Arlington Delegation about public sentiment on FoG. Take a look at the questions, block copy the page, and email it with your responses to: formofgov.chair@civfed.org. Come to the meeting! 7 PM County Board Room. There also is a less formal session noon to five on the 15th in room 311 of the County building. CivFed members will be present. We are working to identify presenters to discuss some of the mechanisms named in this paper and in addition are hoping for a relatively free form discussion with anyone choosing to attend. It will be followed by the session in the County Board room at which we will describe the input we have received by that point and receive feedback from attendees. The sooner we get your written feedback, the better we can reflect it at the meeting the 15th. We will be accepting written feedback until a week after the meeting, in preparation for writing a report.

Presenters will be announced at: <https://www.civfed.org/about-us/committees/legislation/formofgov/>

6a HERE ARE SOME RECOMMENDATIONS for improving Arlington County's government (1-4 are from the CivFed TiGER task force):

1. Board Members: Increase the number of School and County Board members to 7 to better represent diverse opinions. Advantage seen is that more members would enable more of the opinion clusters existing in our electorate to have champions on the Boards, note that diversity of electeds expected to increase if ranked choice voting for multiple candidates at once.

2. Election System: Keep At-Large seats but hold elections for multiple members every other year to encourage proportional representation. The current staggered term system of plurality elections is a mechanism which does not further proportional representation in either single- or multi-member elections. It results in that relatively small fraction of the dominant party electorate which consistently



votes in party primaries designating its favored candidate as the nominee in nearly all elections – neither the variety of other interest clusters within nor those without the dominant party succeeds in gaining representation. Representation is most likely to be proportional if elections are for multiple seats and by ranked choice. Proportional representation is a policy choice – many but by no means all political analysts favor. Readers need to consider their views on the proportionality issue in thinking about this issue.

3. Board Chair Terms: Extend the terms of the Chairs of the County and School Boards from one year to at least two years, with an option to extend if other members agree. Enables greater continuity in Arlington’s relations with peer jurisdictions

4. Salaries: Increase the salaries of County and School Board members to attract a wider range of candidates. The County Board is already phasing in higher salaries; the School Board needs a substantial increase from the current \$25,000 for members and \$27,000 for the Chair.

5. District Elections: Consider electing Board members by district to improve representation of specific community interest clusters.

6. Advisory Neighborhood Commissions: Establish ANCs to ensure neighborhood concerns are addressed, especially if Board members continue to be elected at large.

7. Non-Partisan Primaries: Cancel partisan primaries to allow more residents, including those covered by the Hatch Act, to run for office, and consider ranked choice voting – no primary at all - to determine winners in general elections. Result is a much larger electorate and more confidence that the result is consistent with popular will.

8. City Status: Shift from county to city status and elect a mayor, which might grant broader authority and better align with Arlington’s dense population. However, probably would result in Arlington no longer having a dedicated section of the Virginia Code to define its form of government.

9. Local Authority: Increase Arlington’s authority to make changes to its form of government, potentially through County Board authority or referenda

6b. Municipal System Examples:

A. Arlington Today (with RCV):

- Transitioned from first-past-the-post to RCV.
- No changes to board size or School Board elections.
- At this point, a major change has been made in shifting from first-past-the-post to RCV for Arlington elections. No enlargement of the Board has been undertaken, nor have changes been made for School Board. So this is included as an example of some reform accomplished.

B. CivFed TiGER Proposed Reforms:



- Expand boards to 7 members each.
- Use RCV and stagger elections (groups of 3, then 4 members).
- Ensures representation for groups with over 25% (3-member years) or 20% (4-member years) of the electorate.
- Records generated by the TiGER task group are at <https://www.civfed.org/about-us/committees/tiger/>

C. Cambridge, MA Model:

- Elects a 9-member City Council and 6-member School Committee every two years via RCV.
- Any group over 10% of the electorate (City Council) or 14% (School Committee) can elect a representative.
- City Council elects the mayor, who also serves on the School Board, enhancing coordination. Though there are no districts, electeds tend to get more of their support from neighbors. Described at https://fairvote.org/spotlight_cambridge/.

D. Portland, OR Model:

- Divides Portland into four districts, each electing 3 City Council members via RCV.
- Eliminates primaries; general elections determine outcomes.
- A mayor is elected city-wide.
- Ensures representation for groups with over 25% of the electorate in any of the districts.
- . Portland system and the process by which they reached it are described at <https://www.kptv.com/2023/04/20/portland-city-council-adopts-new-election-system/> and <https://www.portland.gov/transition>

E. Election by District:

- Many cities elect board members by district to ensure local representation.
- Likely to result in elected officials from dominant opinion clusters within each district.
- Fort Worth switch from at-large to district City Council described in a video presentation to CivFed TiGER group

F. Mixed District and At-Large Representation:

- Combines district representation with at-large members.
- Balances neighborhood advocacy with a broader perspective.
- Ensures diverse viewpoints in decision-making while avoiding parochialism.



- Requires balance of the malign effects of larger districts with number of at-large members

7. POTENTIAL REFORMS LIKELY EFFECTS: In reading the below, note that some of the proposals work differently (and better) if they are enacted in conjunction with some of the others.

Increase the salaries of County Board and School Board members to attract a wider range of candidates:

a. For the County Board – support and continue the implementation of the phased increase of salaries to the statutory pay caps of \$89,951 for County Board members and \$95,734 for the Chair; b. For the School Board – increase their salaries substantially over the current levels of \$25,000 for members and \$27,000 for the Chair. Note that CB increase has been accomplished but SB wage remains low. We hope in particular that young parents will be able to contemplate SB service if they don't have to take the hit to their incomes the current structure requires.

Election (of School and / or County Board) by district – this was not proposed by the CivFed TiGER, but enough people favor it that it needs to be included as a possible reform: districts are used in many jurisdictions to enable greater representation of interest clusters within the community. District election for School Board would isolate many parents from the Board member near the choice school their children attend.

It's important for the reader to consider that there are different ways to identify interest clusters, and that any individual may have some allegiance to several. Clusters include: ethnic/ racial/ gender/ sexual orientation, neighborhood, class/ tenant/ SFH status, self-identified interests (pupils in the schools, teachers in the schools, field sports, tree canopy, affordable housing, municipal thrift). Most interest clusters in Arlington are not sufficiently concentrated in locations that they would likely have success electing their champions if the County were to use district representation (gender, tree canopy, park services provision, schools, affordable housing, e.g.); although there are some neighborhoods with a substantially higher fraction of ethnic voters none is large enough to constitute a Board district in which a particular ethnicity (other than White) is dominant. If districts were used, though, each district could be expected to select backers of its parks and transit needs. Districts would improve representation for only those interest clusters which are residentially concentrated and would probably make it worse for others.

Advisory Neighborhood Commissions – not proposed by CivFed. ANCs are a feature of civic life in DC and constitute a mechanism to ensure that concerns at the neighborhood level are taken into account. Particularly if Arlington continues to elect its County and School Board members at large, this can fill a gap in representation <https://anc.dc.gov/page/about-ancs> and consideration of ANCs has been recommended for Arlington <https://www.arlnow.com/2020/07/15/peters-take-does-arlingtons-form-of-government-equitably-serve-all-its-residents/>

Cancel partisan primaries – Arlington's use of partisan primaries effectively excludes residents covered by the Hatch act from running for office. However, given first past the post elections, primaries are an extremely important mechanism to sort for the candidate(s) acceptable to a broad public. This proposed change was not put forward in the CivFed TiGER report, but jurisdictions which use ranked choice voting ("instant runoff") often dispense with party primaries. Absence of a primary means that the



general elections – with their far larger electorate – determine the winners, with consequent confidence that public will prevails.

Shift Arlington from a county to a city. Elect a mayor. The idea of changing the County’s status from county to city intrigues many residents. Arguments in favor include the somewhat broader authority ceded to a city than a county by the legislature and the view that Arlington is more densely populated than are counties in general. Arguments against include: Arlington has obtained many adjustments from the legislature for its government structure. This success is in large part because our FoG can be changed without making other jurisdictions in the Commonwealth consider whether the changes would entail problems for them. The idea that we would be well served to have a single head of government – mayor – setting the agenda for the County has some backing (though it’s not clear that a mayor would automatically do better for us than would a Board Chair elected for a longer period than one year)

Enlarge Arlington’s authority to make changes in its own FoG to match the authorities held by other Virginia jurisdictions. Enlarge Arlington’s authority to make changes in its own FoG to enable the CivFed TiGER package of reforms to go into place (some of these authorities would be unique to Arlington) If you respond in favor of this change, please let us know whether changes should be by the authority of the County Board, by referendum, or by either.

Proportionality. See the discussion of proportionality at #5, above. CivFed/TiGER favor proportionality in the view that better decisions result when the major opinion clusters in the community are part of the decision making process, and in proportion to their relative numbers. Others have suggested that the majority should sweep all of the seats, and that governance is smoother when there is unity on the boards. The more candidates elected at once, if by ranked choice voting, the closer the result to proportionality of the electorate.

INPUT FORM

We are eager for your input about possible improvements in Arlington’s Form of Government. The mechanism which will work best for us is: block copy this Input Form. Provide answers to the questions about which you have views. Decide how much identifying information you want us to have, and how you want us to use it. Email it to: formofgov.chair@civfed.org.

Responses in advance of the October 15 meeting will be discussed in that meeting. Responses received within a week after the meeting will be incorporated into the summarized input we will provide it to the County Board, to local press, and to the Arlington Delegation. We will strip out personally identifying information in that report. If you want us to put you in touch with others whose views are similar to yours, let us know and tell us how you want to be contacted. If you want to be part of the CivFed effort to back reforms, let us know.

1. What do you want us to know about you?

Age, ethnicity

Name



Length of residence in Arlington

Civic Association/Neighborhood

Type of residence

Have you been highly/ moderately / occasionally active in Arlington civic issues?

Do you want to be involved in FoG discussions going forward? In the context of CivFed? Want us to help you find people who share your views?

1a What information about you do you want included in the summary document to be sent to County Board/Delegation/local press?

2. Do you think changes in Arlington's FoG should be made? Why? If you don't want changes, why not? Do you think this is an important issue for us going forward?

3. If you want changes, and if they are reasonably well described in the text above, which changes seem desirable to you?

4. If you want changes which are not described in the text above, please describe.

5. Do you favor proportional representation mechanisms to enable a more diverse set of candidates (ethnicity, age, housing type, political views) to win election in Arlington? Do you favor enlarging the Board to enable more diverse electeds?

6. Should changes in Arlington's FoG be within the authority of Arlington to make? Should those changes which are within Arlington's authority be made by County Board? By referendum? By either?

Thank You! For your time and care in thinking about these fundamental issues for Arlington's governance.