

Fairfax County, Virginia: Ten Principles of Sound Financial Management (Revised as of April 21, 2015)

Ten Principles of Sound Financial Management

Background

The *Ten Principles*, adopted by the Board of Supervisors on October 22, 1975, endorsed a set of policies designed to contribute to the County's fiscal management and maintain the County's "triple A" bond rating. The County has maintained its superior rating in large part due to its firm adherence to these policies. The County's exceptional "triple A" bond rating gives its bonds an unusually high level of marketability and results in the County being able to borrow for needed capital improvements at low interest rates, thus realizing significant savings now and in the future for the residents of Fairfax County.

From time to time the Board of Supervisors has amended the Ten Principles in order to address changing economic conditions and management practices. Changes adopted on April 21, 2015 have been made which reflect the Board's commitment to increasing the County's reserve policies and continue to strengthen the County's financial position. The rating agencies have for many years validated the approach the County has taken identifying a Managed Reserve at 2 percent of General Fund Disbursements and the Revenue Stabilization Reserve at 3 percent of General Fund Disbursements (for a total of 5 percent), as well as funding other replacement reserves, as strong financial management. The increases recommended further strengthen this approach by adjusting the policy for the two primary reserves and adding an additional reserve for a total reserve policy of 10 percent. As a result, the County reserve policy will be more in line with the other triple-A jurisdictions. Funding of this increase will begin immediately; however, it will take several years to fully fund the new target level.

In addition to the more traditional methods of long-term financing through General Obligation Bonds, the County has been able to accomplish major capital improvements through the use of alternative financing while maintaining the County's fiscal integrity as required by the *Ten Principles*. Accomplishments such as Metro station parking garages, construction of Route 28, the opening of a commuter rail, and construction of government facilities have all been attained in addition to a robust bond construction program. In 2003 the County was able to accelerate the construction of a new high school by three years through the creative use of revenue bonds in connection with the joint development of a senior care facility and a golf course in conjunction with the high school. From 1999 through 2014, the County has approved \$3.47 billion of new debt at referendum, with \$2.31 billion for Schools and \$1.16 billion for the County.

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Since 1975, the savings associated with the County having a “triple-A” bond rating is estimated at \$470.88 million. Including savings from the various refunding sales, the total benefit to the County equates to \$702.51 million. Also, implementation of a Master Lease program and judicious use of short-term lease purchases for computer equipment, copier equipment, school buses and energy efficient equipment have permitted the County and the Schools to maximize available technology while maintaining budgetary efficiency.

The *Ten Principles* full text is as follows:

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1. **Planning Policy.** The planning system in the County will continue as a dynamic process, which is synchronized with the capital improvement program, capital budget and operating budget. The County’s land use plans shall not be allowed to become static. There will continue to be periodic reviews of the plans at least every five years. Small area plans shall not be modified without consideration of contiguous plans. The Capital Improvement Program will be structured to implement plans for new and expanded capital facilities as contained in the County’s Comprehensive Plan and other facility plans. The Capital Improvement Program will also include support for periodic reinvestment in aging capital and technology infrastructure sufficient to ensure no loss of service and continued safety of operation.
2. **Annual Budget Plans and Reserves.** Annual budgets shall continue to show fiscal restraint. Annual budgets will be balanced between projected total funds available and total disbursements including established reserves.
 - a. A Managed Reserve shall be maintained in the General Fund at a level sufficient to provide for temporary financing of critical unforeseen disbursements of a catastrophic emergency nature. The reserve will be maintained at a level of not less than four percent of total General Fund disbursements in any given fiscal year.

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- b. A Revenue Stabilization Fund (RSF) shall be maintained in addition to the managed reserve at a level sufficient to permit orderly adjustment to changes resulting from curtailment of revenue. This Fund shall be maintained at five percent of total General Fund disbursements in any given fiscal year. Use of the RSF should only occur in times of severe economic stress. Accordingly, a withdrawal from the RSF will not be made unless the projected revenues reflect a decrease of more than 1.5 percent from the current year estimate and any such withdrawal may not exceed one half of the RSF fund balance in that year. A drawdown of this Fund should be accompanied with expenditure reductions.
 - c. An Economic Opportunity Reserve shall be established in addition to the Managed Reserve and the Revenue Stabilization Fund. This reserve is meant to stimulate economic growth and will provide for strategic investment opportunities that are identified as priorities by the Board of Supervisors. When fully funded, this reserve will equal one percent of total General Fund disbursements in any given fiscal year. Funding for this reserve would only occur after the Managed Reserve and the Revenue Stabilization Fund are fully funded at their new levels of four percent and five percent, respectively. Criteria for funding, utilization, and replenishment of the reserve will be developed and presented to the Board of Supervisors for approval. The criteria for use will include financial modeling analysis (e.g. cost-benefit, etc.) to determine the fiscal impact to the County of the proposed investment opportunity and will require approval from the Board of Supervisors for any use.
 - d. Budgetary adjustments which propose to use available general funds identified at quarterly reviews should be minimized to address only critical issues. The use of non-recurring funds should only be directed to capital expenditures to the extent possible.
 - e. The budget shall include funds for cyclic and scheduled replacement or rehabilitation of equipment and other property in order to minimize disruption of budgetary planning from irregularly scheduled monetary demands.
3. **Cash Balances.** It is imperative that positive cash balances exist in the General Fund at the end of each fiscal year. If an operating deficit appears to be forthcoming in the current fiscal year wherein total disbursements will exceed the total funds available, the Board will take appropriate action to balance revenues and expenditures as necessary so as to end each fiscal year with a positive cash balance.

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4. **Debt Ratios.** The County's debt ratios shall be maintained at the following levels:

- a. Net debt as a percentage of estimated market value shall be less than 3 percent.
- b. Debt service expenditures as a percentage of General Fund disbursements shall not exceed 10 percent. The County will continue to emphasize pay-as-you-go capital financing. Financing capital projects from current revenues is indicative of the County's intent to use purposeful restraint in incurring long-term debt.
- c. For planning purposes annual bond sales shall be structured such that the County's debt burden shall not exceed the 3 and 10 percent limits. To that end sales of General Obligation Bonds and general obligation supported debt will be managed so as not to exceed a target of \$275 million per year, or \$1.375 billion over five years, with a technical limit of \$300 million in any given year. Excluded from this cap are refunding bonds, revenue bonds or other non-General Fund supported debt.
- d. For purposes of this principle, debt of the General Fund incurred subject to annual appropriation shall be treated on a par with general obligation debt and included in the calculation of debt ratio limits. Excluded from the cap are leases secured by equipment, operating leases, and capital leases with no net impact to the General Fund.
- e. Use of variable rate debt is authorized in order to increase the County's financial flexibility, provide opportunities for interest rate savings, and help the County manage its balance sheet through better matching of assets and liabilities. Debt policies shall stipulate that variable rate debt is appropriate to use when it achieves a specific objective consistent with the County's overall financial strategies; however, the County must determine if the use of any such debt is appropriate and warranted given the potential benefit, risks, and objectives of the County. The County will not use variable rate debt solely for the purpose of earning arbitrage pending the disbursement of bond proceeds.

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- f. For purposes of this principle, payments for equipment or other business property, except real estate, purchased through long-term lease-purchase payment plans secured by the equipment will be considered to be operating expenses of the County. Annual General Fund payments for such leases shall not exceed 3 percent of the annual General Fund disbursements, net of the School transfer. Annual equipment lease-purchase payments by the Schools and other governmental entities of the County should not exceed 3 percent of their respective disbursements.
5. **Cash Management.** The County's cash management policies shall reflect a primary focus of ensuring the safety of public assets while maintaining needed liquidity and achieving a favorable return on investment. These policies have been certified by external professional review as fully conforming to the recognized best practices in the industry. As an essential element of a sound and professional financial management process, the policies and practices of this system shall receive the continued support of all County agencies and component units.
6. **Internal Controls.** A comprehensive system of financial internal controls shall be maintained in order to protect the County's assets and sustain the integrity of the County's financial systems. Managers at all levels shall be responsible for implementing sound controls and for regularly monitoring and measuring their effectiveness.
7. **Performance Measurement.** To ensure Fairfax County remains a high performing organization all efforts shall be made to improve the productivity of the County's programs and its employees through performance measurement. The County is committed to continuous improvement of productivity and service through analysis and measurement of actual performance objectives and customer feedback.
8. **Reducing Duplication.** A continuing effort shall be made to reduce duplicative functions within the County government and its autonomous and semi-autonomous agencies, particularly those that receive appropriations from the General Fund. To that end, business process redesign and reorganization will be encouraged whenever increased efficiency or effectiveness can be demonstrated.

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9. **Underlying Debt and Moral Obligations.** Debt related to but not directly supported by the County's General Fund shall be closely monitored and controlled to the extent possible, including revenue bonds of agencies supported by the General Fund, the use of the County's moral obligation, and underlying debt.
 - a. A moral obligation exists when the Board of Supervisors has made a commitment to support the debt of another jurisdiction to prevent a potential default, and the County is not otherwise responsible or obligated to pay the annual debt service. The County's moral obligation will be authorized only under the most controlled circumstances and secured by extremely tight covenants to protect the credit of the County. The County's moral obligation shall only be used to enhance the credit worthiness of an agency of the County or regional partnership for an essential project, and only after the most stringent safeguards have been employed to reduce the risk and protect the financial integrity of the County.
 - b. Underlying debt includes tax-supported debt issued by towns or districts in the County, which debt is not an obligation of the County, but nevertheless adds to the debt burden of the taxpayers within those jurisdictions in the County. The issuance of underlying debt, insofar as it is under the control of the Board of Supervisors, will be carefully analyzed for fiscal soundness, the additional burden placed on taxpayers, and the potential risk to the General Fund for any explicit or implicit moral obligation.
10. **Diversified Economy.** Fairfax County must continue to diversify its economic base by encouraging commercial and, in particular, industrial employment and associated revenues. Such business and industry must be in accord with the plans and ordinances of the County.