

General Assembly Reconvened “Veto” Session

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The General Assembly is in session on April 2 for the reconvened or, as it is popularly known, veto session. After legislators go home from the regular annual legislative session, the governor has 30 days to review bills that passed both houses. He can sign the bills into law, veto them, or return them to the legislature with proposed amendments.

The reconvened session allows legislators an opportunity to review the actions of the governor. A two-thirds vote in both houses is required to override the governor’s veto; his amendments can be passed by a simple majority.

The session has historically only lasted for one day even though the Constitution provides for a three-day session that can be extended. With the hot-button issues before it, this session is likely to go late into the evening.

Governor Warner has vetoed the repeal of the estate tax, and the block of powerful lobbyists hired to get the repeal passed has been revived to get the bill passed over the Governor’s veto. An override is possible in the House of Delegates where Democrats control only 34 votes, and some of those will probably vote against the Governor. It will be a cliffhanger in the Senate where one or two votes will make the difference.

The Governor termed the repeal “irresponsible fiscal policy.” It would provide a tax break of over \$200 million to fewer than a thousand of the richest families in the Commonwealth.

As the Governor described the timing of the repeal:

“What is particularly unfair about this tax cut is that it is being proposed at the same time that college students are paying higher tuition at our state universities, the poor and mentally ill are facing curtailed social services, and programs that benefit all Virginians – ranging from parks to environmental protection – are under-funded due to our severe fiscal crisis. Moreover, the General Assembly has proposed this course before it has fulfilled its promise to phase out the car tax and the food tax, which impact nearly all Virginia taxpayers.”

Business groups have come under increasing criticism for their aggressive pushing for the repeal at the same time they are lobbying for more funding for schools, universities and roads. The repeal would not take effect until Fiscal Year 2005 which means that it could be delayed for consideration until tax reform is taken up as an issue next year. I support the Governor’s position.

The Governor’s action on several abortion-related bills will also draw strong debate. While the public has generally supported parental consent for a minor seeking an abortion, parents may be less enthusiastic when they realize that under the bill passed by the General Assembly they must go to a notary to get their consent form signed. A governor’s amendment would take away that requirement because of “medical privacy.” A Governor’s proposed amendment on the so-called “partial birth abortion” bill would make an exception for the health or life of the mother.

The Governor has vetoed the “Choose Life” license plate because he does not support “political or ideological slogans on license plates regardless of their expressed viewpoint.” The abortion bills are generally litmus test bills for the conservative Republicans. Moderates in both parties often vote with the conservatives while expressing privately their misgivings on these issues. Republican moderates fear a conservative challenge in a primary. I support the Governor’s position on these bills.

The reconvened session will probably only last for a day, but it will be a busy day!