

Reform in the Commonwealth

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(Appeared August 8, 2004 in the *Reston Connection*.)

The Virginia General Assembly prodded by Governor Mark Warner and enabled by Republican moderates made a significant step this year in putting the Commonwealth's fiscal house in order. By increasing the revenue flow with a half-cent increase in the sales tax and by stopping the hemorrhaging from the car tax, the state will be able to meet its core service obligations for the biennium and into the future. Moody's Investor Services has taken the state off its credit watch list.

Another quiet reform is taking place in Virginia government that has the potential for long-term positive impact. That reform is the return to merit-based gubernatorial appointments. The Governor of Virginia appoints about 4000 persons both to paid positions in state government and to unpaid membership on boards and commissions. Men and women who occupy these positions can have a lasting impact on government policy, and in the case of membership on boards and commissions they can impact policy beyond the term of the governor as these positions sometimes overlap the terms of governors.

Types of boards and commissions range from the State Board of Education responsible for K-12 education, the State Council for Higher Education, and the Board of Medicine to the Virginia Soybean Board, the Board for Coal Mining Examiners, and the Citizens Advisory Council on Furnishing and Interpreting the Executive Mansion. For a complete listing, visit the Secretary of the Commonwealth's website at www.commonwealth.virginia.gov.

From 1982 to 1997 I served as Chairman of the Nominations and Confirmations Committee in the House of Delegates. During that time I reviewed the resumes of the persons appointed by the governor. As a legislative courtesy, unlike in the federal Congress, the governor is able to appoint whomever he wants so long as the persons do not have a conflict of interest or do not have something in their background to disqualify them. Minimum qualifications are established by the governor's decision in appointing the person.

With the beginning of the Allen administration, a disturbing trend occurred. Political operatives began being appointed to important posts in government in greater numbers. The only experience many of these people brought to the job was partisan political campaigning. Many had little or no business or community experience. Governors have always appointed people friendly to their campaigns, but appointees in the past have had other meaningful experience or expertise as well.

Talk to the president of a public college or university who served during this period, and he or she will tell you of the setbacks and problems caused by ideologically-driven political appointees on their boards who were not friendly to higher education. Many of the problems associated with the start-up of the Standards of Learning program came from the extreme, conservative, public school critics who had been appointed to the State Board of Education.

Fortunately, Governor Mark Warner has turned the situation around and is appointing high-caliber men and women to positions on boards and commissions. Appointments to the State Council of Higher Education and college boards are particularly notable. Last week, for example, he appointed Dr. Ernst Volgenau to the board of George Mason University. Dr. Volgenau is a physicist, author of several books, political persuasion unknown, and chief executive officer of SRA, a business he started in his garage in Hunters Woods, Reston, that now has over 2000 employees.

State Government will be more effective, efficient, and responsible under the leadership of persons like Ernst Volgenau and the other capable and qualified men and women Governor Warner is appointing to state government.