



**2023 County Board Primary Candidates Questionnaire: Climate Change and Sustainability**

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**Name: Susan Cunningham**

- 1. **Addressing Climate Change** In its March 20 report, the International Panel on Climate Change stated “There is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a livable and sustainable future for all (very high confidence).” The scientific consensus is that GHG emissions must be reduced by 50% by 2030 to avoid the worst consequences of climate change. As a County Board member what policies and initiatives would you pursue to ensure that Arlington rapidly reduces its GHG emissions?*

We are deep into a global climate crisis and must move more swiftly and boldly on Arlington County environmental goals. Every County investment and decision needs to consider the 3Es: Environment, Economics, and Equity.

Trained as a mechanical engineer with a renewables focus, I have worked on climate resiliency throughout my career - from teaching renewable energy as a Fulbright Scholar in Africa and building locomotives at General Electric, to delivering netzero buildings and sustainable master planning at Gensler and building climate-sensitive affordable housing and public schools.

As a progressive community with a long history of environmental values and policies, Arlington needs to be relentlessly focused on reducing both embodied and operational carbon emissions. I would pursue several policies and initiatives to reduce GHG emissions quickly:

- **Accelerate shifts to renewable energy sources and reduced usage.** I will support the goals outlined in our community energy plan, including accelerating them where possible. This includes prioritizing renewable energy, electrification of the county vehicle fleet, transit and sustainable mobility investments, and incenting resident and business actions on energy sources and uses, from transportation and buildings to tree cover.
- **Reduce transportation emissions.** I will invest in Metro and premium bus networks to improve frequency and hours of service. Combining school bus and county bus routes could be one step to enhance frequency. On-demand options, similar to Uber, can fill mobility gaps for disabled or elderly riders. Transportation and climate resiliency infrastructure are all crucial not just to Arlington, but to the region and state. Funding these investments is a team effort, including local bonds, public-private partnerships, and state and federal grants to support the long-term economic outlook for the region.
- **Preserve and expand tree cover.** We are losing our tree canopy at a rapid clip, and are in danger of accelerating that loss with increased by-right development and lot coverage. Our trees play a crucial role in uptaking carbon dioxide and heat-trapping greenhouse gasses. I will prioritize preservation of existing trees, working with schools and property owners to maintain and plant trees, and with our leaders in Richmond to create a local tree ordinance exception to require more tree canopy than currently allowed. In addition, I will work to manage increased density to provide additional housing and economic activity, while investing in green space, trees and permeable land.
- **Commit to a comprehensive lighting efficiency program,** including ensuring scheduled dimming on all street lights, whether owned by County or Dominion Power.
- **Reduce GHG emissions from buildings.** This will include incentives and requirements for building commissioning and recommissioning, as well as Incenting adaptive reuse rather than teardown and new construction will help us reuse existing structures and reduce embodied carbon and emissions due to construction. We can also expand solar hot water and photovoltaics use, especially in our affordable housing stock.
- **Complete regular building recommissioning,** including schools and county owned or occupied properties. Buildings are rarely delivered as designed and often lose efficiency over time. A robust commissioning program can identify changes proactively and tune the building use to minimize energy use.
- **Encourage adaptive reuse** of commercial office space and existing housing stock. With office vacancy above 20% and climbing, creative repositioning of these built assets will be a priority. We can engage practitioners in competitions to reimagine these spaces as schools, recreation facilities, and in some cases residential uses. And, we can streamline our permitting and zoning processes to make these conversions faster, less risky for owners and more valuable to our community.
- **Maximize use of community facilities to reduce building volumes needed.** As I have for decades on school and community projects and the Joint Facilities Advisory Commission, I will continue to press to improve space efficiency, shared space, and energy efficiency in its own facilities, including rented space, owned buildings and schools. This includes long-term planning of public facility usage and needs. By far the

most efficient building is the one you don't have to finance, build, or operate. The next most efficient is the one that is in near-constant use.

- 2. Sustainable Development How would you advance urban development in Arlington that supports less energy intensive lifestyles and helps advance our housing affordability goals while protecting tree canopy, providing equitable access to open spaces and nature, and effectively managing stormwater runoff?*

### **Planning for Housing Access and Affordability:**

To advance our smart growth and housing affordability goals, I will work across the county to define a clear community vision to create more housing, including pilots around home ownership and preservation, investments in truly affordable homes, and climate-sensitive updates to lot coverage and tree ordinances.

Housing, especially affordable and mixed-use housing, is a complex planning and financing challenge. As a board member of GreenHOME I worked on greening affordable housing and designing and implementing the DC Green Building law. I am proud of the work I did as interim CEO at nonprofit affordable housing provider AHC, including the ground breaking mixed-income Waterfront Station project in southwest DC and operating the largest solar array on an affordable property in Arlington at the Apex.

The recently passed Missing Middle/Expanded Housing Options policy gave away added density without creating incentives to make housing affordable, attainable, or climate-sensitive in the near term. We missed the chance to require contributions to parks acquisition, stormwater investments, or the Affordable Housing Investment Fund to support committed affordable units and help public employees get interest-free loans for their down payments. In commercial development, developers aren't just being given added density, the county negotiates for community benefits. In the current version of the policy, the Board gave away its leverage and gained few concessions to help with affordability. In addition, they failed to show their work on planning for longer-term infrastructure costs, climate-resilience, transportation investments, school capacity and cost to serve a larger population. We have some work to do to get implementation right and get these elements to be part of the plan.

Adding tax credits or other incentives for adaptive use both in offices and existing residential space should be considered. In addition, I support density bonuses, with transparent reporting on how this would benefit the community. Permit and zoning review must be accelerated, especially for larger planned projects, like East Falls Church and Plan Langston Boulevard, to help get projects moving more quickly. Revamping our site plan review process is a likely first step - both residents and developers have highlighted the inefficiencies and ultimately the economic and community value lost in this protracted process. I also support down payment assistance along with opportunities for tiered affordable ownership possibilities such as those espoused by the Virginia Statewide Community Land Trust.

### **Incorporating Climate Resilience, Stormwater, and Open Space**

The July 2018 and 2019 floods locally, along with climate data and devastating "500-year" floods across the country, must be a wakeup call for Arlington. The data are clear: we are behind and must act boldly and swiftly to mitigate safety, environment and financial risk. Arlington can be and should be a national leader on innovation and value in stormwater modernization. I will champion an accelerated, holistic approach to stormwater management as an urgent priority by:

- **Including robust cost-benefit analysis** (including stormwater, ecosystem, school capacity, transportation impacts, future costs, health impact) in every investment decision (e.g., County/Schools capital plans, site plan reviews). Ensure all users (including federal government) pay for the stormwater capacity they use and benefit directly from managing their own or others' stormwater.
- **Developing a comprehensive County-wide watershed plan**, including identifying opportunities for constructed wetlands, greywater reuse, reforestation and tree canopy, permeable surfaces, creative shared use, and biophilic design principles.
- **Pairing innovative design with strong implementation**, after-actions, and continuous improvement.
- **Updating zoning codes**, including stormwater requirements, lot coverage, and tree ordinance.
- **Expanding tree cover and park land**, with strategic land acquisitions and investment in preserving and expanding tree canopy, on public and private land.

3. ***Decarbonization of Transportation** Transportation accounts for almost 40 percent of Arlington's GHG emissions and contributes to poor air quality and congestion. What would be your plan for creating more sustainable transportation options that would sharply reduce reliance on single-occupancy vehicles with shifts to biking, transit, and zero emission vehicles?*

Transportation remains a crucial part of Arlington's greenhouse gas emissions and carbon footprint; We must remain committed to encouraging telecommuting, supporting metro and rapid bus improvements, and continuing our strong commitment to safe bike travel by users of all skill levels. I will prioritize using electric school buses and cars as battery banks, combining ART and school bus routes where feasible, and continuing to expand bike share to include more electric-assist options.

- **Reducing transportation energy use** by combining ART and school bus routes to connect schools, parks/recreation centers, and libraries to reduce car trips and improve access. We can also continue to electrify the County fleet and expand electric bikes.
- **Supporting electrification and charging infrastructure** for bikes and vehicles, both public and private.
- **Prioritize specific community benefits** early in the site planning review process, including a specific checklist that includes energy efficiency, heat island reduction, sustainable mobility infrastructure, electric bike/vehicle charging, transportation management, tree cover, and building and materials reuse to minimize additional carbon production during construction and demolition.
- **Reimagine and innovate** our long-standing transportation planning processes, to make room for earlier transportation analysis, new ideas, more context-driven adaptation, and more efficient implementation. How about using our buses as solar electricity storage banks? Could we establish circulator and loop buses to connect parks, recreation

facilities, schools and neighborhoods – focusing more on north to south connections instead of just east to west? Can we look at more regional solutions for our bus parking shortages?

My interest in multimodal transportation isn't just practical – it's personal. I enjoy biking and am a lifelong user of public transportation. We used to bike our two daughters to daycare down Quincy Street before there were protected bike lanes. And now I watch my girls enjoy their new found independence on their own bikes. I hope that passion lasts a lifetime. I also hope that more bikers and public transportation users will mean better air quality for Arlington. One daughter struggles with asthma, as do many others in our community. We must do everything we can to improve air quality to keep all of our citizens healthy, especially our children and those with underlying health conditions.