

May 1, 2017

Re: Warrant Articles 26 and 39

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to ask your support for the Board of Selectmen's recommendation on Article 26 and the Finance Committee's recommendation on Article 39. Article 26 would accept a provision of state law that authorizes the establishment of parking benefits districts (PBDs). The only PBD contemplated for Arlington is Arlington Center. A PBD there would allow parking meter receipts to be used as a sort of revolving fund for such things as parking lot improvements, reconstruction of Broadway Plaza (in part), enhanced snow removal, benches, streetscape, and the like. Article 39 would delay these improvements pending bylaw amendments that would tighten controls over the expenditures of these funds. By next fall, the Arlington Center PBD would be ready to go.

While the details of these warrant articles are complex, the big picture is not. First, and most importantly, a parking benefits district would commit the Town to pursuing the health and vitality of Arlington Center on a sustained basis. This is critically important. As Alyssa Clossey, co-founder of Support Arlington Center, says:

"Arlington Center is the heart of Arlington, located in between East Arlington and the Heights along and around Mass. Ave. -- our main artery. With Town Hall, Arlington High School, the main Post Office, the historic Arlington Friends of the Drama and Regent theaters, the future hub of Arlington Center for the Arts, and more -- the center is the pulse of the Town. And yet it is the center that is struggling the most with empty store fronts.

"With a dedicated fund, the Town could put real money into improving the lighting, design, and adding art into the center, bringing more beauty and interest into the patrons, residents, visitors, business owners and future business owners. We want to continue to see the center as a place for people to go out to dinner, lunch, grab coffee, breakfast, buy a book at our local book store, pick up gifts at specialty shops, catch a movie, performance or live music at our historic theaters and indoor/outdoor cafés--essentially enjoying a few hours of their day or night in the inviting, bright, beautiful, energized center."

A vibrant Arlington Center is consistent with our Master Plan and has the potential to lead the economic development of the entire town.

Second, it makes sense to use the money generated by parking meters in Arlington Center for improvements to Arlington Center. The state has recognized this in a general way in enacting the parking provisions of the Municipal Modernization Act. The parking meters were not installed in order to beef up Town revenues. They were installed as a way to regulate parking in Arlington's downtown. This has created a pool of money funded by the people who use Arlington Center, and it is natural to spend those funds on making their Arlington Center experience better.

Third, using parking receipts as a dedicated fund to provide more life to Arlington Center is the only realistic way to get the job done. General Fund revenues are divided among many expenditures. Only by segregating new parking revenue can we focus on improving Arlington Center over time.

Fourth, the proposed parking benefits district is modest in scale. Only a portion of meter revenues beyond the costs of operations will actually go to Arlington Center improvements: about 40% would instead pick up costs of parking enforcement and administration that would otherwise be borne by the General Fund. But while the amount that will go to the Center in any one year is relatively small, a sustained multi-year effort focused Arlington Center would contributed enormously to the health and vitality of our downtown and the well-being of our whole community.

Fifth, Arlington has a tradition of preserving Town Meeting control over appropriations. The Finance Committee recommends delaying expenditures on Arlington Center improvements pending the development of bylaws that would tighten control over expenditures from the PBD and maximize the role of Town Meeting within the legislative framework. This recommendation is sensible and would not lead to any substantial delay in the Arlington Center revitalization effort.

I urge you to support both the BoS recommendation on Article 26 and the Finance Committee's recommendation on Article 39. Together they will make a strong contribution to the vitality of Arlington Center.

Pat Hanlon
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Town Meeting Member, Precinct 5