

Virginia General Assembly

2015 Report from Delegate

Vivian Watts

This newsletter covers governing decisions. It hardly touches the challenge of working with the very different life experiences of 140 legislators to find “the common good.” My black colleagues spoke out long ago about the fear and intimidation conveyed in their lives through use of the confederate battle flag. My website carries my floor remarks on the reality of Northern prejudice as I’ve witnessed it. We have far to go to achieve liberty and justice for all —

Vivian



VIRGINIA’S ECONOMY

Thumbs up !

Governor McAuliffe has been a dynamo bringing in new jobs. In his first year, he brought twice as much business investment into Virginia than any Governor ever has. The pace continues with over \$7.5 billion brought in to date!

Thumbs down . . .

The continuing threat of federal budget cuts plagues Virginia’s economy. *We benefit more* than any other state with 30% of our economy driven by federal contracts and jobs. Therefore, *we could lose more* and the looming uncertainty of *whether we will* plays out in a number of ways:

- ▶ Unemployment: In the last 2 years, national unemployment dropped from 7.3% to 5.5%, while Virginia’s barely changed, hovering at 4.9%. Businesses in Northern Virginia and around the military presence in Hampton Roads are very cautious about expanding.
- ▶ Economic growth: Virginia’s economy is flat compared to 2.2% growth nationwide in 2014.
- ▶ National rankings: Virginia’s slipped from the #1 best state to do business 5 years ago to #12 today, largely because of our economy and lack of transportation investment.

Keep your fingers crossed

Continuing to diversify our economy is critical. The Governor earned strong bipartisan support to fully fund his efforts.

Hopefully, we’re beginning to see the pay-off. **State revenue reports finally turned around** in mid-March, giving us a current budget surplus, instead of a \$2 billion shortfall if we hadn’t made hard cuts last September to education, nursing homes, law enforcement, and state agencies across the board.

EDUCATION

Progress in K-12 !

We continued the push to reduce over emphasis on test-taking. Last year we eliminated 5 of 22 state-required tests. This year we approved 3rd through 8th graders retaking a test, as high school students can. The student must have passed the class and only narrowly failed the state test.

Over 23% of Fairfax County’s school budget comes from the State. This year we got more funds because of two General Assembly actions:

- ▶ \$4.7 million more to fund the state’s share of a 1.5% salary increase and
- ▶ a \$6 million break on our payment to the state teacher pension program. This is a one time gain, however, using \$250 million in the sale of old unclaimed state stocks to get the retirement system in better balance.

Challenges . . .

The State contributes less per student than in 2009. The amount each locality gets is based on a seriously flawed, 50-year-old formula. (See vivianwatts.com.)

Progress in Higher Ed !

There were no funding increases, but we shifted priorities to:

- ▶ add 2,100 new in-state slots;
- ▶ increase need-based financial aid for in-state undergraduates by \$8.9 million; and
- ▶ for the first time, allow community college students pursuing industry-based certifications to get need-based financial aid. Currently, only students getting a 2-year degree can qualify.

Challenges . . .

Economic success depends on more than a high school degree; however, we must have a range of alternatives that are job-relevant and affordable.

BRINGING IN QUALITY JOBS

Virginia has one of the greatest spreads of any state between wealth and poverty. Many areas need quality jobs. This area, as well, benefits when we build economic diversity to depend less on federal jobs. Issues, such as those below, directly impact major employers' decisions to locate in Virginia.

Ethics

Well-established employers typically look for government stability to limit uncertainty in corporate decision-making. Virginia's long-standing reputation as a fiscally well-managed state with a AAA bond rating serves us well.

What doesn't serve us well is national news stories about insider, influence-pedaling convictions. This Session we closed legal loopholes to:

- ▶ limit gifts, travel, and entertainment to a yearly total of \$100;
- ▶ prohibit family members from soliciting or accepting such items; and
- ▶ include everyone under the \$100 gift limit who does or wants to do business with the government.

Starting next July, the public will be able to go online to search the disclosure reports which officials and lobbyists are required to file every 6 months.

LGBT Civil Rights

Virginia was becoming increasingly isolated in refusing to recognize same sex marriages. June's U.S. Supreme Court decision supporting the right to marry takes this issue off the table. Hopefully, as we attract employers who want to maintain an open door, their personnel policies will set the standard for other employers to provide equal support for the healthcare and family needs of all employees.

Health Insurance Coverage

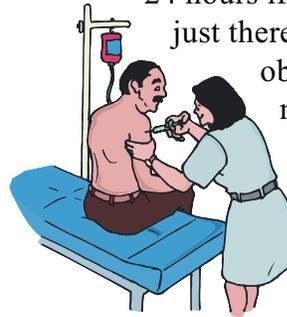
Virginia also is increasingly out of step with other states in refusing to expand Medicaid to cover 400,000 uninsured adults. The Virginia Chamber of Commerce said it best about how this affects employers:

"Insurance premiums for Virginia's businesses have risen 32% faster than the rate of inflation, in part because of the cost shifting due to the uninsured. Over the next 8 years, Virginia businesses will incur \$16.4 billion in ACA-related taxes to pay for federal health care reform. A private option plan will allow Virginia to take control of \$15 billion of its federal tax dollars and put them to work for Virginia ..."

HEALTH ISSUES

Hospitalization

Two bills passed to help people dealing with hospitalization. First, persons must be informed within 24 hours if they haven't been admitted but are



just there as an outpatient or for observation. They need to know that not being admitted can make a huge difference in insurance coverage. Also, if someone is admitted, hospitals must discuss a discharge plan with the person or their designee to go over follow-up care and treatment.

Medical Marijuana

Effective presentations by parents of children who've lost significant abilities due to ever-worsening epileptic seizures led to allowing doctors to prescribe marijuana in the form of cannabidiol or THC-A oils.

Elder Abuse

Suspected physical and sexual abuse in nursing homes and assisted living is supposed to be reported by more than a half-dozen agencies and providers. However, serious questions about follow-up were brought to my attention. While my bill to focus responsibility and to increase the training of those who directly care for patients didn't pass, I am working with those involved to craft a solution for the 2016 Session.

Medicaid Expansion

Instead of expanding Medicaid to 400,000 under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), we brought 21,600 severely mentally ill adults having less than \$10,000 income, dental care for 45,000 poor pregnant women, and 35,000 additional children under Medicaid. The problem is this approach **costs Virginia taxpayers \$85.6 million more** than getting 90% federal funding under the ACA.

MENTAL HEALTH

Brain Injury

Sophisticated research is showing that how the brain functions is not different from the medical issues of how any part of the body functions. The reality of combat TBI (traumatic brain injury) underscores the medical connection. I was able to change the budget to remove bars to services for persons with brain injury, which had been limited to substance abuse or to psychiatric disorders only if they didn't also involve injury. The language includes providing TBI community mental health services as an alternative to jail.

Please, let me hear from you . . .

Vivian, the two issues I'm most concerned about are:

- Economy** **Transportation** **Education** **Health Care** **Mental Health**
 Environment **Personal Freedoms** **Taxes** **Immigration** **Other** _____

My concerns about #1 are _____

My concerns about #2 are _____

Please cut along the dashed line on the back page to include your address label with your response.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Mental Crisis Intervention Training (CIT)

Law enforcement officers frequently deal with persons experiencing mental health crisis. Nationally, CIT grew out of an awareness that to get persons the help they need, officers need training in how to not escalate the crisis and access to readily available mental health services.

Unfortunately, even though Virginia's CIT requirements go back to 2010, far **too many mentally ill persons still end up in jail**. As a member of the special 4-Year Mental Health Commission, I'm determined to identify and address roadblocks to a more appropriate response.

Campus Sexual Assault

We spent the entire Session trying to find the right balance to stop serial rapists while helping victims deal with the lasting emotional trauma of rape. Under the final bill:

- ▶ victims will be strongly supported in getting counseling;
- ▶ while some campus employees must report an alleged rape, counselors won't do so unless victim agrees;
- ▶ reports must be assessed by a team that includes law enforcement and turned over for criminal prosecution if it's determined other students may be in danger; and
- ▶ if a student is disciplined for a non-consensual sexual act or withdraws while under campus investigation, it will be recorded on the student's transcript.

Drug Overdose Deaths

People who've OD'd may be left to die by others afraid of arrest because they're also illegally using drugs or alcohol. We passed a "Good Samaritan" law that protects the reporter if they stay on the scene and cooperate with any criminal investigation related to the drug or alcohol used in the overdose.

ENVIRONMENT

Green Energy

We created a solar energy authority to expand solar by identifying regulatory barriers, improving financing, and expanding job training.

We doubled the amount of green energy (solar, wind, biomass, etc.) that commercial customers can generate for their own use. The limit for residential customers remains the same, at about twice what an average household consumes.

However, a bill to allow homeowner associations to construct solar panels for communal use didn't get out of committee.

This March, Virginia was awarded the first permit to construct wind turbines in federal waters. Dominion will construct two turbines about 25 miles off-shore, where the depth is about 85 feet, to gain valuable information about challenges of expanding wind power.

Chesapeake Bay

We've significantly reduced pollution from sewage treatment and agricultural run-off. But, little or no change has occurred in pollution from urban run-off. New construction requirements only kept pollution from getting worse. This Session we increased funding to \$25 million to help localities like Fairfax control erosion by undertaking costly stream restoration.



By authority of
Delegate Vivian Watts
8717 Mary Lee Lane
Annandale, VA 22003

PRSRT STD
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
MERRIFIELD, VA
PERMIT NO.1517

Phone: 703 / 978 - 2989
FAX: 703 / 978 - 2750
email: vwatts@erols.com
website: vivianwatts.com



Josh Levy, NVTech Council, and Adm Harvey (ret), Sec Veterans&Defense Affairs

MILITARY

Employment

We have more veterans per capita than any other state. Most are under 30 and 20,000 of those under 25 are unemployed. With the strong backing of the NV Tech Council and Virginia's Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs, I carried legislation to support hiring veterans. Employers, who employ recently discharged veterans for one year at the prevailing wage, will get a grant. Veterans will get job counseling and an opportunity for a substantial career.

Education

By the end of 2015, community colleges will begin awarding academic credit for military training to help veterans get a degree or technical certification in less time at lower cost.

Healthcare

Virginia was the first state to get federal funds to set up community health centers for veterans who live more than 40 miles from a V.A. hospital or have to wait more than 30 days to be seen.

TRANSPORTATION

Local Roads

The 2013 transportation funding increase was long overdue. **It's going to take years before we begin to catch up with the huge backlog of needs.**

Engineering assessments show Northern Virginia roads are in the worst condition of all 9 districts except the Richmond District. Roads in Fairfax, Prince William, and Loudoun are particularly bad. The State maintains the roads in these counties. (Alexandria, Fairfax City, Falls Church, and Arlington do their own maintenance, adding local funds to state per mile payments, which is why their roads look so much better and the snow gets removed faster.)

The 2015 major transportation bill was needed to add transit funding and improved Private Partnership oversight. I got it expanded to:

- ▶ include rebuilding deteriorated local roads (numbered 600 and above) not just interstate and primary roads and
- ▶ fund projects to reduce congestion on local roads, which the State wasn't going to fund until well after 2028.

A PERSONAL NOTE

Secretary Harvey, a retired Admiral, and Secretary of Transportation Layne, a CPA and investor, are the best I've worked with. Sec. Layne is a problem solver who systematically looks at return on investment. Sec. Harvey knows the support needed by veterans and how decisions will be made to keep military jobs in Virginia.