



The ACTA Watchdog

Newsletter of the Arlington County Taxpayers Association

KEEPING A SHARP EYE ON GOVERNMENT

October 17, 2005

www.acta.us

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School Board Candidates Answer Questions

With the November 8, 2005 elections approaching, we devote much of the newsletter to the responses of the three candidates for Arlington School Board to questions about the operating and capital costs of the Arlington Public Schools. This year's race for the open School Board seat is especially important since the winning candidate will henceforth have the benefit of incumbency.

We asked the candidates seven questions, and to limit their answers to 125 words. While we reserved the right to edit any responses exceeding that limit, the only editing we did was assuring consistency in font size and type.

The questions and answers are on **pages 3-6**.

County Board Continues Its Merry Spending Way

The County Board adopted a \$917.3 million budget for Fiscal Year 2006 in April, which was a 5.4% increase over the FY2005 adopted budget. However, inflation during the previous 12 months was 3.5%.

A comparison of the Board's FY2006 budget resolutions to the FY2000 budget resolution appears on page 7. It shows that county spending increased 47.8% over the six-year period, or 8% annually. During the same six-year period, inflation increased 13.1%, or just under 2.2% annually.

The bottom line is that the Board continues to spend significantly faster than the rate of inflation although the rate of increase in county spending is slowing.

The bad news is that even though the Board cut the real estate tax rate by 8 cents (from \$0.958 per \$100 of assessed value to \$0.878), the tax bill payment on the average residential family home still increased 13.6%. For the six years since 2000, tax bills have increased an astounding 94% on the average single-family residence.

In his transmittal letter for the adopted Fiscal Year 2006 budget, the Manager noted that the County Board focused its tax relief efforts on cutting the tax rate an additional three cents beyond the five cent cut the Manager recommended, creating a new \$500 homeowner grant program, and expanding tax relief for the elderly and disabled.

Message for the County Board. Your efforts at providing tax relief were weak at best. If the Board had limited the \$917.3 million to the rate of inflation (3.5% over the previous 12 months), you would have cut another \$30 million from the budget, and enabled the Board to provide meaningful tax relief for all Arlingtonians!

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RECEIVE YOUR WATCHDOG BY E-MAIL

One of the association's largest expenses include the printing and mailing of The ACTA Watchdog. You can save ACTA money by electing to have it e-mailed to you, plus you will get it more quickly than receiving it via USPS.

You can have The Watchdog e-mailed to you by sending a message to members@acta.us with EMAIL WATCHDOG in the subject line.

YOUR FEEDBACK IS WANTED

Your board of directors wants AND needs the opinions of members. We need to know that we are serving our members' interests. Are we sending the correct message to Arlington's elected leaders? Are we communicating frequently enough with members? Are our analyses what you expect? If you think we're being too hard on local and state officials, tell us. Should the Watchdog be 4, 8, or 12 pages? Are there topics you would like us to write about?

Call, write, or e-mail us. Or tell us in person by attending meetings of your board of directors. Meetings are held in the basement library at Culpepper Garden, 4435 North Pershing Road. We meet on the third Wednesday of most months so we suggest you call ahead to be sure there has not been a last minute change.

DO YOU HAVE MEMBERSHIP QUESTIONS?

The top line of the mailing label on your copy of the Watchdog reads, "Member through 2005" if your

membership is current. If you think your membership information is wrong, or if you have any other membership questions, please e-mail us at membership@acta.us, or call (703) 351-9300.





VISIT "GROWLS" -- ACTA'S WEBSITE

WWW.ACTA.US

Members are encouraged to visit the ACTA website often to view our blog (weblog) authors who attempt to track how your tax dollars are being spent.

The bloggers comment on numerous significant issues related to county and school spending in Arlington County as well as on state and national budget and tax issues. We think you will find the bloggers "adding value" to the news articles they comment on. If you would like a Growls blogger to comment on a particular news article dealing with taxes or government waste, send the link to the article to editor@acta.us.

Some issues discussed by Growls' bloggers include:

-  construction costs of the new Washington-Lee High School;
-  comparisons of the cost-per-student for the Arlington public schools and other Northern Virginia school districts;
-  editorial or other opinion pieces in the local press; and,
-  AP exam kerfuffle in the Arlington public schools.

Contacting the County Board

Fight back! Tell the County Board your thoughts on their spendthrift ways. Unless they hear from you, they will think everyone is happy with the tax increases they are burdening us with. Get your neighbors involved, too.

Write: Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Boulevard
Arlington, Virginia 22201

Call: (703) 228-3130

E-Mail: countyboard@arlingtonva.us

Tell them ACTA sent you!

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**CANDIDATES FOR ARLINGTON COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD
RESPOND TO ACTA’S QUESTIONS**

ACTA’s Questions	William S. “Bill” Barker	Cecelia M. Espenoza	Edward J. Fendley
<p>1. Operating expenditures in Arlington schools currently stand at \$16,464 per pupil per year (see page 39, fiscal 2006 adopted budget). This cost per pupil increased by 7.6% over fiscal 2005. Are Arlington's per-pupil operating expenditures too high, too low, or about right?</p>	<p>With the Revenue Sharing Agreement with the County Board, resources and needs have in effect been disconnected. We need to start with a budget based on what we need – not with what resources we have. What disturbs me is that despite the fact that our per-pupil expenditure is the second highest in the country and considerably higher than the per-pupil cost in neighboring jurisdictions, we are falling behind neighboring jurisdictions in test scores and in meeting NCLB standards. One cannot make overall budget decisions based solely on one criterion, but when considering all these results, it appears that we may not be getting full value for our money.</p>	<p>Averages rarely tell the whole story. I believe that for some students the expenditure is inadequate and for others it is excessive. However, according to the budget: “[t]he APS cost per pupil is higher than other WABE jurisdictions due in part to Arlington's commitment to kindergarten and preschool education.” I support the continued funding and expansion of these programs even though they raise the overall per pupil expenditure. Further, I recognize that targeted spending in response to remedies and testing required under No Child Left Behind, (NCLB) and the decrease in enrollment may escalate the figures. Thus as a school board member I would look not only at averages or increases but also on the actual dollars spent on improving the in-class delivery. Further, I will work to curtail unnecessary administrative costs. I will argue for increases in spending to achieve equity in educational opportunity.</p>	<p>Arlington has great public schools, and it is in the financial interest of us taxpayers to keep them strong -- in part, because the level of private investment in a community is correlated with the quality of its schools.</p> <p>At the same time, I believe that we should be getting more for our tax-dollar investments in our schools. Arlington Public Schools can make better use of existing revenue and resources to make our schools even better and to provide all residents more value.</p> <p>In particular, the design and management of school buildings and recreation facilities can be significantly improved to increase community and other non-school-related use of these facilities, thus providing more services for our tax dollars.</p>
<p>2. Some advocates assert that Arlington teachers should be "the best-paid teachers in the region." Do you believe this should be School Board policy? If so, what would you suggest the School Board do if Fairfax County, for example, decides to adopt the very same policy?</p>	<p>I support providing teachers with a fair and competitive salary and benefits package. We also need to be accountable to the people paying the bill – the taxpayers – to ensure their continued support in the future. Except for some specialty areas like special needs or Latin teachers, we have more than sufficient applicants for teaching positions - which indicates that the salaries are already competitive, and we need to ensure they remain competitive. Where we can benefit is to create an environment that allows teachers to teach and gain maximum job satisfaction by providing the leadership necessary to help them achieve high standards through their students.</p>	<p>I am committed to maintaining the highly talented work force that we currently have in APS and would work to ensure that we offer competitive compensation packages. However, I would not adopt pay as the only measure or adopt a “best-paid teachers in the region” policy. I recognize that in addition to money, the work environment must be supportive and nurturing if we are to retain the best of our teachers. The School Board must work to implement a working environment that honors the skills of teachers and allows them to teach. We must fight to eliminate barriers to success and ensure that a collaborative work environment exists. We must find ways to more fairly address surplusing of teachers, and we must match the skills of the teachers to the schools in which</p>	<p>I believe it should be APS policy to attract and retain the very best teachers, since the quality of our educators is the single-most important factor in the quality of our children’s education. To do this, our compensation packages must compare favorably to those in surrounding jurisdictions, many of which have significantly lower housing costs than Arlington.</p> <p>At the same time, pay level is not the only factor in attracting and retaining great educators. The quality of the workplace for teachers is also important, as is the level of parental support, professional development opportunities, and the school system’s approach to conflict resolution. Focusing on these areas, as well as compensation packages, will help ensure that</p>

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ACTA's Questions	William S. "Bill" Barker	Cecelia M. Espenoza	Edward J. Fendley
		they work.	Arlington's teachers remain among the best in the country.
<p>3. Under the current "revenue-sharing agreement" between the School Board and the Arlington County Board, the schools are allocated a fixed 48.1% of county tax revenues. Does it make sense to have such an agreement that essentially increases schools funding largely in response to local property values? Do you favor changing this agreement?</p>	<p>I would prefer to see the Superintendent develop a budget, present it to the School Board, which in turn would set priorities and advocate their proposals before the County Board. In my government career, we worked very hard to end such arrangements because of its tendency for waste. We are experiencing an entirely different economic situation than when Revenue Sharing was enacted, and I have not doubt that with or without Revenue sharing, the County Board will adequately fund the schools. However, we are not the only priority for funds, and it is unfair to police and fire fighters, for instance, to determine how much to fund the schools before we know how much we need.</p>	<p>There is value to having a revenue sharing agreement in order to provide a reasonable basis to derive an annual budget and to ensure long term planning. The exact formula can and should be modified to assure that "windfalls" do not occur. Therefore, in the face of escalating assessments, it would be reasonable to set a floor and ceiling in the formula. I would not advocate a return to the time when the school system scrambled to draft a budget relatively late in the fiscal year.</p>	<p>As a School Board member, I will expect active and annual consideration on the part of the School Board and the County Board as to the amount of funding that is necessary and available to ensure top-quality public schools. It makes sense to tie school funding primarily to the educational needs of our children, not primarily to fluctuations in local property values.</p> <p>I believe that a fixed allocation of resources for our schools is appropriate and cost-effective in certain circumstances, such as periods of relative stability in revenue and school enrollment. In such circumstances, fixed revenue allocations can substantially improve capital planning and County-Schools budget coordination, which results in more efficient use of resources.</p>
<p>4. Construction costs for a new high school to replace the current Washington-Lee High School are currently estimated to exceed \$ 95.2 million. Sealed bids are scheduled to be opened on a date after the School Board election takes place. Suppose that the best bid turns out to be \$15 million over the current estimate. What would you propose doing?</p>	<p>We originally committed to spend no more than approximately \$80 million on this project, including the bond and the money set aside for contingencies, and I believe we need to keep to this. I don't accept the excuse that associates the increased cost to increased material costs because materials had already gone up prior to when the bond was presented last year, and responsible government would have included these increases when developing that estimate. One idea is to go out to bid specifying our objectives, provide the proposed design, and cap the project at \$80 million including all change orders. We would then have the potential of awarding a contract to the company that provides us the best value for the money.</p>	<p>Washington-Lee entails phased new construction of an approximately 350,000 sq. ft. facility which will accommodate 1,600 students and will include a new 10-lane community swimming pool. Since this is a phased in project there will be time to assess the need for modifications to the plan. Therefore if the bids cannot be met without upsetting other capital projects, I would scale back the project and send it for a re-bid. In addition I would advocate for the increased cost to be put before the voters for approval.</p>	<p>As a longtime civic activist and professional financial manager, I believe that the planning process for the reconstruction of Washington-Lee was flawed and that decisions on the part of the School Board unwisely precluded siting and design options that could have been much more cost-effective. This is linked to legitimate concerns over project costs, which warrant continued and serious scrutiny.</p> <p>As a School Board member, I will be committed to ensuring that the reconstructed W-L provides for outstanding educational programs, and produces broad benefits to the community. At this point, I do not believe it would be cost-effective to cancel or fundamentally redesign the new W-L. I want APS to learn from its errors and ensure that future processes better serve taxpayers and our community.</p>
<p>5. Since Arlington accounts for about 5% of the population in the</p>	<p>My focus is on teaching and education. Providing incentives to county employees to live in</p>	<p>This is not solely a school issue. The need for affordable housing exists for many of Arlington's</p>	<p>I believe there is substantial value in ensuring a significant number of APS employees live in</p>

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<p>metropolitan area, do you believe it is very important, somewhat important, or not important that Arlington teachers and other school employees live in Arlington County? If you believe that it is important, what percentage of school employees do you believe should live here? What programs, if any, would you initiate or change to encourage them to move here in greater numbers? How much money above and beyond their regular salaries would you like to see budgeted for that purpose?</p>	<p>the jurisdiction works in areas of high crime where having police officers living in the area provides needed extra police presence. We don’t have that situation in Arlington. Arlington is a small community in a very large metropolitan area that offers a wide variety of housing and lifestyle choices, and people consider these factors when determining where to live. Many people willingly work in Arlington but do not want to live here because of its semi-urban environment, high cost of real estate, and high taxes tied to high assessments. One thing we can do is to encourage retired practitioners already living in Arlington to pursue second careers in education.</p>	<p>public servants. I do not believe this should be made part of the APS budget (or per child cost). Instead, I think the school board must work with the county to identify housing stock that we have, or could acquire, especially as a result of the base closures which could be rehabilitated to create affordable housing.</p> <p>In addition, for those teachers who choose to work in Arlington but live elsewhere we should look to programs that will enhance their quality of life, and support their commitment to the community. I would establish easy access to carpool information and methods of maximizing the ability of teachers to bring their children to Arlington schools</p>	<p>Arlington. I’m concerned that most Arlington teachers do not live here, and that in recent years the number living here has dropped.</p> <p>One low-cost effort we should enhance is providing APS employees with quick access to public announcements of any affordably-priced housing that appears on the Arlington market.</p> <p>I also believe APS should expand the Live-Where You Work program, which provides a loan to employees purchasing a home in Arlington. I believe this program is cost-effective in attracting and retaining outstanding teachers, increasing their classroom performance, and promoting school-community ties.</p> <p>I would also like APS to explore potential new cost-effective partnerships with nonprofit housing organizations and the business community.</p>
<p>6. Accountability and efficiency reviews conducted at several Virginia school districts under the governor's "Education for a Lifetime" initiative have found areas where substantial savings can be realized. (See http://snipurl.com/hvpo for details.) Should the Arlington schools conduct similar reviews on a periodic schedule? If so, should they be done in-house, or by an independent firm?</p>	<p>I believe our current state of affairs is perfect for such an efficiency review. The review conducted by the Virginia Department of Education is a bargain for the locality because Virginia will centrally fund up to 75% of the cost and in addition to the ideas we can obtain on ways we can be more efficient, such a review would give us the benefit of lessons learned from other school districts in Virginia. Rising assessments have provided Arlington’s school system with a large amount of money, but with revenue sharing, there is no correlation between what is spent and what is really needed. We also need to continue to partner with community organizations like the Civic Federation and local universities to conduct continuous in-house reviews.</p>	<p>Since approximately 20 percent of the per child expenditures are for administrative and management costs, it is wise to engage in periodic external evaluation. Under the governor’s plan, “The emphasis of the reviews is to identify and generate savings through administrative and management best practices. This is not a review of classroom instruction or student achievement.” I would support such a review and applaud the efforts of the state to provide the reviewers.</p>	<p>I applaud Governor Warner’s initiative, and specifically the intent of the Education for a Lifetime program to identify and generate cost savings and best practices in education system administration and management.</p> <p>As I understand the program, the state is providing funds to conduct reviews (in the event the federal government will not underwrite.) As a School Board member, I would welcome the ability to leverage those available funds, instead of spending additional Arlington resources, in any assessment of best practices for more efficient resource uses and expenditures.</p> <p>At this time, I remain open-minded about the most effective way to undertake this kind of periodic review. I would want to know more about the experiences of other Virginia jurisdictions that have employed the in-house vs.</p>

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<p>7. A new Capital Improvement Plan for construction, rehabilitation, and improvement of Arlington's school buildings and grounds will be assembled next spring. What changes, if any, should be made from the current CIP? Do the issues of declining enrollment and increasing construction costs require special attention?</p>	<p>I believe the issues of declining enrollment and increasing construction costs require our immediate attention and the need to reassess every project in the current CIP to develop realistic priorities and ways to provide successful programs like ATS and HB Woodlawn to a larger population. Just as school enrollment is currently declining, we could experience an increased enrollment in the future. As such, we need to look at ways to provide quality facilities in the most flexible and cost effective manner which may include consideration of leased space, private-public partnerships, and joint use facilities that can be converted to classrooms when required. We also need to incorporate 21st Century technologies such as distant and individualized learning labs and consider current security and safety enhancement.</p>	<p>The new plan will need to include ways to affirmatively handle cost overruns such as the ones that have been identified in the Washington-Lee project. Given our current knowledge we should be able to make better predictions of costs and we must be willing to evaluate and eliminate non essential expenditures.</p> <p>From the outset of my campaign I have highlighted the fact that declining enrollment is a major issue facing APS. The impact of the numbers should not be borne disproportionately by any geographic part of our county. I would advocate for a stronger adherence to external factors that were used to decide priorities. It troubles me that Abingdon in particular, continues to be pushed back despite it's higher overall priority.</p>	<p>independent audit and review through this program, to help inform my own decisions before undertaking such a project.</p> <p>As a School Board member, I will work to improve our planning process so that capital investments allow our schools to serve as community centers, providing more services for Arlington residents and better value for taxpayers.</p> <p>I want APS buildings and recreation facilities to be designed and managed to support community and other non-school use outside of school hours, and, where appropriate, during school hours. Building flexibility into our facilities is especially important since student enrollment in Arlington (as in other communities) tends to fluctuate, sometimes in decadal cycles.</p> <p>By maximizing use of our buildings notwithstanding enrollment changes, Arlington will be able to maintain a stable stock of facilities and avoid closing or opening facilities over short periods of time – something that is not cost-effective.</p>

“(M)aybe at least it is time for a change of terminology. After all, taking \$200 million of public money to build a bridge, name it after yourself and get reelected isn't merely "pork." Demanding \$250 billion of public money for your hurricane-damaged state -- in the hope that voters will ignore all the mistakes you made before the hurricane struck -- isn't just "waste" either. As I say, corruption comes in many forms. But whatever form it comes in, it will be easier for voters to identify if it's called by its true name.

Anne Applebaum, Washington Post columnist

“What is ominous is the ease with which some people go from saying that they don't like something to saying that the government should forbid it. When you go down that road, don't expect freedom to survive very long.”

Thomas Sowell

“The American Republic will endure, until politicians realize they can bribe the people with their own money.”

Alexis deTocqueville

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A COMPARISON OF TWO BUDGETS

Fund/Category	FY2000 (\$1,000)	FY2006 (\$1,000)	Percent Change
General Fund			
County Board	\$ 503	\$ 807	60.4
County Manager	1,564	3,442	120.1
Management/Finance	4,089	4,760	16.4
Personnel	6,685	6,217	<7.0>
Civil Service Commission	16	18	12.5
County Attorney	1,044	1,558	49.2
Circuit Court	2,119	2,660	25.5
General District Court	212	279	31.6
Juv & Dom Rel Court	3,390	4,722	39.3
Commonwealth's Atty	2,481	3,393	36.8
Sheriff/Jail	19,703	26,281	33.4
Comm of the Revenue	3,451	4,124	19.5
Treasurer	4,434	5,249	18.4
Electoral Board	403	776	92.6
Police	33,237	42,398	27.6
Emerg. Comm. Center (1)	4,216	8,297	N/A
Fire	20,857	32,507	55.8
Environmental Svs (2)	33,114	52,346	58.1
Human Services	64,404	94,001	46.0
Libraries	9,614	12,133	26.2
Economic Development	2,332	2,679	14.9
Comm Plng, Hsg, & Dev	7,222	11,470	58.8
Parks, Rec & Comm Res	20,133	29,677	47.4
Office of Tech & Info Sys	N/A	14,177	N/A
Non-Departmental	16,407	34,767	111.9
Debt Service	30,183	43,803	45.1
Regional Contributions	4,767	7,031	47.5
Metro	8,720	13,000	49.1
Total Gnl Fund Budget	\$305,299	462,472	51.5
Other Operating Funds			
Tourism, Travel, Promo.	\$ 1,009	1,192	18.1
Utilities	33,943	45,624	34.4
Rosslyn Bus Imp Dist (3)	N/A	1,902	N/A
Community Development	2,303	2,172	<5.7?>
Section 8 Housing Asst	11,912	14,119	18.5
Automotive Equip	506	476	<5.9>
Office, of Tech, Info Sys	3,984	N/A	N/A
Printing	103	197	91.3
Jail Industries	4	5	20.0
Ballston Parking Garage	4,790	5,857	22.2
Total Other Optg Funds	58,556	71,545	22.2
Utilities Capital Outlay	11,497	13,540	17.8
General Capital Outlay	10,283	5,869	<42.9>
Subtotal	21,780	19,409	<10.9>
Total County Budget	\$385,635	553,426	
School Operating Fund	\$192,745	289,467	50.2
Sch Comp Svcs Acty Fd	3,300	3,750	13.6

Sch Cap Projects Fund	4,160	9,969	139.6
Sch Debt Service Fund	13,788	25,751	86.8
Sch Food Services Fund	4,640	5,599	20.7
Sch Special Projects Fund	7,840	15,806	101.6
Community Activity Fd	8,318		62.3
Total Sch Optg & Other	\$234,791	363,840	55.0
Total Cty, Sch & CAF	\$620,425	917,265	47.8
General Fund Revenues			
Real Estate Tax	\$204,783	382,189	86.6
Personal Property Tax	69,778	79,562	14.0
Business License Tax	38,890	47,000	20.9
Other Local Taxes	71,783	101,018	40.7
Licenses, Permits & Fees	4,401	11,930	171.1
Fines	10,085	8,136	19.3
Interest, Rents	6,258	6,271	0.2
Charges for Services	24,265	35,472	46.2
Miscellaneous	2,210	1,381	<37.5>
State Revenue	52,756	58,943	11.7
Federal Revenue	15,710	24,049	53.1
Other Transfers, Net	<1,170>	752	N/A
Prior Year Balance	2,600	2,198	<15.5>
Total General Fd Rev	\$502,348	758,902	51.1
Other Fund Revenues	\$118,077	158,363	34.1
Total Rev, Cty & Schs	\$620,425	917,265	47.8

Source: Budget Resolutions, Fiscal Years 2000 and 2006 in respective adopted budgets. Editorial decision resulted in making some categories not comparable, i.e., those marked Not Applicable (NA).

(1) Operated as the Emergency Communications Center in FY2000 and Office of Emergency Management in FY2006; consequently not readily comparable.

(2) Reorganization resulting from Environmental Services, Department of Public Works, and Office of Support Services.

(3) The Rosslyn Business Improvement District was recently formed, and is funded through a so-called 'overlay tax.'

COUNTY BOARD TO FINALLY DECIDE LOT COVERAGE

Think property rights only happen to "the other guy." That's what a lot of "other guys" thought before it happened to them. Lot coverage is one of the catchphrases used by liberals to restrict property rights – in this case the size of your home.

The Board is scheduled to hear this item at its November 15 meeting. ACTA members are encourage to contact the County Board to encourage the Board to maintain the current status quo. You can contact ACTA's president for additional background information.

