

## Statement by Arlington County Board Chair Jay Fiset on the call for streetcar referendum

06/17/2014

I want to start today by addressing a question that has been out there in our community for some weeks – should we hold a referendum on the streetcar? Many people are passionate about this issue – on both sides. My colleagues and I have heard from many of you, directly, and we respect your views. Each of us on this Board has taken your questions and concerns very seriously.

We have given so much thought to this question. We've consulted with the County Attorney and had lots of thoughtful conversations with lots of people.

I understand the impulse to put the streetcar to a vote. Building a modern streetcar system is the biggest transit project this County has undertaken since Metro. Fairfax is our partner in the Columbia Pike segment of the planned 7.4-mile route, but Arlington will be responsible for the lion's share of the costs – and reap the majority of the benefits -- of this project.

And because it is such a large and ambitious transportation investment, streetcar has generated debate and lots of scrutiny, and that's a good thing. That is the Arlington Way.

And after careful consideration, I have come to the conclusion that I do not support a referendum on streetcar. Let me explain why.

Under Virginia law, the County Board cannot hold an up-or-down vote on streetcar – a referendum question must be tied to a vote on General Obligation bonds – and it is my commitment that **WE WILL USE ZERO HOMEOWNER-FINANCED GENERAL OBLIGATION BONDS** to build the streetcar. To put a streetcar bond question on the ballot would violate that basic principle that a majority of this Board has long embraced and remains committed to – streetcar will be built using designated transportation funding, not by raising homeowner's property taxes.

Let me be clear: **I am committed to streetcar, but not at any cost.** I will support the building of the streetcar only if it does not require Arlington homeowners to take on bond debt to pay for it. The County has a plan to leverage federal, state, regional and local commercial funds that are dedicated to new transportation projects to pay for the streetcar's construction.

That plan includes **ZERO** homeowner-financed General Obligation Bonds -- **ZERO**.

I will walk away from the project rather than violate that pledge.

But at its core, my opposition to a referendum is based on my firm belief that this issue has been decided by our community. We have spent years discussing and studying and analyzing the streetcar and its expected impact on this County that we all love. The Columbia Pike community first recommended studying high-capacity transit for the Pike in 2002. Many, many public meetings – and votes by both this Board and the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors – have been held since then.

The time has come to act, to move forward without delay to build a streetcar system that I know will benefit all Arlington. Here are the facts:

A combined streetcar-bus system is the only transit option that can provide the capacity we need to handle the growth in population and jobs coming to the neighborhoods along the 7.4-mile streetcar route.

Over the next 30 years, 65 percent of this County's expected population growth, and 44% of its expected job growth, will be along the streetcar route. Transit ridership along the streetcar route will more than double to about 60,000 daily trips - 62% of those trips will use the workhorse modern streetcar vehicles. No possible bus-only system can handle that ridership growth. A modern streetcar will ease congestion along these heavily traveled corridors.

A modern streetcar will attract new private investment in these corridors -- investment that will benefit our entire County in increased property values and increased tax revenues that will help fund services and infrastructure across Arlington, and help ensure our County's long term financial sustainability. No bus-only alternative would provide anything like the increased property values and increased tax revenue that we expect to see from streetcar.

Just as Arlington's choice to underground the Metro instead of running it down the center of I-66 -- at far greater cost and despite much opposition – led to the bustling R-B corridor that we have today, streetcar will give us a much better return on investment. It is key to our efforts to transform Columbia Pike and Route 1, from Pentagon City to Potomac Yard, into more transit-oriented, walkable and livable neighborhoods.

Streetcar also will make it easier and more comfortable for people to use transit in their daily lives. It will make it easy for residents, workers and visitors to travel from the Skyline area of Fairfax to Crystal City – and to stop along the way, or to connect to the regional metro or commuter rail systems.

This Board is determined that the streetcar will be built in a cost-effective and timely manner. We will closely oversee this project. Recently, we signed a contract with an experienced firm that has a proven track record of delivering transit systems – including streetcar and light-rail – that requires them to scrub the project for ways to reduce costs and speed-up delivery.

Streetcar, truly, is Arlington's next generation of transit. Across the nation, communities are embracing modern streetcars as a far lower-cost alternative to subways and a far

more robust, accessible, comfortable, attractive and practical alternative to buses. All Arlington will benefit from joining their ranks.

Recently, I attended the Intelligent Communities Forum meeting in New York. We made the top 7, losing the prize of most intelligent city in the world to Toronto. I had an extensive conversation with a Toronto City Council member and Chair of their Economic Development and Culture Committee. Toronto is one of North America's most successful streetcar cities. He expressed great pride in their streetcar system and its planned expansion.

I ask all my colleagues – on both sides of this issue – to join together and work to make this project a success and a source of pride for our entire community.

The County needs to do a better job of communicating the clear benefits of the modern streetcar, and we will do better. I would ask Arlington residents to study and learn about the issue – to go beyond the sound bites and give the matter the full consideration that this community always gives important issues.

Let us join together to fulfill a commitment we have made to our community, and to honor community planning efforts that began more than a decade ago. Let us extend our legacy of smart growth, of tying land use to transportation, a planning approach that has made this community among the most successful, transit-oriented communities in the world.

Let us join together to keep Arlington competitive, save our streets from gridlock and continue the great work this County has done to build community and strengthen neighborhoods.