

# Never too late to make New Year's resolutions for transparency in government

BY MATT MINAHAN

The new year is only a month old, so there is still plenty of time for County Executive Steuart Pittman and Anne Arundel County government to make some New Year's resolutions for better government and citizen involvement in his second term. The Growth Action Network (GAN) has some suggestions.

The matter of constructing an office building in Quiet Waters Park might be resolved for now, but there are still raw feelings, citizen complaints about the lack of transparency of the process and frankly some deep-seated concerns that this is just another example of a broken process.

When 200 neighbors meet on a Friday night to say they had heard nothing of the plans for a project of this size — despite the county following its own requirements for public engagement — there is a problem with the county's own requirements for public engagement.

In order for Anne Arundel County to be “The Best Place for All,” the citizens must have a measure of trust in our government that has been missing in these and too many parks and land-use decisions.

In his Jan. 31 “Our Land, Our Parks” message, Pittman commended the neighbors of Provinces Park for their strong opposition to the West County Swim Center, which had been approved on a unanimous vote by the County Council, saying alternative sites would be explored.

These are very much the same circumstances for the Quiet Waters Park project. A meeting is held, not many notice, plans are developed, the council passes a lease bill, it gets public attention, opposition arises and allegations of secrecy and back room deals circulate because citizens were caught unaware and were told this was a “done deal.”

GAN believes these projects get too far along in the design and contracting phase before citizens can be heard on basic questions like, “Do we want this here?” and “Is this the highest and best use of this precious land resource?”

The county’s interagency work group needs to improve the way the county plans projects like these. Some very specific suggestions from GAN include:

Hold community meetings much earlier in the process, and hold them when there are major changes to the concept, as happened with the Quiet Waters tornado and fire that fundamentally changed the nature of the project.

Require substantive community input well before the 30% meeting, by which time the fundamentals of the project are in place.

Greatly expand the 300-foot perimeter for informing neighbors of proposed projects.

Notify more people in a larger area for larger projects. It makes little sense to use the same notification perimeter for a single home, a large development, or a major park.

Take extra measures to notify community associations and HOAs within a larger radius around larger projects.

Bring capital projects to the Recreation Advisory Board and other citizen bodies before they grow into the costly nightmares mentioned above.

Bring citizens into the interagency work group now, and conduct a purposeful, wide-ranging consultation with advocates and citizens groups.

These are just the first steps the county should take to earn the trust of its citizens. Pittman and county government made some significant steps in his first term, getting much more of the county’s operational data on the web, especially around land use and development, bringing the county into the 21st century. That was a good start by Pittman, but it is not enough. For instance, please:

Require all county meetings be hybrid meetings. It is better for citizens to know what’s going on in their government, and because meetings at night and a distance are too difficult for some citizens to attend in person (e.g. parents of small children, elderly, disabled, etc.).

Create an opt-in email notification system for public notice for interested parties to choose from a robust menu of notification options, including capital projects by area, geography, amount, etc.

Create full electronic records in the Office of Planning and Zoning and other agencies such as DPW, etc. Some agencies still are not allowing citizens to review records in their offices, despite most of their records not available electronically.

Waive FOIA fees for individual citizens who have found no other way to get documents from county government. These departments ought to be responsive to citizen requests for data and shouldn't have to pursue the FOIA process

In short, GAN would like to see Pittman build on the good start in his first term, but now please commit to make citizen engagement, transparency and public access key themes for the second term. And change the culture from one of citizens-disturb-and-interrupt-our-work to citizens-are-the-reason-we-are-here-and-why-we-have-our-jobs-which-we-can't-do-without-them.

That would be a huge step in making Anne Arundel County truly, "The Best Place for All."

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