County of Fairfax, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

December 15, 2022

TO: Bryan Hill
             County Executive

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

SUBJECT: FY 2024 ITPAC Interim Budget Letter to the County Executive

ITPAC is a Fairfax County Advisory Committee of citizens with significant government and IT industry expertise and experience. In regular interactions with the senior leadership of the county's Department of Information Technology (DIT), the members of ITPAC draw on their backgrounds to recommend options for addressing Fairfax IT challenges and opportunities.

County Successes: ITPAC recommends that the budget continue to maintain IT operation and leadership as County strengths.

Key Application Modernized for Service and Savings: The result of a multiyear investment of funds, planning, and technical expertise, the County's Planning and Land Use System (PLUS) is now operational. The new system replaces outdated technologies and disjointed silos of information that have frustrated Fairfax County citizens and developers for many years. Migrating files and data from systems well beyond their life expectancy to a more modern system overcame issues of complexity, high data volume, and huge data export/import requirements. The newly operational system has already been lauded for simplifying processes and improving services.

Addressing Operational Challenges: DIT, with the assistance of DMB and other partners, aggressively implemented technology options that supported moving the County's workforce to hybrid operations during the pandemic. 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 in the future and must be supported in budget planning.

County 2022 Election Process Smoothed: Despite difficulties encountered with the Commonwealth election systems during the 2022 midterm election, DIT managed to ensure a smooth operation for Fairfax County citizens and staff.

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

Effectiveness and Efficiency Investment Recommendations: ITPAC supports the following investments supporting increasingly effective use of resources:

Cyber Security: Continued investment in cybersecurity technologies and expertise to reduce the risk of disruptions to County operations and services is paramount.

DTA Business Process Funding: New funding is required to address Department of Tax Administration (DTA) identified needs. These include business process enhancement, payment solution improvement, portal and user interaction upgrading, IT performance improvement and system integration.

E-Gov Project: Ongoing funding is needed for key functional upgrades to AI powered Fairfax Virtual Assistant (chatbot) to include Spanish and Live Assistant capability as well as to integrate it with voice assistants such as Alexa and Google. In addition, ITPAC recommends funds for implementing intelligent automation with tools to optimize content and design. Aligning digital metrics with organizational goals to provide predictable, credible, measurable, accountable, and compliant services requires funding.

Hybrid Operation: Continue funding the Remote Access Project and other options that improve workforce ability to conduct business both remotely and on-premises while maintaining a secure environment.

Enterprise Data Analytics: Expand work on enterprise-wide data governance with analytics and citizen portals. Leverage the enormous value in County data to make more effective budget and programmatic decisions aligned with the County's strategic plan.

Equitable Technology Access: Seek ways to incorporate equitable access to technology across the County.

Collaboration and Partners for Growth: With others in the area (such as FCPS or IT companies with significant local presence), partner to co-create solutions and services. Examples include predictive analytics, artificial intelligence (AI) and related "smart/connected communities" concepts. Growth strategies include state investments and efforts to explore and analyze opportunities to deploy innovative technologies that enable business growth across all sectors. Some ideas may include applications of blockchain, new electronic payment methods, artificial intelligence, robotics, automation, and others.

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

Hiring Impediments with Much IT Staff Approaching DROP: With more than 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 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.

ITPAC is concerned 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.

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 used locally that are obsolete and underfunded. ITPAC is concerned that these older systems may expose the County systems to unexpected costs and security risks. ITPAC also is concerned with the possibility of state data breaches that may expose private information on 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 key components of the County's 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 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 greatly benefit greatly from increased contracting agility and reduction in time to award for IT contracts. Current review requirements often extend the time required to implement needed technology. Slow contract award processes increase the cost of IT implementation and can prevent its implementation entirely.

Additional FY24 Recommendation Highlights: ITPAC supports the following initiatives.

- DIT updating its strategic plan covering the next five years.
- 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 to benefit from technology innovations and provide timely funding.
- Provide additional funding as needed to obtain and maintain 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 strategies. 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 the use of 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
Gregory Scott, Chief Technology Officer
Christina Jackson, Chief Financial Officer
Ellicia Seard-McCormick, Deputy County Executive