

Bumper Cars in the House of Delegates

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The goings-on in the Virginia House of Delegates would be amusing if it were not for the seriousness of the business being conducted. Not unlike bumper cars at the amusement park, the persons occupying leadership positions have changed directions, bumped into each other and into stiff outside opposition, and moved aimlessly and without direction.

The latest ill-conceived, last-minute ploy sprung as a surprise – as most of their actions have been – left many in bewilderment including members of the Republican majority. After a couple of hours of a closed-to-the-public caucus to convince their own increasingly skeptical members, those with leadership titles announced that a “continuity budget” would be introduced. As Delegate Vincent Callahan, Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, explained, the new one-year interim budget would allow the government to continue to operate since the budget conferees had not been able to agree on a biennium budget.

“Continuity budget,” I said on the floor of the House of Delegates, “sounds an awful lot like ‘continuing resolution’ that is Washington-style budgeting that Virginia should never embark on.” Clearly such a move would signal to Wall Street that Virginia is unable to come to grips with its systemic budget problems and would end the state’s AAA bond rating. And programs and services would be essentially level funded at a time when enrollment is increasing in all educational programs. Medicaid costs are rising, prison population is going up, and the cost of the car tax cut continues to bilk nearly a billion dollars out of the state budget.

This latest very bad idea is but another in a series of missteps and miscues in a House of Delegates lacking leadership with having multiple factions within its Republican majority. Other incredible ideas that have been floated and shot down included a referendum on the budget. The proposed question: Do you support an increase in your sales and income taxes to support expanded services? Any guess as to the outcome of such a dishonest question?

The fiction is still being perpetuated that the House proposed budget is balanced. The revenue proposal on which it is based will raise about \$300 million less than claimed by its House proponents according to the Department of Taxation.

Time remains for a compromise to be worked out between the House and the Senate, but it will take new conferees on the part of the House to accomplish the task. I told the Speaker in a speech on the floor of the House that he should appoint new conferees. You can do the same thing by sending him an email at delhowell@aol.com.

Thanks to the many persons who took part in the community forum Senator Janet Howell and I sponsored recently. The overwhelming message was clear that people want a budget passed that will respond to our educational, human services, transportation, and public safety needs. And the need to pay for those services was also clear. Senator Howell and I continue to work for passage of such a budget.