

Arlington Board Retreats on Clarendon COVID Effort

Leaders: Policy Aimed at Spacing Out Patrons in Restaurant/Bar Corridor Proved Ineffective

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Staff Writer

Concluding that good intentions and public-health finger-wagging don't necessarily translate to compliance, Arlington County Board members on Sept. 15 voted to scrap their two-month-old effort to use police in enforcing COVID-19 distancing directives in Clarendon.

The 4-1 vote means the initial ordinance, passed July 31 on an emergency basis, will lapse as of Sept. 29 (and likely will not be enforced much, if at all, between now and then).

The July 31 measure put the county government in an aggressive stance – some would argue needlessly aggressive – against patrons of restaurants and bars in Clarendon, which had been devastated by the COVID crisis and resulting government lockdowns. And ultimately, the effort failed to generate what county officials hoped for.

"At the end of the day, I don't see any reason to continue having something on the books that just doesn't work," County Board member Christian Dorsey said. "We want to be effective. We shouldn't double down on something that doesn't

work."

Dorsey was joined by colleagues Katie Cristol, Matt de Ferranti and Takis Karantonis in voting to let the measure die. Only County Board Chairman Libby Garvey supported the staff recommendation to continue it, saying the ordinance, and the publicity it had engendered, did have an impact.

"I think we're getting people to pay more attention – that's a good thing," she said.

But Garvey was on an island unto herself (perhaps with County Manager Mark Schwartz alongside her). Just about everyone else in the decision-making process said the effort wasn't paying dividends.

The Arlington Chamber of Commerce opposed the measure as targeting one segment of the community (hospitality) and endangering its recovery. In a statement following the vote, the Chamber encouraged county officials to "develop alternative, more constructive approaches to promoting social-distancing on sidewalks."

"We look forward to working collaboratively with our members and local government to help patrons enjoy and support our restaurants and other Arlington businesses in a safe, healthy manner,"

the business organization said.

That was a view that found resonance with several County Board members. "We want our restaurants to thrive," de Ferranti acknowledged.

Before voting, County Board members took public testimony, which reinforced the view that the enforcement effort wasn't bearing fruit. Other speakers complained about using police and the threat of \$100 fines to force compliance.

"If it's really about 'education,' let's get rid of the fine element," said local resident Gary Lawkowski, who spoke on the topic. "Otherwise, it's just bureaucratic double-speak at its worst."

The entire effort has proved "a misuse of our law-enforcement resources, turning our police into glorified hall monitors," Lawkowski said.

During board discussion, de Ferranti floated the idea of waiting another week or two before making a final decision, but Schwartz said there wasn't really a point.

"I personally don't think the conversation is going to change much," he said.

Another proposal – to keep the ordinance but only enforce it during late-night hours – also went nowhere.

Schwartz shouldered some of the

blame for the negative community reaction to the enforcement effort, acknowledging that comments he had made about possibly going further to address crowding in front of restaurants and bars (on property the restaurant/bar owners have no control over) may have scared some in the hospitality industry into believing more draconian restrictions were in the works. There also were concerns the effort would expand to other areas, such as the restaurant row along 23rd Street South near Crystal City.

As County Board members are wont to do, the discussion meandered in the weeds for a time, but by 10:45 p.m., Garvey was ready to call it quits.

"It's really late, we need to stop," she said, corralling her colleagues toward the final vote.

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