

Straight Talk on Virginia's Fiscal Woes

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For those who are concerned that loose fiscal policies can doom democracies, there is ample cause for worry. At the federal level, President Bush has taken the Treasury's 2000 budgetary surplus of \$236 billion and turned it into a deficit that may go beyond \$450 billion this year. At the state level, Governor Mark Warner is struggling to put Virginia's fiscal house in order after the state plummeted from the best financially managed in the nation in the Wilder administration to fourteenth after the Allen and Gilmore administrations. His efforts have been stymied in the past by an uncooperative Republican-controlled General Assembly.

Recent weeks have brought some straight talk on Virginia's fiscal woes, and that talk is coming from Republicans. Most notably, the Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, John Chichester, told a pro-business group, Virginia FREE, that he "fears the stealth damage we're doing to our infrastructure by letting these things go dormant – damage that we won't see today, or a year from now, but that we will see five to ten years down the road." The things he was referring to were the state's underinvestment in public schools, colleges, transportation and health care.

"If we're content to be a grade C state, then we can plug along as we are now," he said. But "let's not kid ourselves – we can't sustain quality without continual reinvestment and renewal." This kind of thinking and talking got Chichester a primary challenge from within his own party this year that was unsuccessful but which was heavily financed by the right-wing element of the Republican Party.

Chichester's comments were no doubt well received by the business leaders in Virginia FREE. They echoed the warnings the business leaders have been giving. For the first time ever in history, the business-dominated organization gave Democrats higher marks than Republicans on being able to lead and manage the state.

Joining in on the straight talk on Virginia's budget was Delegate Harvey Morgan, a retired pharmacist who has been in the legislature for 24 years and who is considered a moderate Republican. In his comments to the Tax Code Study Commission, Delegate Morgan said, "Virginia is at a crossroads. We entered the 21st century dragging a tax structure designed for the 19th and 20th centuries." And he suggested that the Commission members "have the opportunity to make perhaps the most significant contribution of their legislative careers." He told the members that "the people of Virginia are depending on them."

Most significantly, however, Delegate Morgan pleaded with the Commission members to "please put partisan differences aside and work for solutions that will keep our Commonwealth sound." And if his words are heeded, Virginia's fiscal policies can be put in order to save our democracy, to adequately educate our children, to improve the quality of life in our communities and in our travels, and to ensure that everyone has access to health care.