

Bringing About Change in the Old Dominion

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The trip from Reston to Richmond takes two hours in travel time. But in making the trip over more than two decades I realized that the hundred or so miles I traveled took me in many ways back into another era of time.

The first, most glaring difference between my home community and the Capital City when I first went there in 1978 was the excessive amount of cigarette smoking every place you went. A blue haze floated through the House of Delegates chamber from the number of members who smoked during the session.

Of course, tobacco is a major part of the Richmond and Virginia economy. Tobacco leaves are represented in the frieze around the ceiling of the House.

For many years several of us worked on a Clean Indoor Air Act to require that nonsmoking areas be set aside in restaurants and public places. We made slow but steady progress, and now such places are available even in Richmond. Members stopped smoking on the floor of the House of Delegates, and the air is clear. In fact, few members now smoke.

The state cigarette tax of 2.5 cents per pack in Virginia continues to be the lowest in the country, but in the 2002 session there was some serious discussion about the possibility of raising that tax to support education. I have introduced a tax on the manufacturing of cigarettes several times because it would raise considerable money to help offset the health care costs associated with smoking.

Much more serious differences between my district and Richmond existed in the areas of race relations and the treatment of women. Less than 50 years ago Virginia was fighting court-ordered desegregation of its public schools through an effort called "massive resistance" that ultimately, of course, was unsuccessful. And as recent as earlier this year a circuit court judge threw out Virginia's legislative redistricting because it discriminated against minorities. That case is under review by the Virginia Supreme Court.

Virginia still has a long way to go in race relations, and as events of the past few weeks demonstrate, the legislature has some serious changes it needs to make in the treatment of women. One of the last of the "good ole boys," former Speaker Wilkins, resigned his position as Speaker when it was disclosed that he had paid a young woman \$100,000 to settle out of court what could have been a sexual battery charge.

While most of the members who were the most offensive in their behavior towards women have left the legislature, it is clear that a no-nonsense sexual harassment policy needs to be put in place. That will put the legislature in the same place that businesses, industries, and our communities adopted decades ago.

Why do I still drive the two hours back into time? I believe I can make a difference. And we are making progress. While not as rapidly as many of us would like, that progress is important to our community and to the state as a whole.