

Second Chance at Sales Tax Referendum

Delegate Kenneth R. "Ken" Plum

(Appeared in the April 10-16, 2002 edition of the *Connection*.)

The Virginia General Assembly's reconvened or "veto" session meeting this week in the State Capital should prove to be more interesting than most have been in recent years. The annual session provides legislators an opportunity to review vetoes of legislation by the Governor which would require a two-thirds vote to override and to consider amendments proposed by the Governor to legislation that passed this year.

In the latter category, the Governor has announced that he will propose to amend the bill that would allow Hampton Roads residents to vote on a referendum for a one-cent increase in the sales tax for transportation projects to give Northern Virginians the same right to vote on a half-cent increase in the sales tax for transportation projects in the region.

For the business and developer interests that have been pushing for the referendum, the Warner amendments are a clear victory. The amendments are expected to pass both houses of the legislature.

For those who had hoped to include a half-cent for education and had seen their hopes dashed when the House of Delegates abruptly adjourned without permitting a vote on the Senate-passed bill that included both transportation and education, they will have to wait for another day. A group appointed by the Governor will consider budget reform proposals that will bring more money to education.

In many ways the Governor's amendments are better than the bills considered by the legislature in that they include more dollars for mass transit projects. But even his amendments will produce only about \$5 billion over the next twenty years. The projected shortfall in transportation funding for the Northern Virginia region to stay even in its level of service is \$15 billion for the same period.

It is less than certain a referendum will pass. Numerous people want no more taxes; others object to raising taxes during a recession. Critics will point out that transportation is a state responsibility and that the region should not be bailing out the state on its failure to provide adequate roads. And then there are those who remain angry that school needs were not addressed.

The business community is reportedly prepared to mount a million-dollar campaign to get the referendum passed. Such a campaign will be necessary. The campaign will need to emphasize that without additional funding our transportation needs will not be met and the quality of life in our region will deteriorate. That money comes from the taxpayers, and it is a better deal for Northern Virginia to raise and spend its own money than send it to the state.