

In the past half century, Falls Church has grown from a fledgling independent city struggling to serve a growing population to one of the most attractive --and attracting - communities in the Greater Washington region.

Throughout this transition, the Citizens for a Better City (CBC) organization has been a consistent force in promoting responsible local government, excellence in local education, and citizen stewardship.

CBC stands on a foundation of principles and policies set by its founders in a time of political controversies that gripped the entire city. CBC is committed to:

- promoting civic leadership development
- high quality schools and city services
- development policies seeking business growth compatible with the city's neighborhoods
- protection of the city's natural endowments
- maintaining the city's independent status

CBC presents no political platform on particular issues. Indeed, the City Council and School Board representatives elected with CBC support have had to find their own answers to constantly evolving challenges posed by growth, transportation congestion, growing school populations and pressures on tax revenues.

In most elections CBC-backed candidates have won the public's mandate. CBC's recurring success has prompted some opponents wrongly to call it a political machine. In fact, its leadership and volunteers -- like the candidates its conventions endorse -- come from the ranks of residents who take time away from work and home to serve their community.

Today, as in the years leading to the creation of CBC, Falls Church residents face difficult choices as they seek to assure our small city's economic vitality and maintain its defining quality of life. CBC continues as a catalyst for citizen engagement on these issues.

BEGINNINGS

Falls Church, a quiet crossroads village of 2,576 in 1940, was notable mainly for its historic Falls Church and the two major highways that intersect at its heart. English settlement began in 1699, but Falls Church was not incorporated as a town until 1875. At the beginning of World War II, the town was in Fairfax County and its schools were part of the Fairfax County system. The county was controlled politically by the then-dominant Byrd organization.

Burgeoning population -- it almost tripled during the 1940s -- placed heavy burdens on the town's schools, streets and roads, drainage, garbage collection, and other city services. Newcomers drawn to the city during the war generally demanded higher quality educational and municipal services than was customary in rural Virginia. They were willing to pay the taxes and float the bonds necessary to finance them. This was

strongly opposed by many of the native residents long used to low taxes, minimum services, and pay-as-you-go fiscal policies.

Along with better schools, the new residents felt an equally compelling need for more control over the city's future growth than was possible under a town form of government. Many had come to Falls Church because of its "village atmosphere." They were resolved to keep it that way. They favored zoning policies that featured low density development of business and single family detached homes. This was strongly opposed by real estate speculators and by some residents who hoped to redevelop their properties for commercial use.

These two motives -- better schools and more control over the community's destiny -- were major drivers behind the successful effort to obtain city status from the Virginia General Assembly in 1948. But Falls Church was badly shortchanged by the court settlement that divided school facilities between Fairfax County and the new city. The city was left with no high school; old, inadequate elementary schools, and a rapidly rising school population. It had no city hall, library, recreation center, virtually no park land, and a water system dependent on wells within the city.

Following incorporation as a city, Falls Church remained limited to its current land area of 2.2 square miles, much of it already occupied by homes and businesses. Two attempts to annex additional land were rejected by the courts.

The city's first elected council approved a bond issue for a new high school and for renovation of Madison and Jefferson schools. Land for George Mason Junior-Senior high school and the Mt. Daniel elementary school was purchased in the county, since suitable land in the city was not available.

Opposition to these actions was immediate, vigorous, and persistent. The school projects proceeded, but the opponents won control of the council and at one point, all but one of the appointed school board members resigned to protest council actions. This conflict was resolved when supporters of the school board regained control of council in 1953.

STRIP ZONING OF WEST BROAD STREET

Zoning ranked alongside the schools as a subject of political battles. In the early 1950s, some property owners sought to rezone narrow bands of land on both sides of West Broad Street for commercial development. The Planning Commission rejected the proposal but was reversed by the council in 1952. As the planning commission had predicted, the strip zoning of West Broad Street effectively prevented block zoning which could have permitted creation of a more desirable central business district and more sensible traffic management.

ANOTHER SCHOOL CRISIS

A second school crisis erupted in the late 1950s. Those critical of the system regained control of the council in 1957. The new council majority rejected a school board request for a bond issue for expansion of the high school, despite a petition signed by 1,200 residents. The council then replaced members of the school board who had recommended the bond issue.

A group of citizens, many of whom had been active in city politics since the time when Falls Church was still a town, launched a nonpartisan campaign in February, 1959 to elect candidates in the June council election. They described themselves as representing "all areas of the city and a broad range of views - Republican and Democrat, liberal and conservative, government workers and private business," united by a determination "to bring back good municipal government to Falls Church." The group, calling itself Citizens for a Better *Council*, was the forerunner of the present Citizens for a Better *City*.

The group charged that "our schools -- once a major attraction of this community and a source of justified pride -- are now being driven into mediocrity." The statement cited delayed construction, crowding, lowering of standards, reductions in budgets, and teacher pay scales below area standards.

Other matters stressed included zoning for public interest, open debate on major matters of policy, and appointments to city boards and commissions of qualified persons. An overwhelming victory in the council election capped the campaign.

A PERMANENT PARTY

It was now apparent that the school crises reflected the ephemeral nature of the political efforts of supporters of the system during the first decade of the city's existence. Citizens favoring good schools, low density zoning, and better municipal administration would band together on an ad hoc basis to win an election. Once in power, they would let the organization wither away and as a result, lose the next election. An editorial in the Washington Post pinpointed the difficulty.

"The lesson is clear. Hard work built a good school system in Falls Church, but political apathy brought neglect of the vigilance at the polls necessary to insure its continuation.

Taking that lesson to heart, Citizens for a Better *Council* leaders called a meeting of the members on November 16, 1959, and created a permanent organization styled Citizens for a Better *City*, with a formal structure and bylaws. This was the founding date of the CBC that continues today.

CBC's structure, which was unusual, if not unique, for an organization of its kind, has these elements:

An open nominating convention.. Residents of voting age may attend the convention and vote for nominees, whether or not they are members of CBC. Also, any resident of voting age, whether or not a member of CBC, may seek the convention's endorsement as a candidate. All candidates for nomination are required to subscribe to CBC principles.

The possibility that an opposition group could come into the convention and nominate candidates hostile to CBC was recognized and accepted. It was believed that the advantages of an open convention made the risk worthwhile. The open convention refutes the occasional accusation that CBC is a political machine run by a secret inner group.

No party platform.. CBC does not develop a party platform to which candidates for nomination at the convention are pledged. Instead, candidates are quizzed during the question period at the convention as to their stands on issues, philosophical positions and personal qualifications. After the convention, the nominees draft their own platform which is expected to be consistent with the stated principles of CBC.

This practice reflects the long held CBC position that the best guarantee of good city government is the experience, judgment, competence and integrity of council members.

Positions on issues.. CBC as an organization does not take stands on specific issues before city councils on which CBC is represented. Individual members, of course, are free to voice their views as they see fit. Council members are fully responsible for the positions they take.

The CBC executive committee has taken positions on referendum questions including bond referendums that have been referred to the voters and are not before the city council. In these cases the positions taken are clearly declared to be the positions of the executive committees and not necessarily the positions of the organization as a whole. The chief functions of the CBC executive committee are to maintain the organization between elections and encourage qualified candidates to seek nomination at the CBC conventions. The executive committee does not "dictate" policy on issues before the council.

Nonpartisan policy.. The Falls Church City charter specifies that ballots used in the election of council members shall not have "any distinguishing mark or symbol" indicating party affiliation. The federal Hatch Act prohibits federal employees from running for office as representatives of national parties. CBC boards have always included both Republicans and Democrats.

CBC's efforts brought national attention to Falls Church in 1962 when the city received an All-American City award from Look magazine and the National Municipal League because "It got better government and better schools through nonpartisan political action."

NEW BATTLEGROUND

Unable to win at the polls as the 1950s decade closed, the opposition resorted to the courts. After a hard fought campaign, voters approved a referendum in 1960 on a \$1.2 million bond issue to enlarge George Mason, modernize Madison elementary, and improve storm drains and streets. Alleging irregularities, the Falls Church Taxpayers League asked the Fairfax County Circuit Court to invalidate the result. The court found the bond issue legal, a decision affirmed by the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals.

Issues involving business development and zoning moved to the forefront. By the end of the decade, these focused on the proposed development of the First Virginia Bank property at the intersection of Broad and Washington streets. This is the tract opposite Brown's Hardware, developed in 1985.

The bank proposed to construct an office building that exceeded the city's seven story height limit. Many residents feared this project would open Falls Church to high rise development similar to that of Rosslyn. Others saw the bank's proposal as key to the long-sought creation of a central business district. They were willing to raise the height limit to achieve this goal. The controversy divided CBC as well as citizens generally

Following protracted negotiations, the bank proposed a building within the height limitation, which was approved by the planning commission. Later, however, the bank withdrew its proposal. The bank gave no public explanation, but it may have been responding to a recently enacted state law that would have limited branch operations in Arlington and Fairfax counties had the bank remained headquartered in the city. The bank later constructed two high rise buildings just outside the city, in the Seven Corners area.

CBC LOSES COUNCIL MAJORITY

In the 1969 council campaign, a major effort by real estate interests and dissension within CBC over the bank issue resulted in CBC's loss of a council majority. An immediate after effect was another zoning issue, as divisive as the strip zoning of Broad Street in the 1950s and the First Virginia Bank's proposal.

The council adopted a Planned Unit Development ordinance which was supported by CBC members as a useful device for planning and development of the commercial areas of the city. The PUD ordinance did not control density; this was to be done by assigning Land Use Intensity ratings (LUIs) to various areas.

The night it was passed, after most of the audience had gone home, without public notice or hearing, the council majority adopted a resolution which assigned interim LUIs for most of the city, residential as well as business. The effect would have been to open certain areas to highly intensive development. For example, maximum ratings

were assigned to Tyler Gardens (now Winter Hill) and the tract now occupied by the Oakwood Apartments.

Public outrage forced the council to modify these actions and was largely responsible for CBC regaining its council majority in the 1974 election. Political strife then eased markedly. In the four elections from 1980 through 1986, council candidates supported by CBC were uncontested.

The party continued to function. Membership drives were conducted, funds solicited, literature prepared and distributed, and the campaign organization maintained. CBC nominees campaigned actively, helping inform citizens of the organization's principles, activities and goals.

A DECADE OF DEBATE

Interest in local politics revived dramatically after the 1986 election. In 1988, CBC faced opposition for the first time from a new party, the Falls Church Citizens Organization (FCCO.) Preceding organization, several issues of an anonymously written broadside entitled "Blur" were distributed. It attacked not only CBC council persons but also the schools and the city's professional staff. This disturbing development violated the city's tradition of open political debate.

The new party campaigned vigorously, charging that CBC policies had resulted in "runaway taxes." The three candidates supported by CBC were defeated, but the four elected in 1986 remained in office. In the next two years, political debate was warm and often rancorous. CBC won all four of the contested seats in 1990 and all three in 1992.

The 1998 election resulted in the loss of a CBC-supported council majority for the second time in the organization's history. The new council consisted of four FCCO representatives and three CBC representatives, and the mayor and vice mayor were from FCCO. For the next two years, FCCO initiatives prevailed. However, the base of the FCCO organization was growing smaller and in 2000 three CBC candidates defeated three FCCO or Independent candidates. FCCO as an organization died out, and in subsequent elections opposition candidates ran as independents. In 2006, four CBC candidates faced no opposition, but in 2008, three CBC candidates faced opposition from four independents. One of the four independent candidates was elected. CBC candidates for the School Board have faced opposition from FCCO or independent candidates only three times since 1994.

For twelve years, from 1991 to 2003, City residents could find weekly columns in the Falls Church News Press, in the POINT-COUNTERPOINT column, written by representatives of each nonpartisan party, CBC and FCCO. The contrast between CBC and FCCO columns could often be noted. In March 1991, for example, the first CBC column focused on outreach to business, while the FCCO column topic was

sustaining the village atmosphere. Phased out in February 2003, the columns had provoked interest and provided visibility for both parties.

CHALLENGES TO BIPARTISAN POLITICS

In 2006 the City Democratic Committee (FCCDC) adopted a resolution, stating an intent to endorse candidates for the City Council. This brought an immediate negative reaction from most CBC members, who saw such a development as an unwanted “partisanization” of City Council elections. It would cause new Democratic and Republican divides in city policy debates and could lead to a reluctance of federal employees to become candidates, due to the Hatch Act prohibition against running in partisan elections. A change in the leadership of the FCCDC in 2008 resulted in rescission of the resolution.

Another threat to nonpartisan May elections involved a new State law effective January 1, 2000 that allowed cities and towns to move their local elections from May to November. The state budget adopted for FY2010 reduced the funds available to the State Board of Elections and that board adopted a new policy to conserve funds by not supporting City and Town elections in May. Those in favor of moving local elections to November cite the possibility of increased voter participation and the reduction of election costs. Others believe local elections should continue to be decided in May, when budget discussions are fresh in voters’ minds and local issues are less likely to be overshadowed by state and national partisan politics.

DEVELOPMENT LOOMS LARGE

In the past 20 years, the long-held views of the city residents toward residential development evolved. The expansion of the Washington Metro system led to a surge of condominiums and mixed-use residential and commercial buildings in Arlington County. Some in CBC and the wider community felt that such developments in Falls Church would threaten the residential character of the city. Others in CBC and in the city argued that such development was essential to expand the commercial tax base for the support of schools and city services.

The new Smart Growth theories of community development, expounded at the Street Works workshops early in the new century, led to revisions in the zoning code. The new ordinances permitted a mixture of retail and other commercial and residential uses in one development at the discretion of the council. They also included the possibility of greater height and density than “by-right” zoning previously allowed in commercial areas.

While the initial City Center proposal resulting from those workshops seemed to be well received, first uses of the new ordinances were not for the center of the city, but farther along West Broad Street and South Maple Avenue, with the construction

of the Broadway, Byron, Spectrum and Pearson Square buildings. Other mixed-use projects have been proposed for North Washington Street, but the controversial City Center South development approved by council had not gone forward as 2009 drew to a close.

CBC Council members generally supported these applications and welcomed the resulting revenues as a means of financing essential city services and the full budget requests of the school board.

Strong concern about the ratio of residential versus commercial construction in commercially-zoned areas led to two citizen-initiated referendums in the early 2000s.

In 2002, a proposed City Charter amendment to curtail new residential structures on commercially-zoned property if such construction would increase the city's population by more than one percent was subject to referendum. The council would have had to seek voter approval by referendum if it did not meet the curtailed limitations. The vote failed, with 63 percent of voters voting "No".

In May, 2008, a similarly initiated referendum sought approval of a proposed charter amendment to limit square footage devoted to residential uses to 40 percent of the total square footage of a mixed-use project. This time 57 percent of the voters rejected the charter change. The timing of this referendum was a result of the proposed City Center South application, then very much a subject of discussion.

In single-family detached areas, lack of open land has resulted in either tear-downs followed by rebuilding, or sizeable additions to small houses. In either case, this has resulted in much larger houses than previously on the properties. A further result has been a decrease in the amount of lower-cost housing, threatening the diversity of the community.

A comprehensive review of the city's zoning regulations for neighborhoods and commercial areas was launched by the council in 2007 with participation by a citizens' panel. Proposals are due at the end of 2009 and in 2010, creating an opportunity to seek a new consensus on how to balance neighborhood preservation and development of a vital commercial center to strengthen the tax base.

QUALITY OF LIFE ISSUES

In line with CBC's founding principles, CBC councils in recent years have emphasized the following initiatives:

Diversity of housing opportunities. As part of an effort to attract and keep valued city and school employees, to conserve resources and to provide shorter commutes for some public service employees, affordable housing units were included as part of the negotiating process for major condominium and townhouse development within the city. In several cases, affordable units were offered first to city public employees.

In seeking these goals, councils have adopted an Affordable Housing Policy and established an Affordable Housing Fund with revenue from developers' proffers. The councils have also provided financial support to the Falls Church Housing Corporation, established under the auspices of the 1981 CBC council to act as a cooperating agent to provide additional affordable housing units.

Preserving and expanding parkland. Open space acquisitions have continued over the past 15 years, as land became available. The city purchased the Hamlett property, a large tract between Thomas Jefferson School and West Broad Street and added to it the Rees property by proffers from a condominium developer, resulting in a total of more than four acres of additional parkland. The West End Park was enlarged by acquisition of property long held by the Volunteer Fire Department, and minor additions to Crossman Park have been purchased. In the 1990s, the acquisition of the Whittier site permitted development of soccer fields and youth softball fields on the south side of Hillwood Avenue. Master Plans for improvement of individual parks are gradually being developed and implemented.

Community center for residents of all ages. After a \$4.8 million bond issue for major renovation of the Community Center was defeated in May, 1998, a more modest renovation costing \$2.5 million was completed in 2001.

Recycling programs. The broad range of recycling options, including voluntary curbside disposal with opportunities for convenient drop-off at the recycling center at the West End have made our recycling participation among the strongest in Northern Virginia, the Commonwealth and the nation.

Other areas. In 1999, the city began construction on a new state-of-the-art fire station and a major rehabilitation of the school fields. In the same year the council acquired historic property to become a commemorative center for the civil rights movement. Noting increased traffic, the city continued to create treed medians and use other traffic-calming techniques.

GROWTH AND CHANGES IN THE SCHOOLS

The 1990s were a significant time for city schools. In 1993, a newly enacted state law allowed localities the option to select school board members by election rather than by appointment of the governing body. In response to a petition drive, a referendum was placed on the ballot in November 1993. Sixty-two percent of those voting favored elected school boards. Falls Church held its first school board election in May 1994.

In advance of that election the CBC executive committee decided to hold an additional nominating convention, solely for school board candidates. There was little contest at the CBC school board candidate nominating conventions in 1994 and 1996. By 1998, the CBC executive committee decided to combine the school board and city council conventions. CBC candidates who were selected from the nominees

for both school board and council ran parallel campaigns with each slate printing brochures and signs.

In the early years of the new century, a distinct rise in student population resulted in overcrowding in the schools. This was concurrent with condominium

and townhouse development and a general population increase and partly a result of program changes. In November 2003, an overwhelming 77 percent margin of voters supported a \$25 million school bond referendum to construct a new middle school separate from the high school, and to renovate Mt. Daniel elementary school. The CBC executive committee supported the referendum.

The often fluctuating school enrollment is again on the rise, as new families settle in neighborhoods and the multi-family developments fill up. Enrollment was at its highest number in 1964-1965 when 2,293 students crowded into our schools. In 1982-83 enrollment had dipped to a low of 1,013. Presently the enrollment has moved just over 2,000. Throughout this period George Mason High School has won accolades as one of the best high schools in the nation.

CONTINUING THE TRADITION

Over the past 50 years, CBC's opponents have often raised concerns about the organization's central role in the city's political life and the de facto single party system that has prevailed in most years. The critics ignore the fact that CBC creates a process -- not a program or a partisan platform -- a process for encouraging civic-minded candidates to serve on the City Council and School Board. CBC has played a vital part by supporting those candidates, chosen by citizens at the open CBC conventions, as they conduct their campaigns. This will continue to be a primary CBC function.

The forces of change in Northern Virginia have created a very different environment from the one CBC founders encountered. Then a strong corps of citizens was able to unite a majority of the community around CBC's goals. Today the city's population is twice as large, with many newcomers. Fewer than half of Falls Church residents in 2000 were living in the same place they had lived just five years before, according to Census data.

It will take a concerted effort of the CBC organization to continue to provide a strong CBC membership base of residents, both newcomers and "old-timers," so that we will inform our citizenry about CBC and its role in City nonpartisan politics. Parents with school-age children, working outside the home, often find it challenging and too time-consuming to take more than a short-term role in the activities of CBC. Continuing to develop and support a strong ward organization, a strength of CBC throughout the years, is still of primary importance.

Falls Church faces grave economic circumstances in common with many other state and local governments. The need has seldom been greater for constructive dialogue and debate about the path Falls Church should follow.

CBC's encouragement of residents to seek appointments to boards and commissions will continue to be an important step in helping prospective council and school board candidates gain knowledge and experience within the Falls Church City government structure. It will foster a willingness and readiness to become a larger part of the democratic process in the city. As we celebrate 50 years of leadership by Citizens for a Better City, and 60 years of Falls Church City Public Schools, we pledge to continue the vigilance and participation necessary to maintain quality schools and open, participatory government as we strive to make Falls Church a Better City.

This history is drawn from the 1993 History of CBC by Wayne Dexter

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