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### John Watkins Talks About Cigarette Tax and Transportation Authority

This fourth week of the General Assembly finds us even more deeply embroiled in the budget deliberations. Some of the Governor's proposals, such as the cigarette tax increase, have failed to come out of the Finance Committee. This will have a significant impact on the approach the Senate will be taking to meet the budget constraints. The primary focus will be more cuts and reduction in expenditures.

I voted against the cigarette tax increase for two primary reasons. First, I felt it was inappropriate to focus the tax on one industry and one commodity. If the proponents were serious in approaching this tax increase as a deterrent to poor health, the tax should have been broader and should have covered more products than just cigarettes. Second, tobacco in the Richmond area means jobs. I think it would be detrimental to the economical well being of several companies and the jobs of so many of Virginia workers in our metropolitan area if this tax increase were successful.

Another piece of my legislation that made it out of committee this week concerns the Richmond Metropolitan Area Transportation Authority. The primary focus of this legislation initially involves two jurisdictions, Chesterfield County and the City of Richmond. The goal is to undertake necessary planning and study for transportation projects that would be beneficial to these two jurisdictions. The only associated revenue stream with the authority is a grantor's tax, which is paid by individuals benefiting from sale of property. Usually this is correlated with development and growth. This is just the beginning, but I hope it will create results that will benefit our entire community.

Next week will be crossover, and Tuesday is the last day for the Senate to deal with its bills with the exception of the budget. The budget will be voted on Thursday, February 12<sup>th</sup>. Sometime in the next week we should also receive the January numbers from the Governor's office in terms of General Fund revenues. This will be a clear indicator of the direction and economic well-being of the Commonwealth for the next 12 months.

Among many visitors this week I or my aides saw were David Mangano with the Chesterfield Community Services Board; Dr. Leah Bush, the Chief Medical Examiner; Robin Shortridge and others with the Powhatan Education Association; Don Wilms and others with the Chesterfield Education Association; LaVater Walker and Rachelle Anderson with CHIP; and a number of people who visited the General Assembly as part of Jewish Advocacy Day.

I welcome their comments, input and opinions, and I welcome yours.

To follow the progress of any bill, please visit the General Assembly's web site at:  
<http://legis.state.va.us>.

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