



County of Fairfax, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

March 28, 2023

TO: Jeffrey C. McKay, Chairman and Members
Fairfax County Board of Supervisors

FROM: Edward H. Blum, Chairman *EHB*
Information Technology Policy Advisory Committee (ITPAC)

SUBJECT: FY 2024 ITPAC Budget Letter to the Board of Supervisors

In regular interactions with the senior leadership of the County's Department of Information Technology (DIT), ITPAC reviews County IT challenges and opportunities. This Advisory Committee of citizens with significant government and IT industry expertise knows that it is important to expand and strengthen IT investments when serious community needs exist even in an uncertain fiscal environment. Drawing on their backgrounds, the members recommend options for Fairfax IT investments.

At the Board IT Committee meeting February 28, 2023, DIT presented the *DIT Strategic Direction 2023-2025* blueprint. The plan structures DIT's role as securely leading the County's digital transformation. ITPAC endorses and supports its direction and focus on the most important County core processes and capabilities.

County IT Successes: ITPAC recommends that the budget continue to maintain the IT operational leadership that is a County strength. DIT budget support has led to significant County successes. These include:

Key Application Modernized for Service and Savings: As the result of a multiyear investment of funds, planning, and technical expertise, the County's Planning and Land Use System (PLUS) is now operational. It is replacing a system of outdated technologies and disjointed silos of information. The new system will simplify processes and improve services for citizens and developers as well as realize savings from discontinuing out of date technologies. The implementation process included challenges – some resulting from migrating files and data from systems well beyond their life expectancy to a more modern system. DIT and its partner agencies overcame the major issues of complexity, volume, and massive data exporting/importing.

Pandemic Operational Challenges Addressed: The pandemic necessitated shifting the County's workforce to hybrid operations. With the assistance of DMB and other partners, DIT implemented technology supporting that move. To enable most staff to work remotely, they used Federal CARES Act and ARPA grants supplemented with local funds to support upgrades in IT security, video-teleconferencing, Wi-Fi enhancements, and other technologies. Hybrid work by County staff is likely to continue for the foreseeable future and must be supported in budget planning.

County 2022 Election Process Successfully Managed: Despite difficulties encountered with the Commonwealth election systems during the 2022 midterm election, DIT ensured a smooth operation for Fairfax County citizens and staff.

GIS Recognized for Its County-wide Integration: ESRI, a global leader in geographic information system (GIS) software, location intelligence, and mapping, gave Fairfax County’s GIS its inaugural award recognizing excellence in advancing the power of geography through an enterprise-wide approach. The County should continue to fund the integration of geographic information and analysis into its systems to strengthen services.

Investment Recommendations for Effectiveness: ITPAC supports the following investments for increasingly effective and efficient use of resources in critical areas:

Cyber Security: It is critical to continue investment in cybersecurity technologies and expertise to reduce the risk of disruptions to County operations and services due to increasingly capable attack agents. County funding in this area will be needed in the near future to maintain enhanced services originally funded through Federal CARES and/or ARPA funds.

DTA Business Processes: New funding is required to address Department of Tax Administration (DTA) performance and revenue enhancing improvements. These include business process enhancement, upgrading payment portal and user interaction, IT performance improvement, and system integration. It is our understanding that the first tranche of funds for these needed enhancements is included in *the FY 2023 Third Quarter Review*. Additional funding will be needed in future budget processes.

E-Gov Project: Ongoing funding is needed for key functional upgrades to AI-powered Fairfax Virtual Assistant (“chatbot”), which facilitates voice interactions with County online services. These upgrades should include Spanish and Live Assistant capability and be integrated with voice assistants such as Alexa and Google. ITPAC also recommends funding for tools to optimize content and design in implementing intelligent automation. This requires funding to align digital metrics with organizational goals to provide predictable, credible, measurable, and compliant services.

Hybrid Operation: ITPAC recommends continued funding for the Remote Access Project and other options that improve the ability of the County workforce to conduct business securely both remotely and on-premises.

Enterprise Data Analytics: The County should leverage the enormous value in County data to make more effective budget and programmatic decisions. It should also enable citizen portals to make use of the enterprise-wide data with analytics.

Equitable Technology Access: Fairfax County should seek ways to incorporate equitable access to technology for its citizens and workers.

Collaboration and Partners for Growth: With others in the area (such as FCPS or IT companies with significant local presence), the County should develop partnerships to co-create solutions and services. Examples are predictive analytics and “smart/connected communities.” Opportunities to deploy innovative technologies enabling business growth across sectors could include applications of block-chain, new electronic payment methods, artificial intelligence, robotics, and automation, among others.

Challenges to Achieving the Mission: ITPAC recommends taking action to address the following issues, many of which are longstanding and constantly evolving.

Hiring Impediments with Significant IT Staff Approaching DROP: With approximately 25 percent of DIT staff either in DROP or eligible to retire within the next two years, DIT struggles to retain the high-level talent required to develop and sustain Fairfax’s complex IT environment. As the DMV region’s reputation as a hub for IT and cyber security grows, the marketplace for that talent grows more competitive.

The main issues are compensation, hiring responsiveness, limitation on candidates’ home location, and restrictions on telework. IT professionals report receiving \$250K for area private sector jobs, being employed quickly in rapid hiring processes and having the flexibility to live and work remotely as needed from anywhere in the country.

As discussed at the recent BOS IT Committee meeting, ITPAC shares concern about policies that inhibit the full implementation of telework. For example, current policy limits County hiring to residents of Virginia, Maryland, the District of Columbia, and West Virginia. In addition, current County policy allows telework for a maximum of 60% of one’s time. Given IT hiring challenges, ITPAC thinks it is important and prudent to review and update policies that limit options and flexibility, especially as it pertains to the IT sector.

Virginia’s Under-Investment in IT Systems and Databases: The difficulties encountered with the Commonwealth election systems during the 2022 midterm election underscored the problems associated with state systems that are obsolete and underfunded, but used locally. ITPAC is concerned that these older systems may expose the County systems to unexpected costs and security risks. There is also the possibility of state data breaches that may expose sensitive private information of County residents.

The Commonwealth needs to fully fund its IT systems that are shared and connected to local governments to ensure that these systems are fully functional and secure. The Commonwealth also needs to ensure that resources are available to local governments to keep in full compliance with the state systems.

ITPAC recommends that County leaders emphasize these points to state officials and offer DIT advice and assistance for remediation as appropriate.

Protection of Wide-Spread County Data: Cyber threats continue to grow and become more sophisticated while the County’s technology footprint is expanding. Timely deployment of security protection supporting all levels of applications across the entire County must ensure resilient and uninterrupted operations as well as protected access to a wide variety of data. The volume and breadth of the threats are real and require a robust overall security infrastructure and must continue to be a budget priority.

Growing Value of Data Analytics with Data Proliferating: Data expansion and use drastically increases requirements for technology to gather, manage, preserve, and analyze data. This is critical to support service efficiency and productivity for County agencies. Satisfying demand for these new capabilities must be well-managed and funded. DIT has already begun to increase staffing to focus on data management and analytics.

Agencies' Business Process Transformations: As agencies seek to be more efficient through business process transformation, proposed changes often have significant IT implications. To achieve effective and successful results, it is critical for DIT to be engaged early in the process as a trusted partner. It is important to consider IT implications (both within the agency and in the central IT department) to achieve the goals cost-effectively and create long-term sustainability.

Agility and Time Required to Execute Contracts: The County would benefit greatly from increased contracting agility and reduced time to award IT contracts. Current review requirements often extend the time required to implement needed technology. Slow contract processes increase the cost of IT implementation and can prevent implementation entirely.

Additional Recommendations: ITPAC supports the following:

- Full support of the proposal in the FY 2024 Advertised Budget Plan to fund significant increased costs associated with software, storage, support, and related infrastructure requirements. This includes \$2 million to address inflationary impacts and demand-driven cost increases for both technology products and contracted services. Many of these costs arise from the need for additional remote access, enhanced mobility, and business continuity requirements.
- Support of the significant IT funding included in the *FY 2023 Third Quarter Review* received by the Board on 3/21/23 which includes IT Project funding, a second tranche of funding associated with the multi-year process to purchase replacement voting equipment, and needed support for IT infrastructure, storage equipment and associated software.
- Continue funding to modernize and drive innovation to improve customer services addressing business efficiency aligned with “Effective and Efficient Government.”
- Continue to use any applicable remaining Federal and other revenue sources to make additional IT investments. This should include any funding designated for broadband coverage equity and related areas within DIT’s purview that could notably help the County.
- Continue the innovative multi-year, multi-budget process investment strategy for major IT projects such as the recently implemented Planning Land Use System (PLUS), the Human Services Integrative Roadmap and similar projects for operational improvements. This allows projects to benefit from technology innovations while providing timely funding.
- Provide additional funding as needed to obtain and maintain newly required licenses for software and other core systems. Costs are increasing rapidly and will continue to grow in future years.

Conclusion:

ITPAC is pleased to continue supporting Fairfax County to achieve best practices for technology governance and implementation. As with other high-performing organizations, the County’s reliance on technology continues to increase. With the need to protect against constantly evolving cyber threats and the rapid advance in options for information and technology to deliver services, the County must stay abreast of the latest technologies and applications to meet its goals.

ITPAC appreciates the opportunity to provide expert citizen advice to assist the County.

Cc:

Information Technology Policy Advisory Committee
Bryan Hill, County Executive
Christina Jackson, Chief Financial Officer
Ellicia Seard-McCormick, Deputy County Executive
Gregory Scott, Chief Technology Officer