April 10, 1995

To: Current and exiting members of the 1994-95 RCA Board and the 1995-96 Board  
From: Ivan Cole, President Reston Citizens Association Board of Directors  
Topic: Farewell (Confidential)

I know my limitations. I do not do prepared or extemporaneous speeches very well, but there are some things I'd like to communicate before I step down. One of the disadvantages of being President is that opinions have to be very carefully filtered, or not expressed at all since the President is often viewed as the representative of the corporate body. So, in addition to formally thanking a lot of people for everything from serving RCA to supporting me as I served as President, I am also going to indulge myself and offer some opinions about the future of RCA, and by extension, Reston.

Why am I leaving the RCA Board? I have had a lot of people question me about my decision to both step down from the presidency, and leave the Board at the same time. It has been hinted in some quarters that I may be disgruntled with RCA. First, let me say that the greatest compliment I have received in my time with RCA is the outpouring of regret concerning my departure (even if some of it isn't true). I am leaving the RCA Board at precisely the time I had determined four years ago when I decided that I would serve as President. Those of you who have been around for awhile will remember that several years ago, a task force was commissioned to revitalize RCA in anticipation of the 21st Century. I was a member of that task force. Among the things we accomplished was a rewriting of the Bylaws and the creation of District Representatives to make certain that all geographical segments of Reston were represented on the Board. It was also decided that RCA would move toward being a committee driven, rather than a board driven organization. The 'career track' of a volunteer could then proceed from the overall policy role of the RCA Board to specific in-depth work on one or more committees. I am following that line of reason in my own decision making concerning how I spend my time. Ideally, I would have served two terms as President, then a transitional one year term as a Board member. As you may remember, last Spring would have been an awful time to step down as President. The Spectrum issue was reaching a climax, the Reston Festival was transitioning into a new phase (and not raising any money for RCA), the press and a number of 'prominent' citizens were declaring RCA as a nuisance, in decline, "irrelevant". I would have loved to have stepped down at that juncture, but I judged it to be unfair, it probably would have conveyed the wrong message, and besides, who would have been stupid enough to take the damn job? (I ran unopposed last year, now everybody wants to be President—or so it seems) This explanation of the logic behind my retirement also allows for me to touch upon a couple of areas of potential misunderstanding between 'veteran' Board members (three or more years service) and newer members of the Board. We do an awful job of transmitting to new Board members just exactly where we are in the evolution of the Association. I am certain that some of you have never heard of the concept of "committee driven". Every year, or so it seems, new Board members express the desire to prepare RCA for the 21st Century, totally oblivious to the fact that a variety of individuals have been attempting some version of the same for the last six years at least.
These new enthusiastic visions of reform are often greeted with yawns and anecdotes of the 'been there, done that' variety from the veterans. The problem has been the lack of a proper, in-depth orientation for new (and current) Board members which can be expensive, and even more important, time consuming. But I would suggest that the new President somehow persuade the new Board to find the time, and devise an effective format for bringing everyone up to speed as to where RCA is in its evolution, and how it got there. The veteran Board members are correct in pointing out that newcomers are often guilty of trying to reinvent the wheel, and are ignorant of what has transpired in the past. But whose fault is that? Conversely, the newcomers are correct in asserting that the reform process is, at best, incomplete and much remains to be done. But the process that is undertaken to remedy this situation is often misinformed, inefficient and personality driven. At least take the time to find out what the previous reform efforts were about, and how and why they fell short so you can avoid being victimized by the same problems. Also be mindful of the fact that RCA's vitality should ultimately be judged by how active and engaged are our committees. If the focus is on the Board then we are off track.

Thanks! The debts that I owe are considerable. I have been supported, encouraged and covered for by more people than I can probably name, but I will try.

Embry Rucker, Priscella Ames and Margaret Boyd encouraged me to run for President, or more correctly, told me that this is what I was going to do like it or not. Jack Gwynn, by naming me his First Vice President provided an opportunity for some accelerated learning about the duties and issues that the President had to address. Former President Nancy Larson has also been very encouraging and supportive.

As a President who was not self employed, retired or otherwise independent, support has always been a critical issue with me. Baba Freeman (First Vice President, and the person who originally recruited me into RCA), Marcia McDevitt (Communications Director), Vera Hannigan (Treasurer/Chief Republican), Nancy Boyd-Mattern (Second Vice President), Howard Perlstein (Advisor/Chief Democrat), Walter Perry (Secretary) and Susie Walsh (the Real Secretary) have all played critical roles in helping me retain a facade of competence.

A lot of fine people served as Board members during my Presidency. I'm sure I will miss a name or two, but they all need a mention. Stewart Macdonald (former Secretary), Carol Naughton, Richard Merriwether, Warren Schmidt, Chris Corrington, Dee Cotton, Shari Jennings, Tom O'Rourke, John Nelson, Bruce Pearson, Phyllis Horne, Yung Sook Kim. Current members Bill Hoppe, George Kain, Howard Leeb, Joe Lombardo, Victor Lombardo, Jack Savage and Tom Wiltshire. I would like to make special mention of the efforts of Joe Lombardo in holding together the Planning and Zoning Committee during a particularly difficult time during the Spectrum controversy. Bill Hoppe played a very critical role in the Spectrum situation; he framed the issue for the community and set the tone that enabled all of us to examine the project and its impact with a much higher degree of sophistication.

The performance of the RCA Committees has been outstanding. Joe Stowers, Ridge Loux and Joe Lombardo have led P&Z through a number of important development projects and issues over the past few years; Spectrum, Town Center Phase Two and Three, South Lakes Mobil, the Crippen Development, Sallie Mae, American Mobil
Satellite, the North Point Village Center, Plaza America, Oak Park and Edgewater, McDonald's and the various residential and recreational developments in North Point, just to name a few.

The dozens of volunteers that served on the Festival Committee under the leadership of Warren Schmidt, Tom O'Rourke, Dick Merriwether and Marcia McDevitt (with considerable assistance from a number of Board Members, particularly Carol Naughton and Nancy Boyd-Mattern). The Festival underwent tremendous growth and evolution over the past three years. The Pre-Festival Receptions, The Oktoberfest at Hunters Woods Plaza and the Pancake Breakfast were highly successful events.

Margaret Boyd's Youth Committee has been consistently creating or influencing the creation of quality programming for Reston's adolescents; the recent Leadership Conference, the Teen/Adult Dialogue, the Teen Summit, the Pit. A special thank you also to Victor Lombardo for his coordinating role in the Leadership Conference.

There is also Patty Nicoson's Transportation Committee, John Fuller's Reston Forum, Howard Perlstein's Education Committee, Dee Cotton's Health Committee, Walter Perry's and Nancy Boyd-Mattern's Senior Committee, Hale Ament's and Jack Gwynn's work on the Streetlight Committee, Vera Hannigan's work with Police/Community Relations, Jack Savage's Hunters Woods Task Force and George Kain's service on multiple task forces in such a short period of time.


I would also like to extend special thanks to Tom Bartelt, Michael and everyone at Reston Community Television for their willingness to work with us in televising our Board meetings, the Reston Festival, Oktoberfest and community Forums. Ray Venaro, Dana Weinberg, Renee Rupple and all the folks at Mark Winkler. Dave Morgan, Activities Director at South Lakes High School. The Lake Anne Merchants Association and The Lake Anne Condominium Association. Nick Lanyi, formerly of the Connection, John Pitcher, Carrington Cunningham and Susan Ferrechio of the Reston Times. Carol Hunter of Voce.

I apologize to those individuals that I have overlooked.

Final Thoughts (on a variety of topics). For those of you who are staying on, or better yet, just getting started with RCA, you are in an enviable position. The next five years will be the most fascinating and challenging for Reston, because of where the community is in its evolution, and where the region, nation and world is in their evolution as well. If you are about trying to make a difference and/or like chewing on important
issues concerning community building, self governance, environmental concerns, education, class warfare, economic development, technology and its impact on our lives, the development of our young people, spiritual vitality, politics, diversity, long range planning, etc. then you are in the right place. But whether RCA is a leader in this process or a nuisance ('irrelevant') depends upon a number of things.

**RCA must remain nonpartisan.** RCA must have a point of view, but it must transcend the partisan viewpoints of Democrats or Republicans, and the various local cliques. Nonpartisanship demands a discipline of thought that compels us to view our community holistically, our Board as inclusive and generally harmonious and to cast issues in terms of what is best for Reston, as opposed to what is beneficial for a particular interest group. Maintaining this perspective has allowed individuals to not only peacefully coexist, but to agree on most issues, when in other contexts they would just as soon murder each other in a dark alley. We will not agree on everything, of course. But how the arguments are framed determines whether the debate is constructive or poisonous. RCA must not become a partisan hive, or a bipartisan bickering society. It must also remain accessible to, and work effectively with elected and appointed officials of all political stripes, so long as they are working to advance what is best for Reston. Some individuals cannot handle these contraints, they believe passionately in what they believe and are not interested in listening to differing views or working toward consensus. They want their way, period. These people will never be happy with RCA (the Board), and RCA will never be pleased with them. Don't try to fit a square peg into a round hole.

**Proactive? Reactive? Facilitative?** Which should RCA be? While I am sure that this topic will find its way into the Candidates' Debate and various sound bites related to the election, a functional understanding of the issue may elude us. The art of RCA effectiveness involves understanding when to be proactive (when to lead), when to be reactive (when to follow), when to be facilitative (when to referee) and when to do nothing (when to hide). Restonians are not of a single mind on every issue, nor do we all possess a sophisticated understanding of the issues facing our community. We must avoid the politician's cop-out of trying to be all things to all people and jumping to attention whenever a wheel squeaks. Should we support the building of a fast food restaurant which was on the drawing board for years, and would receive a lot of local business, especially from little league and soccer parents on weekends, or do we support the surrounding community which does not want it? What about the introduction of a new corporation which will bring scores of new jobs into Reston, but may disrupt the neighborhoods surrounding it? Sometimes the community is ahead of us. Sometimes we are ahead of them. Sometimes there exists legitimate differences of opinion, no 'right' position, where the wisest course is to let the various parties fight it out.

RCA must be proactive in framing the terms for the debate on Reston's future and should not be bashful about advocating certain outcomes. The sad fact is that for all the discussion concerning local control, few localities, Reston included, are ready to assume this burden conceptually or psychologically. The task of creating readiness must fall to us. On the other hand, we do ourselves and the community no favors by doing their thinking for them, or presuming that we know best concerning every issue and circumstance. Nor
are there any issues that are inherently good (e.g. governance) or bad (e.g. development). Whether or not something is good or bad depends upon context. Motherhood is good, assuming Mom is not abusive or negligent. Apple pie is great, assuming the apples aren't tainted. Is governance good? Is local government always better because it's closer? Seems to me that local government has just as much potential for unresponsiveness, corruption, etc. as County, State or Federal government. In this instance and many others the wise role for RCA is to be facilitative, to not advocate prematurely one way or the other.

One of the more subtle qualities of good leadership is knowing when, and how to act, knowing when you don't know and knowing when it is best to let people find their own solutions and make their own mistakes.

Future issues. Reston is a cutting edge community with cutting edge problems. That makes it difficult to anticipate or predict all the concerns that we will face in the coming years. Further complicating matters are the enormous changes occurring in the metropolitan area and the larger society. The radical and permanent changes in the Federal Government is just one example. Plus the staggering pace of change which makes trying to plan a few decades ahead seem like we are attempting to look a few centuries into the future. The first task is coming to terms with radical change. It is my observation that most of us are terrified and in denial of what is coming, indeed, is already manifesting in our lives. The opportunity exists to manage the change and influence it to be a beneficial force, but not if we keep our heads in the sand.

Economics. The combination of corporate and governmental downsizing, technological advances, the decline in the number and reliability of 'jobs' as we understand the term, and an anticipated period of economic instability will effect how people attempt to make a living in Reston. The Economic Development Committee was initiated, in part, to advocate for local, small and home based businesses, and should begin thinking about addressing this issue in a big way. Collateral issues may involve discussion of zoning changes that would allow for the development of cottage industries, assistance with education on business start-ups, marketing locally, promoting bartering efforts such as the Useful Services Exchange, encouraging Village Center revitalization that anticipates serving a segment of the population that may have more time on their hands and a greater need for social interaction, also a more aggressive, local effort to attract, create and keep businesses.

Community building. It can be said that there are two types of people in Reston, those who came here as a result of the founding principles, and those who did not know and maybe don't care about these principles, might even disagree with them. Over the years, Reston has been marketed in contradictory ways. Efforts must be made to create a new consensus, or strengthen the old one before significant fractures are created in the community fabric. In particular, Reston has always been committed to diversity, and, relatively speaking, has done a pretty good job of promoting and preserving it. In the current national environment, where the emphasis seems to be on divisiveness and the politics of blame and scapegoating, we may be particularly vulnerable to and hard hit by efforts to put us at each others throats. Here is an issue where we need to be absolutely, and aggressively proactive. Another related concern is the possibility of people identifying
too strongly, or exclusively with their region of the community and viewing other areas of Reston in negative or competitive terms. The District Representatives in particular have to be careful not to get caught up in this sort of mindset.

**Education.** Public education stinks. There, I've said it. It's not necessarily the teachers, certainly not the kids. The institution simply is not capable of delivering what is needed in the late 20th Century, much less the 21st. It is difficult to broach this subject because heretofore much of support for education has consisted of support for the guild of educators who are wedded to the system as is, more or less, and fending off those who are indifferent to or hostile to the educational needs of the masses. Smaller class sizes, higher salaries, some minor curriculum changes are all that is offered. Necessary to be sure, but not even close to the level of needed reform. Positive reform must be initiated locally by people friendly to public education but not invested in the status quo. The RCA Education Committee has to move beyond (but not abandoning for now) being just a booster of budget increases to the Fairfax County Schools, and preserving existing programming. We must also move toward becoming a fair, honest critic of the educational process as it manifests on the local level, and becoming a focal point for an increasing number of people that believe that our schools are not sufficiently responsive to the needs of our students and the community as currently constituted. An additional area of focus is for the development of continuing and post-secondary educational opportunities in Reston.

**Redevelopment.** As the physical development of Reston reaches completion, the redevelopment phase has already begun. Where is the strategy that preserves the positive features of our community and judges projects against projected needs and desirable outcomes? In the anticipated absence of an overall developer (Reston Land), who performs this task? Developers will look out for their interests, they are not in business to look our for the interests of the community. Hoppe is right about long range planning. And we are already behind the curve.

**Staffing.** One of the ongoing frustrations I experienced serving as President was that I was, in effect, trying to serve two masters; my job, and my role with RCA. Both suffered. RCA is doomed to suffer from inconsistency and lack of depth if it remains staffed entirely by volunteers. Key positions in this organization (President, Chair of P&Z, etc.) are subject to restricted access, i.e. one must work in Reston area, or not be employed, or be self employed, or otherwise independent and flexible. This is not acceptable if the Association is to experience the growth and sophistication necessary to serve a useful role in this community through the next century. When establishing long range funding goals, some consideration should be given to funding an Executive Director and an Administrative Assistant/Office Manager, as well as a facility large enough to house staff, greet visitors, plus provide space for committee meetings. The Executive Director would be able to handle the daytime meeting requirements and the continuous communications necessary with government, business and all other daytime entities. The Administrative Assistant would be in charge of the large amount of paperwork and record keeping that the Association requires. The Board would be provided with the support and information necessary to make informed policy decisions, the organization would benefit from continuity and accountability.
There are lots of other things I'd like to say, but there has to be a limit to these kind of things. I have really enjoyed, and have been honored to have had the opportunity to work with all of you. You are all welcome to my home anytime for social reasons. For RCA business it is by appointment only (I'm contemplating getting a big dog. A mean one too!) Good luck to everyone in the Elections. I look forward to working with you all in the future.