

2008 General Assembly Begins

The 2008 Session of the Virginia General Assembly began last week. The biggest issue that I am dealing with is the budget. I am very concerned that the revenue projections that the Governor has authorized, particularly in the first year of the new biennium, are overly optimistic. I am concerned about the continuing impact of the housing downturn and about pulling money out of the Rainy Day Fund.

This is the 60-day “long” session primarily because of the introduction of the new biennial budget effective July 1, 2008. It is the only opportunity any Governor has to present his budget which will remain in place through the balance of his term of office. Needless to say, this budget will reflect the programs and priorities of this administration.

Another topic that indirectly will be focused parallel to the budget will be that of transportation. The Governor has recommended moving some of the General Fund dollars that were obligated last year back into the General Fund expenditures this year. The reasoning is that the transportation projects are not ready at this time to go under contract to use the dollars. It is anticipated that they will be replaced in the new budget beginning in July.

Another area of focus will be legislation that would allow the Richmond metropolitan area to utilize the same authority mechanism that northern Virginia and Tidewater are using to raise funds for regional projects. This step will require much consideration on the part of the local governments in this area, the community, the taxpayers and consumers. That said, while I am interested in finding a mechanism to fund regional projects, I am quite reluctant to let the state “off the hook” in terms of major interstate and arterial projects.

Another area that will indirectly focus on transportation will be the potential of removing cash proffers and putting in their place impact fees for the development of on-site and off-site road construction, school construction and public safety facilities. The cash proffer system is part of the problem with the continuing rise of assessments. It is an artificial mechanism that adds to the costs of new homes and by doing so inflates the adjacent home values by assessment. It amounts to legalized extortion of the homebuilder, the new homeowner and all of the adjacent taxpayers.

The third area of interest this year will be on what Virginia needs to do about illegal immigration. Many of the ideas that come to mind are specifically pre-empted by federal law. Federal requirements in health care and education preclude the state from denying these services to anyone. The alternative of arresting and incarcerating all illegal aliens sounds helpful, but in reality, if the state undertakes that, the cost of the prisons, the judicial system and deportation would then be borne by the citizens of Virginia. To date the federal government has been quite unwilling to live up to its responsibility to assist financially to a substantial degree in any of this.

The Virginia Commission on Immigration has been formed and will be attempting to determine an appropriate direction for Virginia. This Commission began its work at the end of September 2007 and will be forwarding recommendations for consideration by the General

Assembly during the 2009 and 2010 Sessions. I do not envision that much legislation will be passed on this issue prior to that time.

These are just a few of the important issues that will be addressed at the 2008 Session of the General Assembly. Please do not hesitate to contact my office on these and other issues of importance to you. I would also suggest that for those particularly desiring to follow action on the budget, the entire budget will be available at the state web site: <http://legis.state.va.us>. The Virginia Commission on Immigration report will be available at: <http://www.hhr.virginia.gov/Initiatives/ImmigrationCommission/>

Please visit my web site: www.senatorjohnwatkins.com. We will be updating the web site with information and photos as the session progresses.

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