

Virginia General Assembly

2016 Report from Delegate

Vivian Watts

Once again, I have to start with Virginia's economy. Without a strong, broad-based economy, we cannot accomplish the "common good." However, while not discussing the debates over intensely personal decisions, I will close with my deep concern over liberty and justice for all —

Vivian



VIRGINIA'S ECONOMY

It Appeared to be a Good Year . .

Unemployment had declined to just 3.8% by May, giving Virginia the lowest rate of virtually any state this side of the Mississippi (except NH, VT, and ME.) Equally important, these are good jobs. Average wages in the private sector increased over 4% since last May compared to less than 2% nationally. (BLS)

. . Until the Final Budget Numbers

Despite this robust recovery, at the end of June, the budget year closed with \$266 million less revenue than expected. Total revenue for the year was projected to grow 3.2%. Instead, we fell back to just 1.7%, even though we'd reached 3.1% in March when we finalized the budget.

Selected cuts will be made. The salary increase for state employees, higher education, and local school teachers scheduled for December may not happen .. even though the State has funded only one salary increase in the last 8 years.

In addition, there are two **big concerns moving forward**: First, the budget we passed that started July 1st also assumed 3.2% growth. Governor McAuliffe called for Virginia's traditional group of private sector and academic forecasters to immediately assess that forecast. We will have to cut .. but by how much?

Second, with 30% of Virginia's economy driven by federal contracts and jobs, will our aggressive efforts to expand job opportunities be successful enough to avoid a crippling downturn if the new Congress makes significant federal budget cuts?

85% of the budget comes from personal income taxes and sales taxes

JOBS

Pathway to the New Middle Class

A comprehensive study revealed that 50-65% of the 1.5 million job vacancies over the next decade in Virginia will require less than a bachelor's degree but more than a high school diploma. The building trades and health technology make up most of the demand.



But, the top need is in every aspect of computer security. We earmarked \$4 million for putting in place a comprehensive curriculum from high school through undergrad. \$1.5 million is directed to get federal "center

of excellence in cyber security" designation for every community college. Annual salaries for community college degree holders in this field average over \$95,000.

Rapidly **moving veterans into productive civilian careers** also is a prime focus. This not only honors their service but, as a top state in the percent of adults who are veterans, it is essential to Virginia's economy.

We funded an innovative portal to allow veterans and active duty military to map military skills to degree or certificate programs in high demand areas. The more that military training can be directly applied, the quicker and at less cost a veteran can get a degree and into a higher paying job. We also expanded veteran resource centers at those community colleges with the highest number of veterans.

Finally, we are concerned that many students have had to take on crushing debt. In addition to increased financial aid, we targeted an extra \$5 million this year and \$7.5 million next year to **hold down in-state tuition** and fee increases.

MORE ABOUT VETERANS

John Harvey, four-star Admiral (ret.) and now Virginia's Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs, continues to give invaluable leadership in establishing the support needed by veterans and in putting Virginia in the best position to keep military jobs from being relocated to other states. This year's benchmarks include

- ▶ being the first state to eliminate veteran homelessness with programs to keep it at a minimum;
- ▶ enhanced veteran hiring initiatives, including expanding Virginia Values Veterans employer support from 1 year to 5 years since discharge; and
- ▶ restructuring community family and veteran mental health services to ensure they are responsive to military experience.



Retired Senator Toddy Puller receiving the news honoring her family.

Most significant, a 120-bed Veterans Care Center will be built in Fauquier. It will serve Northern Virginia with skilled nursing, short-term rehabilitation, and Alzheimer's/dementia care and is planned to open in 2019. It will be named to

honor General "Chesty" Puller, the most decorated Marine in U.S. history, and his family.

ENVIRONMENT

Chesapeake Bay \$20 million from bonds will help local efforts to control storm water run-off and stream erosion.

Coal A bill to extend coal tax credits was defeated and, unless there are significant reforms to support alternative jobs, the credits will go away next year. Despite over \$610 million in employer tax credits since 1988, coal production and jobs declined even faster than predicted before the credits. When I toured mine operations in 2008, it was clear many jobs were lost to mechanized long-wall mining and won't come back.

Air Pollution Efforts also were defeated that would have severely restricted any work on analyzing the cost-benefits of developing alternative clean power sources.

Wind Power In 2014, Dominion Power received 1 of 3 federal energy grants to develop major wind power generation 24 miles off the coast of Virginia Beach. While excellent conditions exist closer to shore, this work was to develop the technology needed to withstand hurricanes. Regrettably, the grant was withdrawn because functioning power generation couldn't be guaranteed before 2020.

TRANSPORTATION

We're making **significant progress but the challenges are great**. Metro is Exhibit A of what happens when we don't maintain our infrastructure – complex high cost repairs; reduced farebox revenue; lost commuter productivity; and, most tragically, the loss of human lives.

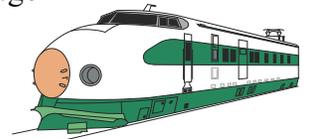
While the new General Manager is tackling years of neglect head on, the burden is on current Virginia, Maryland, and D.C. leaders to not defer ongoing maintenance to a future that never comes. Unfortunately, Virginia legislators failed that test when they refused to close a 40% revenue loss in the dedicated Metro gas tax since 2013. This 2.1% regional tax needs the same price floor as the statewide tax.

Now, nothing but **good news**:

- ▶ Local streets are getting repaved by the State.
- ▶ Transit and carpool improvements are an integral part of increasing I-66 and I-95 capacity to handle congestion inside the beltway.
- ▶ Starting this year, road construction projects are selected using data-driven cost-benefit analyses developed at the direction of the 2014 General Assembly ... What projects will give us the **biggest bang for the buck**?

Finally, Virginia just won a \$165 million federal grant to remove major I-95 corridor bottlenecks. Combined with \$565 million in private investments and \$710 million in other public funds, coordinated improvements will

- ▶ extend the express lanes 7 miles to the Potomac and improve Pentagon access,
- ▶ remove the traffic-choking merge onto I-95 South by extending the express lanes 10 miles to Fredericksburg,
- ▶ add commuter parking and expand bus service;
- ▶ improve VRE and freight rail service by adding 14 miles of track and by conducting the environmental analysis required before replacing the old Potomac River bridge and adding track into Union Station, and
- ▶ purchase land for a future southeast high speed rail corridor.



Vivian, the two issues I'm most concerned about are:

- Economy** **Transportation** **Education** **Health Care** **Mental Health**
 Environment **Personal Freedoms** **Taxes** **Law Enforcement** **Other** _____

My concerns about #1 are _____

My concerns about #2 are _____

Please cut along the line below to include your name and address, which is printed on the back, with your response.

RE-DISTRICTING

How lawmakers' districts are drawn has a great deal to do with **"a fair share for Northern Virginia,"** polarized politics, and much else.

People are bewildered that I'm their representative while just across the street it's someone else. How would they know if they're going to hold me accountable or ask for help? The number of carved-up communities is twice what it was statewide and, especially, throughout my district. Those in charge of new lines touted it was a small "inconvenience" to get the population in each district as close as possible. However, a recent federal court ruling exposed that carving out small numbers was the tool used to pack African-Americans into as few districts as possible, marginalizing their influence.

Urban areas also have been marginalized. It took years to get the votes for desperately needed transportation funding. Fairfax is lumped with rural counties, giving us limited local authority and a financing system dating back to the 1700's. State school funding doesn't reflect Northern Virginia's 1/3 higher cost-of-living.

This **marginalization of the economic engine that drives Virginia** spills over into our justice system. There's no one from Fairfax, Arlington, or Alexandria (18.5% of the state's population) on Virginia's Supreme Court or Court of Appeals. No one has been for over 6 years.

As the ranking minority on House Courts Committee, I did everything I could on behalf of a stellar jurist, Jane Roush, whose 22 years on the Fairfax bench would have doubled trial court experience on our highest court. Her corporate law expertise was honed by issues effecting the 11 Fortune 500 companies headquartered here – half of the 22 located in Virginia. She knows all aspects of our lives, but she was rejected on a party-line vote.

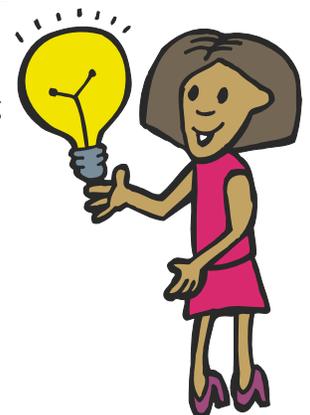
K-12 EDUCATION

Fairfax County schools will get over \$30 million in new state funding this school year. While K-12 throughout Virginia was a budget priority, my personal priority was to restore our small cost-of-living factor. Compared to 26% higher salaries for State Police working in Northern Virginia, our school personnel only net about a 2% state-funded difference ... but, **\$30 million is better than nothing.**

We gained an additional \$140,000 for Thomas Jefferson. TJ was the only Governor's school whose funding was capped below its actual enrollment.

Fairfax County also is slated to receive \$4.3 million as the state share of a salary increase effective December 1st. However, this may be pulled back because of the state revenue shortfall I talked about on the first page.

Finally, on behalf of all students throughout Virginia, I was pleased that \$10 million was designated to **reduce class size** to less than 30 in every elementary classroom where space is available. It's an essential small step forward to a better learning environment.



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CRISIS INTERVENTION

Mental Health

Public psychiatric beds in America have dropped more than 90% since the 1950s. They weren't replaced with adequate community care and now over 20% of the people who end up in jail have a serious mental illness compared to about 4% in 1955.*

Moreover, it's estimated "the risk of being killed during a police incident is 16 times greater for individuals with untreated mental illness than for other civilians approached or stopped by officers.**"

(* Treatment Advocacy Center, *Overlooked in the Undercounted*)

Diversion

I serve on a 4-year legislative study launched after Sen. Deeds lost his son to untreated mental illness. I also attend every meeting I can of Fairfax County's response to law enforcement-related deaths. In both, **many in law enforcement support training** to respond to the person and not escalate the crisis.

Benefits aren't limited to an appropriate mental health response. I got 2 bills passed

- ▶ to not force rape victims to file charges and instead preserve the biological evidence for at least 2 years and
- ▶ to allow police to decide when not to file criminal charges against a juvenile who completes prescribed services.

Mental Health

Law Enforcement

Race Relations

First Response

Law & Order

Unfortunately, veterans courts and mental health courts are still strongly opposed by legislators who believe "do the crime, do the time" .. no excuses .. no substituting needed services for a lifetime criminal record.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Gun Control

Suicides make up 2/3 of all gun deaths. However, it's extremely difficult to establish before the fact that someone is legally a danger to self or others, including a potential mass shooter. Individual rights are at stake, no less than with the 2nd Amendment. We did pass a bipartisan gun control compromise to

- ▶ help close the gun show loophole by having State Police available to do a background check for every sale,
- ▶ prohibit domestic abusers from having a gun, and
- ▶ allow concealed carry permit holders from another state to carry in Virginia, as long as that state can verify the permit 24/7.

Race Relations

Since Virginia's beginning, Blacks have been devalued. In 1902, the state constitution took away felons right to vote to "*inevitably cut from the existing electorate four-fifths of the negro voters.*" Whites would be protected by giving the Governor the power to restore rights. Today's fear and suspicion of discriminatory law enforcement has many and deep roots.