The Networked Neighborhood of Tomorrow
Dear Board Member,

I am pleased to share with you the strategic plan for the Ballston Business Improvement District for fiscal years 2015 - 2018. Strategic planning exercises, like all good planning activities, always take up more time than one expects and this year’s process was no exception. Part of the issue is that the topics that arise are so fundamental and multi-faceted. There are often no objectively clear answers - and no clear solutions. Open discussion is really the only meaningful way forward.

But discussion, and especially the thoughtfulness behind it, is critical to the BID’s continued success in helping to create a Ballston that we can all be proud of. And for that thoughtfulness, participation and time, I would like to thank you. Your continued role as a voice for the greatness that is possible in Ballston is one asset I’m proud to call distinctly our own.

In terms of this strategic plan, we believe that even with our short window of success over the past two and a half years, it was time to reassess. The market continues to change, both literally and figuratively, and we wanted to make sure that all of our activities were focused on the most important goals, especially given our rather lean operational infrastructure.

If there is a theme that has emerged for us over the course of the last number of months, it is this: people matter. It’s very easy to think of the BID’s activities in terms of marketing, events and programs, but the core of what we are trying to do is impact people’s lives in a real and fundamental way that creates a sense of purpose and community. If we can do that, we will have succeeded in creating the type of emotional connection to Ballston that we all know is possible.

Yours sincerely,

Tina Leone
CEO
Ballston Business Improvement District
Background

Context

The Ballston BID has been fully staffed and operational for a little over two years. Over that period, and with a budget that is smaller than its surrounding competitors, the BID has been able to deliver a number of successful programs and outcomes. While focus during the initial phase was on creating a strong brand around Ballston, we believe that future efforts will need to focus on leveraging that brand to deliver more specific and measurable outcomes. The goal of this document is to outline the specific outcomes that we should focus on pursuing, and the methods that the BID should use to go about achieving them.

Objective

The strategic plan is a format and solution that helps position an organization for success by clarifying the most important objectives, the overall scope of activities that should take place, and the advantage that should be leveraged to differentiate the organization from other competitors in the marketplace. It has been simplified by others in saying that strategy is really about answering two key questions: 1) Where will we play?, and 2) How will we win?

Clarifying the Challenge

As a solution, the strategic plan is focused on solving a specific challenge. For discussion purposes, we have framed the Ballston challenge as the following:

In an increasingly competitive, developed, technologically-driven, and design-savvy market, how can the Ballston BID position Ballston as a unique and attractive destination for creative, compelling, and ambitious minds, so that Ballston can retain more company employees, retail business owners, commercial tenants, commercial brokers, business visitors, residents, and social visitors?
Solution Framework

Overview

We believe that a solution for Ballston needs to incorporate the following five areas:

- Foundational Principles
- Customer Focus
- Metrics
- Objective & Strategy
- Strategic Initiatives

Foundational Principles

It is easy for organizations to know exactly what to do when everyone is focused in on the discussion. But for a large part of the year, this simply isn’t the case. The transition from strategic thinking to tactical delivery is often a quick one and the subsequent shift from project to project is even faster. To help focus the BID, we believe it makes sense to modify the language for both our vision statement and our mission. The specificity of language will be invaluable as we move forward in creating new and dynamic programs.

Vision Statement

We propose to amend our vision statement to the following:

Our vision for Ballston is to create a leading business district that attracts, supports and connects the most creative, compelling and ambitious minds in the region.

Specific attention has been paid to the language used in the vision. Most notable is the omission of the word “innovation,” which would have lead to the phrase “innovation district.” There are two reason for this. First, we feel that the term innovation district is now part of the common vernacular and can’t be used in a context that doesn’t at least closely adhere to the now commonly understood definition.

A significant part of that definition includes what are called “innovation cultivators,” which are organizations like incubators, accelerators, proof-of-concept centers, tech transfer offices, and shared working spaces. All of these revolve around what could be called a “startup culture.” Based on our experience with the Launchpad, we do not believe that there is sufficient demand or desire to create the required critical mass for such a startup culture to develop in Ballston. As a result, we believe that it is unwise to try to brand Ballston as something that it simply isn’t.

The second reason we left out innovation is because we believe the term, while still popular, is becoming less powerful because of its overuse. We would prefer to not talk about innovation, but lead through creating programs and events are in the end perceived as innovative.
Mission

The mission is a foundational framework that helps to focus the activities of the organization. We feel that some of the original language didn’t create a strong enough sense of differentiation. We propose amending the language to the following:

**The Ballston Business Improvement District:**
To imagine and implement innovative programs, partnerships and collaborations that bring people together, create a sense of community and strengthen the economic vitality of our businesses and commercial partners in Ballston.

Customer Focus

While the BID does not have customers in the traditional sense, we feel that use of the word helps us better think about the types of relationships that it wants to create. In simplest terms, we want to think about the BID offering a great service and product that is a perfect fit for its target customers.

We see the ranked order of customers as follows:

- Company employees of commercial tenants
- Retail business owners
- Commercial tenant executives and leadership
- Commercial brokers
- Business visitors (non-Ballston employees)
- Residents
- Social visitors

By delivering value to these core customer segments, we believe that in the end property owners will benefit.

**Company employees of commercial tenants**

Almost all commercial tenants are companies and the majority of revenue or value is generated by the employees of the company - not by the managers or executives. By focusing on generating value for the employees, the BID improves the chances of making a real impact on the company. This in turn impacts the perception that having employees in Ballston is better for business.

**Retail business owners**

Retail businesses support various lifestyle choices and the stronger the connection that can be made between company employee/resident needs and retail business products and services, the happier all parties will be. For the BID to get involved here is a win-win. Company employees/residents get connected to what they want. Retail businesses easily get customers just by being in Ballston.
Commercial tenant executives and leadership

With all that company managers and executives have to deal with today, it is unlikely that they have time to take on additional “responsibilities” for improving the neighborhood they are located in. But if that neighborhood is actually doing something that is positively impacting their business, they are going to be more receptive to building a dialogue and that will allow the BID to build stronger connections that can grow into robust networks.

Commercial brokers

Commercial brokers are a critical part of delivering value to property owners and making sure that the Ballston brand is clearly and effectively articulated to the market.

Business visitors (non-Ballston employees)

We have split out business visitors from social visitors because they are a key source of value when they join networks that are connected to commercial tenant employees (ie: they bring in ideas or information). Business visitors are also potential ambassadors that are directly connected to potential clients - companies that have commercial space in other locations in the region.

Residents

This group will naturally benefit from BID efforts servicing the first two categories of customer. The challenge here is that while residents are a vital part of the Ballston equation, budget and operational capacity need to be taken into consideration when serving this group independently.

Social visitors

This last group is an important group, especially if there are larger events. But again, this group will also benefit from efforts serving the more primary customer segments.

Metrics

As a commercial BID, the ultimate goal is to impact commercial vacancy rates. But impacting the rate is not a clear process and the scope of activities that the BID can undertake is limited. Working backwards from this goal, however, we can build a model that highlights important variables and points to achievable results.

The point of including metrics as part of the overall solution is that the BID needs to develop a more robust approach to dealing with data, which will impact overall resource utilization in the short term.
Objectives & Strategy

Objective

Our broad goal is to ensure that Ballston maintains a commercial vacancy rate that is well below the average of the surrounding area.

While Ballston’s vacancy rate is currently lower than its peer neighborhoods, we should not assume this position can be sustained without direct and proactive efforts. Increasing commercial space options in the area, as well as constantly fluctuating economic circumstances, will mean more competition and a more challenging market environment.

Strategy Statement

Based on our information, analyses and discussions up to this point, we propose the following:

Our strategy is to focus on creating innovative and dynamic opportunities for learning, networking and collaboration that leverage the unique combination of research, education, non-profit and corporate organizations in the Ballston area. We will also continue to focus on and make an impact with our placemaking efforts that over time will transform Ballston into a unique and amenity-rich destination point with a strong sense of community.

Strategic Initiatives

Overview

Strategic initiatives are the core areas of focus through which the strategy is converted into actual results. We believe that there are four areas to focus on in terms of new efforts by the BID:

· Data & Analytics
· User Experience
· Program Development
· Operations
Data & Analytics

In order to move beyond generalities, we propose an increased focus on collecting, managing and sharing data about what makes Ballston unique and how the BID is driving results. We are proposing taking on the following new projects:

- Success Criteria, Variables and Open Data Platform Project: This project will aim to clarify success criteria for the BID and create operational capacity for tracking, managing and sharing data around key variables.

- Organizational Capability & Connections Project: This project will aim to conduct market research in Ballston, including tenant tours, to allow for a deeper understanding of which organizations are actually located in the area and consider their needs requirements.

User Experience

While the Ballston BID brand has helped to create greater awareness of Ballston, we believe that greater emphasis needs to be placed on the various touchpoints for each user category. We propose taking on the following new projects:

- Digital Content Strategy and Operational Guidelines: This project will aim to create a clear strategy and operational guidelines for all digital content (web, mobile, social, etc.). This includes looking at potentially shifting the messaging of digital properties from being “BID” focused to being more “Ballston” focused.

- User Experience Audit: Based on our new customer definitions, this project will take a comprehensive look at the user experience for each category in order to develop insights and possible solutions.

Program Development

Based on the insights and information we learned through the strategic planning process, we believe that there needs to be a shift in the type of programs developed and delivered. We propose taking on the following new projects:

- Ballston Employee Events Project: This project will aim to create a successful event series that targets Ballston employees and helps them learn, connect, and grow.

- Education Project: We like the initial idea of trying to leverage the educational institutions in the area in a unique and meaningful way. One avenue that was discussed was the “free” educational credit. This and other possibilities will be explored, which could include the creation of a new event property that leverages the unique combination of organizations and people in the Ballston area.
· **Retail Group Project**: Retailers help to create and define a neighborhood. This project will focus on setting up a retail advisory group that will meet on a regular basis.

· **Resident Integration Outreach Project**: This project will focus on creating a coordinated outreach plan that works towards getting residential partners on board to financially support the BID’s efforts.

· **Dark Fiber Project**: This project will focus on creating a coordinated plan for promoting the dark fiber services available in the area.

**Operations**

Organizations themselves must change and adapt in order to succeed. In this area, we propose taking on the following projects:

· **Internship Project**: This project aims to create a formalized internship program that will allow the BID to shift some of its limited resources from operational tasks to those focused on new value creation.

· **Operational Audit Project**: This project will focus on clarifying the tasks that are being done, the value they add and the future role they will play in BID operations.

· **Taste of Arlington Transition Project**: Taste of Arlington takes up a tremendous amount of internal resources and there are questions as to whether this program, although successful, benefits our key customers. This project will focus on developing a transition plan that could include the Taste becoming its own organization and finding additional resources through grants.
Ongoing & Planned Activities

Ongoing

In addition to the new activities that are part of this strategic plan, we also have a number of ongoing projects that we will continue to work on:

- BID Website: Content and navigation/front and back end
- Taste of Arlington
- Taste of Arlington website
- Farmer’s Market and Mega Market
- Property Managers Group
- Wifi Hotspots
- Metro Canopy Art Project
- Additional Art Projects
- Redevelopment in Ballston
- Placemaking: Holiday lights and medians
- Board and committee meetings
- Other events: holiday, art, Power 100, new businesses

Planned

Some of the activities that we have planned, but have not yet been able to implement include:

- Banners
- Parklets
- Gateway Signage
- Mobile app marketing
- Illustrated Map
- Parking signage