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John Watkins Talks About the Budget and Smoking

It is week six, and we are coming into the final days here at the General Assembly. The Senate passed a budget this week which took into account the significant shortfall that many of us projected would be there. We also tried to anticipate where we could reasonably backfill with federal stimulus package dollars. It is noteworthy to mention that the dollars for Medicaid and education are specifically directed in the federal bill and, in fact, will help, in the short term, to backfill these needs.

I also think it is important for all Virginians to recognize that the stimulus money is short term and, if we are not careful, it will adversely affect future budgets. I personally feel that it will provide some relief for 2010, and perhaps into 2011, but the only way we can expect to be able to budget in future biennia is if the economy rebounds and does so in a significant way.

I do not wish to be a pessimist because traditionally I am a “glass half full” person and, indeed, I think there will be opportunities as we go forward in these austere times. Society and government must adjust to this austerity through reducing expenses and obligations, ensuring that our approach to government and the economy are to accommodate necessities and not niceties.

Other legislation of note is the smoking prohibition, which, in some forms, I support and in other forms I think they are an over-reach of government. I still have some concern over the mandate about an individual’s rights and a proprietor’s ownership of his business. I also understand the health concerns. I think some accommodation needs to be made for bars and vendors of tobacco products. The isolation of these areas would accommodate the public at large. Many business owners do not realize they have the complete authority to prohibit smoking in their places of business. Many do exactly that when they understand they can.

One piece of legislation I have been involved in for over 20 years is the licensure and regulation of professional landscape architecture. I am not a landscape architect, but I have had an opportunity to work within the scope of their field of work for most of my life. To those whose occupation is to design and enhance the communities where people live and work, the expertise of a professional landscape architect is an invaluable tool in creating properties that are both

aesthetically pleasing and environmentally conscious. It seems that the legislation bringing this profession to full licensure will ultimately reach the Governor's desk early next week.

I welcome your comments and thoughts about these issues or any issues of special interest to you.

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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