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February 8, 2007

JOHN WATKINS TALKS ABOUT LEGISLATION

Earlier this week, the General Assembly passed its midpoint. I am pleased to tell you that most of the legislation that I proposed passed the Senate and is awaiting action in the House.

One bill I introduced raised the age in which children are required to ride in car booster seats through age seven. This bill ends a loophole in the current law that allows children to ride in the cargo areas of enclosed vehicles without any restraints at all. This bill passed the Senate overwhelmingly and if enacted into law, will reduce the risk of death or injury for child passengers. In Virginia, motor vehicle crashes are the number one cause of death to children. The bill I introduced does not create new law, but enhances existing law to make Virginia's children safer on the road.

I also co-sponsored a key tax relief measure with Senate Majority Leader Walter Stosch to allow many of the localities I represent to increase the maximum income limits for seniors to qualify for property tax relief. This will help seniors on fixed incomes keep their taxes affordable, especially in light of the fact that local assessments have been rising dramatically in recent years. The Senate passed this legislation unanimously.

I introduced SB 1289 concerning wine and beer delivery permits. This bill restores the ability of Virginia retailers to deliver wine and beer to their customers. This privilege was inadvertently removed by the ruling of the federal court in the litigation that challenged the constitutionality of Virginia's ABC laws. Most of the changes are technical but the law needed to be reinstated with the technical amendments to ensure the constitutionality of the newly positioned administrative procedures. This legislation was requested by the Retail Merchants Association. The retailers' interest in this legislation stems from the fact that many food retailers today home deliver complete meals. Included in those meals, obviously at the request of the consumer, are alcoholic beverages such as beer and wine. This provision will allow this type of operation to continue.

I also introduced a commending resolution to acknowledge the accomplishments of NASCAR driver Denny Hamlin from Chesterfield, Virginia. In 2006 Denny won the NASCAR Nextel Cup Series rookie of the year award. He won two races from the pole at Pocono Raceway, plus a third pole position and a second place finish at Richmond

International Raceway. Denny also became the first rookie to make the Chase for the Nextel Cup Championship playoff, and the first rookie to win the Budweiser Shootout at Daytona. This resolution recognizes Denny's great accomplishments in 2006 and shows our pride in this Chesterfield native.

Finally, to follow up on my column from last week, two measures to resolve the long-standing debate over Virginia's transportation problem failed in the Senate. I voted against both measures because I felt they were too flawed to support. One measure would have raised the gasoline tax by as much as 10 cents a gallon. The other measure would have diverted hundreds of millions of dollars from the General Fund that are currently earmarked for public education, law enforcement and health care. I do not believe we should undermine one core service for the sake of another. As the session progresses, I will continue to work with members of the House and Senate to craft a more acceptable transportation proposal.

As always, I want to hear your views and concerns. Please contact me or my staff if you have questions or suggestions about any of the issues that come before the General Assembly.

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