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John Watkins Talks About the Budget, Education

Week two of the 2009 General Assembly is ending and the overwhelming issue of this session continues to be the amendments to the biennial budget. It is important to recognize we currently have a two-year budget in place, but at this time revenue projections used to construct that budget have been found to be overly optimistic.

As you can imagine, the primary reason for this is the abrupt downturn in the economy and the recession, which has been ongoing for over a year. The members of the Senate Finance Committee have already begun going through the subcommittee areas of responsibility and are trying to examine methods of reducing the size of the budget. It will probably be February before we get an additional adjustment about the downsizing of revenues.

This timeline would reflect end-of-year revenue income as well as non-withholding estimated payments and corporate revenues. It will come at the same time that we make our first adjustment in the budget.

My fear is that we will not get a very accurate revenue picture until after May 15th when the Virginia state income taxes are due. This could very well mean we will have to return in June in order to readjust the budget to reflect the worsening revenue picture. As we go through the session, I will try to keep you apprised of where this is headed.

I want to follow on with some of the legislation I introduced this year that may be of interest to you. An area of the state's responsibility I have looked at over the last two years has convinced me to introduce two pieces of legislation. I think both are forward looking and would drive efficiency in education.

My primary focus was with putting in place a creative commons license system in statute. In the early 90s Governor George Allen, by Executive Order, established a creative commons license that was utilized within state agencies and by local governments at that time. The Executive Order has subsequently expired and there currently exists no authority wherein a creative commons license can be developed.

The legislation I am introducing in SB1173 would require the Secretary of Administration to establish a State Board for Community Colleges, in consultation with the Virginia Department of Education and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. Its mission would be to develop a competitive grant pilot program to provide grants to community colleges to establish open education resource centers in the Commonwealth.

To qualify for a grant, community colleges would be required to demonstrate a partnership with faculty or staff from at least one local school division and one institution of higher education in the Commonwealth. Grants would be awarded on a competitive basis with guidelines established in the bill.

The bill also establishes a fund authorizing both public and private contributions. The provisions of this bill would not become effective, however, unless either an appropriation of general funds is included in a general appropriations act passed by the 2009 or 2010 session of the General Assembly, which becomes law, or funds from other private or public sources are deposited into the Open Education Resource Grant Fund by July 1, 2010.

I think a system such as this would create the appropriate incentives to provide education systems, at both the local and state level, that could be utilized across Virginia. This would lessen our dependence on the current system which takes seven years to authorize the adoption of a textbook in Virginia. It would, particularly in the fields of science, math, and engineering, provide a much more adaptable system for teaching that can address the newest innovations in many fields. In addition to the creative commons license, I have offered legislation that will provide for open education resource centers in the Community College system.

SB1174 will require the Secretary of Administration to establish policies, subject to the approval of the Governor, regarding the use of patents and copyrights owned by the Commonwealth. Such policies shall include, at a minimum, the following:

1. A policy granting state agencies the authority over the use and release of patents and copyrights created by employees of the agency. It would authorize state agencies to release potentially copyrightable materials under the Creative Commons licensing system.
2. A provision encouraging the Commonwealth and state agencies to seek patent and copyright protection only in those instances where the patents or copyrights have potential commercial value.
3. Subject to approval by the Secretary of Administration, a process permitting state agencies to commercialize patents and copyrights with potential commercial value.

The bill also permits localities and local school boards to set policies regarding the use and ownership of patents and copyrights developed by employees.

At the request of the Virginia State Police, I introduced SB1166, legislation that increases the fee paid to firearms dealers for criminal history record information checks from \$2 to \$5 for Virginians and from \$5 to \$8 for persons living out-of-state. The reason for the increases is the cost of the records check. This is an investigation that is only required by those who purchase weapons. It is used as a means to ensure Virginia dealers do not inadvertently sell weapons to individuals who are by law prohibited from obtaining a weapon.

The bill also provides that data and forms submitted to and maintained by the Department of State Police for such criminal history checks and purchases may not be inspected by the public. The bill goes further, though, and provides for an exemption to the Freedom of Information Act for that information that is submitted by the purchasers in the course of the transaction of purchasing a weapon.

This past week has been extremely busy with many constituents and constituent groups stopping by my office and voicing their concerns and their issues with me and my legislative assistants. Among the groups were the Gold Wing Road Riders Association; Virginia Conservation Network; Bob Smith from Central Virginia Health Services, Inc; the Virginia Credit Union; the Virginia Auto Dealers; Virginians for a Healthy Future; Maureen Eberhardt and others about resources for Independent Living; the Virginia Citizens Defense League; Family Foundation; Virginians for a Healthy Future, Crossover Ministry, and Webelos 1 Den, a part of Cub Scout Pack 1811 in Midlothian. We welcome their comments, input and opinions, and we welcome yours. Don't hesitate to contact my office on issues of importance 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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