



AIRE Under Threat

By John Bloom



Arlington County's award-winning AIRE program (Arlington Initiative to Re-think Energy) would take a major funding hit under the County Manager's proposed budget for FY19. The proposal would cut \$554,312 from the budget, or about 25%. \$304,312 of the proposed reduction would eliminate the homeowner energy rebate program, related outreach and education, and work by outside consultants. Another \$250,000 would be cut from a program designed to reduce energy use in County facilities.

The AIRE program serves as a hub for programs and expertise in energy efficiency, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and energy resiliency in all sectors of the community. Since its creation in 2007, the program has helped Arlington develop and begin implementing a comprehensive Community Energy Plan (CEP) to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 75% or more by 2050.

AIRE has won numerous awards for its energy-saving programs. Most recently, Arlington was named the first "LEED Platinum Community" in the nation largely as a result of AIRE's efforts.

In a statement accompanying the proposed cuts, the County Manager's office signaled that this may be part of a broader effort to overhaul the AIRE program. "While the AIRE program has been a success," the statement reads, "the role of the County in these important efforts should become more integrated into general government investments and operations..."

Another major concern with the budget proposal is its treatment of AIRE's sole funding source, the Residential Utility Tax (RUT). Until last year, the RUT was entirely devoted to funding AIRE, based on the rationale that AIRE provides energy efficiency and other energy-related services that benefit all utility customers. The proposed FY 19 budget raises the RUT to its statutory maximum level, creating \$2.7 million in new revenue, and provides 100% of that revenue to Arlington County Public Schools and the Arlington Housing Investment Fund (AHIF). This effectively blocks the County's ability to raise the RUT in the future to fund AIRE-related programs.

The Mount Vernon Group strongly supports fully funding AIRE and maintaining it as a robust hub for energy-related programs and expertise within the County Government. Steep cuts to the AIRE budget are shortsighted for many reasons, including:

- The need for AIRE has increased, not decreased over time, as the County has become more committed to strong action to address climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. For

example, in its [2017 Climate Action Resolution](#), the County Board recognized that the need for local action to address climate change has never been greater.

- AIRE provides very large long-term returns on investment. AIRE programs lower energy bills for every sector of the County, including the County Government. Every gain in efficiency in the County's energy infrastructure pays dividends for decades to come.
- AIRE contributes to Arlington's economic competitiveness. Major businesses are increasingly considering local commitments to sustainability as an important factor in siting their offices. This is especially true in the technology sector, which is vitally important to Arlington's economic future. It is becoming the norm in other sectors as well. AIRE's programs help give Arlington an important edge in economic development.
- The County Board has set ambitious goals that require a high level of expertise and careful planning. Deep cuts in the AIRE budget at this point would be a tremendous loss for sustainability in Arlington.

Sierra Club members in Arlington can voice their support for the AIRE program in a number of ways:

- Writing to County Board members at countyboard@arlingtonva.us.
- Attending the Work Session on March 9 at which the County Board will specifically discuss the budget of the Department of Environmental Services (DES), which houses the AIRE program. (Not a public speaking opportunity.)
- Attending, and speaking out at, the public hearing scheduled for April 3.
- Encouraging others to do the same.

Anyone interested in the proposed budget can find out more about it, and about opportunities for public input, at: <https://budget.arlingtonva.us/fy-2019-budget-information/#>.

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