Questionnaire on the Arts for Arlington County Board Candidates

Arlington County voters will go to the polls on July 7 to determine who will fill the County Board seat of the late Erik Gutshall. In order to help voters understand each candidate’s stand on the importance of arts and culture in the County, Embracing Arlington Arts sent out a questionnaire for the three candidates to complete covering several issues pertaining to the arts in Arlington.

Here are their responses.

1. **The COVID-19 crisis has hit the arts industry hard financially and emotionally. As a County leader, what would you like to say to these professionals during this crisis time?**

   **Bob Cambridge:** Do not stop creating. With respect to the pandemic, decide what aspect or issue is important to you and see if you can communicate that perspective with your art. Every different perspective contributes to our understanding and display, sound, and movement can very effectively communicate.

   **Susan Cunningham:** As a County Board Member, I will roll-up my sleeves to ensure that, when we emerge from the pandemic, the Arlington arts community is primed to grow and thrive. Artists worldwide have again inspired and led us, innovating to keep creating and delivering much needed performances and exhibitions despite the need for strict social distancing. Since the early days of the pandemic, as people sheltered in their homes wondering what was coming next, singers and musicians coordinated their efforts to bring live-streamed concerts to global audiences. The crisis has allowed for new community-building among artists and observers: in one live-streamed concert, for instance, my family can enjoy a pianist from Italy, a percussionist from India, and an opera singer hailing from our own backyard in Washington, DC. Crises can strip back the layers to reveal the bones of society. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how we turn to the arts for pleasure, solace, and connection -- not only in good times, but especially during times of despair and uncertainty. The bottom-line is that our community needs you, and the pandemic has vividly reminded us of that. During the crisis we stand by you, financially and emotionally. When it’s over, we will not forget what you gave us and will look for more ways to give back. As a county, we will look for new and better shared community art facilities, the opportunity for more leveraged public investment paired with private investment, and more cohesive partnerships between local artists and local businesses.

   **Takis Karantonis:** I was glad to see the County roll out its small business grant program and pleased to see that a number of our Arlington arts organizations successfully applied. I hope that as many as could also took advantage of the Federal PPP program. These are obviously short-term solutions in what will be a long journey back to the level of public performance that Arlingtonians enjoyed pre-COVID. I am committed to helping as many of the Arlington arts organizations as possible to survive. I would welcome a dialogue between the County Board,
arts organizations and the Arts Commission to discuss strategies to support this goal. In the meantime, here are some ideas I have: 1) We need to keep our County Arts Grants program going and, potentially, we need to increase the size of the pot in these hard times; 2) I have proposed a public-private funded small business micro-loan program — generally, up to $100,000 with pay back over 5-7 years at very favorable terms — and think that having a special loan product designed for arts organizations should be seriously considered; 3) I support bringing the Challenge Grant program back, with revised terms that would reward (on a $1 of public money to $2 of corporate money) organizations who are able to achieve their pre-COVID level of corporate support; and 4) I also support a renewed effort to encourage our Business Improvement Districts and Urban Partnerships to develop programs that engage and support our local artists and arts organizations.

2. According to an Americans for the Arts study, over $18 million of economic activity is derived from audience expenditures at arts events. Drilling into these numbers we find that arts and culture event attendees spend an average of $24.66 on top of the price of their ticket, with a vast percentage of that amount being spent in restaurants. Can you tell us some specific initiatives you would pursue and spearhead to ensure that the arts and culture industry remains strong and growing in the years to come, which in turn brings more people to Arlington to spend their dollars before and after an event?

Bob Cambridge: While the question is clearly drafted to elicit a particular response, it happens that I agree with the assumptions. In addition to economic effects, the Arts do make life worth living and expand our horizons. The Arts also productively introduce different perspectives, an effect that brings different opportunities to our attention and feasible approaches more apparent. My younger son has done some neat things in Philadelphia which I will describe below. What has been done elsewhere cannot possibly be done worse in Arlington given the talent we have. I would definitely support attainable projects and would look hard to find how to make suggested projects doable.

Susan Cunningham: While Arlington is already actively engaged in promoting our arts, we could do more to promote local arts to the broader Washington Metro area. Arlington could improve visitor outreach by integrating featured Arlington artists and performances as part of people’s options when traveling to the Nation’s Capital. Featuring the Arlington arts community more prominently is an integral part of that marketing. In addition, growing the arts in Arlington should be integrated into a broader plan to reconnect different parts of the County so that more Arlingtonians are drawn to any artistic hub. The arts should always be considered when planning new community facilities and renovations. Schools should have theater space that can be used by the community, while community centers, libraries, and parks should have ample space to host exhibits. Strong long-range planning for transportation, commercial and residential zoning, and public outdoor spaces can contribute to the success of all revitalization and development initiatives, including those directed at strengthening the artistic community and diverse live/work options. Similarly, integrating the promotion of the arts into regional DMV promotional activities would contribute to a more balanced visitor base supporting a wide range of Arlington businesses. This would work to reinforce Arlington’s wide and diverse range of offerings. As a County Board member, I will encourage and facilitate more partnerships among arts organizations, schools, the food and beverage industry, the hotel industry, and tourism and
industrial travel businesses so that each industry is invested in enhancing the prosperity of the others.

Takis Karantonis: Planning for the presence of arts and entertainment is a critical component of successful corridor development. We have only to look to DC to understand that when the arts are part of the planning, the corridors or places begin to more quickly thrive economically as they are developed. It’s too bad that a node—Shirlington—is the only place this has been successfully done in Arlington. We need to think about every plaza and public space that the County Board approves as “performance ready”. That means thinking through where a stage can be most logically placed and providing power hook ups, shade structures and other supports strategically. Lubber Run Amphitheater is a lovely space — should it be the only such opportunity in our County? We need to partner with APS and find ways that arts organizations can have access to the excellent performing arts spaces at the secondary schools — especially during the months when school is not in session. Finally, creating an arts focus weekend or annual event is a way to begin branding Arlington as an active part of our region’s arts and culture scene. Whether it’s offering performing space in our existing plazas and theaters or creating some new (and maybe unexpected) places, we need to operate at this level of placemaking. I saw this up close when Berlin created its 48-hours arts event (48h Neukölln) and believe that idea could find a home in Arlington with a small amount of public/private seed money.

3. How will the development of an Arts District expand opportunities for currently funded arts groups and amplify the inclusion of under-represented audiences?

Bob Cambridge: Paraphrasing from an article on the Arts & Industry District: In November 2018, the County Board adopted the Four Mile Run Valley Area Plan which recognized that the rehearsal, artist, and recording studios, black box theater, and office spaces located within the County-owned building at 3700 South Four Mile Run Drive could provide users with a unique clustering of arts and creative activities producing a fertile environment for collaboration and innovation. It sounds very much like the Torpedo Factory in Alexandria. I was concerned that the article mentioned little that was being done to sell the Four Mile Run Valley Plan to the community and to the County Board. Please see my response to the following question, which is one suggestion of what you can do to better prepare for the obstacles you will inevitably face when your project must compete for priority with other projects.

Susan Cunningham: Art is for everyone. More than many other aspects of economic development and prosperity, the arts are inherently multicultural, both in their production and in their enjoyment. The creation of an Arts District that is broadly accessible to a wide cross-section of the population should be a priority. Our proximity to arts-rich Washington, DC and transportation hubs makes Arlington a great location for an Arts District that builds collaborations between businesses and the arts, and between jurisdictions within Northern Virginia and the greater DMV. Artists work in all corners of Arlington County. Yet Arlington is not widely-known for its arts community, in part because there is no one spot where residents and tourists can conveniently find a range and density of working artists. An Arts District can provide that hub, and allow artists to communicate and collaborate with each other more effectively. This will expand artistic educational opportunities, provide collaborative spaces, and support
coordinated artistic endeavors, leading to increased efficiency and inspiration in the arts. Tourists and residents will flock to the area, art will thrive, and both artists and businesses will prosper. As part of Arlington’s commitment to equity, we need to be aware of who is making and delivering art and who is receiving it. We can prioritize inclusiveness by investing in long-term planning that includes a focus on the arts as part of other County-wide initiatives including housing diversity, rent grants, land trusts, co-op programs, and education, as well as subsidized fellowship programs, built through public-private partnerships.

Takis Karantonis: As the County continues planning the Four Mile Run area, I am very interested in understanding what is physically envisioned for the proposed Arts District. Finding the right partners—as was done with Signature Theater—to help with this long-term endeavor will be important. Another aspect of an Arts District is public art, something I have strongly supported for many years, having served on the Arts Commission’s Public Art Committee for two terms. An Arts District uses public art to brand itself as a “destination”, which is helpful to arts organizations and to the nearby economy. When I served as the Executive Director of CPRO, the CPRO Board had in mind to create this sort of identity for Columbia Pike. We instituted movie nights—a cheaper way to create a sense of destination for near-by neighbors—and installed banners to advertise events. I built out the Blues Festival, featuring national headliners while keeping it free and accessible; I supported and marketed the annual “studio-crawl” at the Columbia Pike Artist Studios and created opportunities for free outdoor performances for local arts companies such as Jane Franklin Dance and Saffron Dance on Penrose Square. The Crystal City Bid also used art to create a sense of place in a neighborhood previously known solely as an office destination. Arlington does not need to be limited to a single area known for supporting arts. Arts have a place in each of our major development areas.

4. With respect to venues, or lack thereof in Arlington, several performing arts venues in the County have been shuttered due to various reasons, including the Rosslyn Spectrum, Artisphere, Iota and the Clarendon Ballroom. In addition, the promised black box theater in Virginia Square will no longer be delivered. If we truly want to be an arts destination, then it is essential that we have at least one quality flexible performing arts venue to accommodate several professional theater organizations, live music events, and other entertainment options. What incentives can the County provide to the business community to support public-private partnerships, especially in the area of infrastructure?

Bob Cambridge: Wings of Paper is a nonprofit corporation set up by my son in Philadelphia. See https://wingsofpapertheatre.org/ and https://www.facebook.com/wingsofpapertheatrecompany/. An individual who owned a group of buildings in the Mayfair neighborhood of Philadelphia and was a supporter for the neighborhood made part of one building available to Wings of Paper. The activities at what became the Mayfair Black Box provided some income and experience to local performers and boosted economic activity at the sponsor’s other businesses in that area. If we can get that kind of support going in Arlington, the County would get a bigger bang for the dollars they can be persuaded to provide. My email is bcesq@verizon.net. Ask me about what Wings of Paper and John did for Philadelphia area schools.
**Susan Cunningham:** Although COVID-19 has stalled current performances and exhibitions, it does not have to stall the County’s planning. Constrained arts space availability is a huge damper on Arts growth in the County. We need at least one quality, flexible performing arts venue to accommodate several professional theater organizations, whether in conjunction with a public facility or in partnership with private owners to repurpose underutilized retail and office space (e.g. Columbia Pike west of George Mason, Ballston Mall). In planning for these spaces, we need to consider long-term operating costs and funding partnerships, to ensure fiscal responsibility and sustainability. While we should explore building new venues, I am also a big proponent of creating shared spaces where the arts can thrive. Working with the community, the County can partner with churches, recreation centers, schools and businesses to maximize the potential of existing space or to work to develop space as part of new County construction projects. We can develop shared-use agreements and work from the bottom up to rethink scheduling, security, cleaning and maintenance, and technology development and investment to transform frequently idle single-use spaces into multi-use spaces. In my mind, I see two goals here: first, a dedicated Arts District and, second, arts venues to attract a wider demographic of both artists and visitors from around the DMV. By maximizing already-existent and any new space to accommodate artistic production, we can integrate the arts more fully and more quickly into the Arlington County community.

**Takis Karantonis:** It is true that we have not been able to achieve an excellent performing arts venue in our county. And that, over the past 10 years, we’ve lost many private venues that served Arlington very well. In my view, the desired facility should be Metro and bus accessible. That means we need to look strategically—and be willing to move quickly should the right parcel of land become available. Many lessons were learned from the evolution of the desire for a black box theater in Virginia Square. I think that the Board should ask the Arts Commission and staff to study that multi-year situation and extract the key lessons that should guide us moving forward. Without clarity about what we learned, what we desire and want to avoid, it will be hard to include this goal in any site plan and I am afraid that no progress will be made on the long time goal of a public performing venue that could serve both Arlington arts organizations and touring performers.

5. **Where, when and what was the last arts experience you took part in or attended and how did it or the arts in general impact your life personally?**

**Bob Cambridge:** My son got a Ph.D. in Entomology (bugs) and constructed a butterfly pavilion at an insect museum in Philadelphia. See https://www.phillybutterflypavilion.com/. John made significant use of local artists and artists from Rutgers University. The museum and butterfly pavilion are not only entertaining and educational, but there is an ongoing artistic effort which does a lot to make the facility both really neat and an effective communicator of the learning which is the purpose of the facilities. Philadelphia has a rather aggressive neighborhood mural program. Holmesburg, the neighborhood in which the museum and butterfly pavilion are located, has accomplished significant improvement thanks to artistic efforts supported by the museum. I am impressed by how much and easily some parts of town can be improved with a little paint and a lot of imagination.

**Susan Cunningham:** COVID-19 has definitely changed the way my family engages with the arts. We’ve had the pleasure of attending online cello concerts, church, and choir performances, as
well as socially distant vigils and marches. We are missing our usual rhythm of Studio Theater performances. We saw “Pipeline” in February, a powerful piece tackling systemic racism in education; it especially resonated as I had just finished leading a weekend-long youth workshop on dismantling racism, where several white teen Arlingtonians grappled with what it meant to be an ally, not a bystander. “Pipeline” also vividly recalled my work at the SEED School in DC which provided a daily reminder education about the need to dismantle racism in our communities and classrooms. I’ve spent time with my daughters on various ‘artistic’ endeavors ranging from protest sign creation to friendship-bracelet making and creative baking. This time has made me think a lot about my own childhood. Growing up in a small rural town in Pennsylvania, my family frequently traveled to New York City where I learned to love all kinds of art, from subway murals to Broadway, from street performance to symphonies and ballet. My family still travels to New York when we can. The last piece I saw in New York City was a gut-wrenching show off-Broadway about the Rwandan genocide. An incredible performance that both made me cry and made me think—which of course, is what great art can do.

**Takis Karantonis:** My last, pre COVID-19, in-person arts experience, was a visit to the VMFA in Richmond to see the excellent exhibition on “Edward Hopper and the American Hotel”. For me the most influential arts experiences this past season were: Woolly Mammoth’s outstanding production of “Fairview”, by Jackie Sibblies Drury, directed by Stevie Walker-Webb And, Woolly Mammoth’s and The Movement Theater’s Company impactful staging of “What to Send Up When It Goes Down” by Aleshea Harris, directed by Whitney White, at the Duke Ellington School for the Arts. Both plays tackle the discussion of race in a way I have not experienced before. I could not have imagined how these two performances would have prepared me for the tragic events and the very difficult discussions of this spring following the murder of George Floyd.