

Finally, Agreement is Near
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The House of Delegates and the Senate have reached agreement on the revenue side of the budget, the most vexing part of the budget impasse. Much to the astonishment of most everyone, the tax bill that passed raised more revenue than even Governor Warner had proposed. It will raise by some estimates upwards of \$1.6 billion.

The impact on individual taxpayers will be gentle except for smokers who will see the current two and a half cents tax increase to 20 cents next year and 30 cents the following year. The sales tax will increase by a half cent, but the sales tax on food will be reduced beginning July 1, 2005. The marriage penalty is eliminated in the income tax, and exemptions increase from \$800 to \$900. Senior citizens will keep the current income tax subtractions, but those who turn 65 in the future will have their income means-tested to determine the level of subtraction. The tax on the recordation of deeds will increase from 15 to 25 cents per \$100 of value.

The positive impact of additional revenue will be much greater than I had predicted last week in this column. The state will come much closer to funding its share of public school costs than it has in many years. The waiting list for mental retardation services will be reduced by nearly half. Public safety officers' pay will increase. The big hole in the budget will be the lack of new monies for transportation. The final budget is expected to be adopted later this week.

The moderate coalition that put together a budget with much coaxing and persuading from Governor Mark Warner is particularly amazing when viewed against the ultra-conservative, anti-tax successes in other states. Delegates and Senators from both parties took statesmanlike positions in voting for a reasonable and responsible budget while putting themselves in probable political peril with almost certain stiff challenges in the next election.

I plan to look for ways to hold the coalition together on future issues to ensure that Virginia stays in the mainstream. We need to continue to work together to improve the business climate and economic development of the state and to improve the quality of life for all citizens. Such issues are not Republican or Democratic but rather are in the moderate range on a political spectrum that spans the extremes of political thought.

A change in leadership in the House of Delegates is likely after the next election of members. The coalition could work together to put in place bipartisan or nonpartisan leadership in the House of Delegates to reduce the sharp divisions and partisanship that too often inhibit the House in doing its work effectively.

The pressures of legislative service over the past several months remind me of the dislike that George Mason developed about public life. As quoted in the current issue of the Journal of Colonial Williamsburg, Mason wrote in his Will advising his heirs to prefer "the happiness and independence" of "a private station to the troubles and vexations of public business." Mason made an exception when "the necessity of the times should engage them in public affairs." While there have been many frustrations and disappointments over the past several months, I am honored and pleased to be able to work on behalf of my constituents on these critically important public policy issues.