

Making Priorities Known

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Tough choices have to be made in times of economic recession at personal and governmental levels. For persons suffering layoffs the choices are particularly difficult, and virtually everyone becomes more cautious about the future and long-term spending.

For a brief time the federal budget actually showed a surplus for the first time in many years. But September 11, the recession, and tax cuts put the federal government back into red ink. State and local governments are already paring back the amount of assistance they expect to get from the “feds.”

The Virginia Constitution wisely requires that the Commonwealth’s budget be balanced. And the balancing of the budget has been especially challenging in recent times. Virginia’s tax revenues have plummeted with the decline of the fortunes of the telecoms in Northern Virginia and the recession. Add to that the cost of the car tax cut which is an expense of nearly a billion dollars a year to state government that is paid to local government, and the budget crunch for the state becomes obvious.

As described in this column previously and documented by business leaders of the state, Virginia has a budget imbalance of nearly \$4 billion that has been covered up with accounting gimmicks and short-term fixes for many years. The ability to juggle the numbers has been really ingenious at times, but the long-term fiscal health of the state is in jeopardy.

In making the difficult choices about programs and services we fund and those we do not, we get beyond the political rhetoric and make our true priorities known. The priorities – or more clearly the programs and services that are not priorities – of the majority party became very clear in the recent reconvened or “veto” session of the General Assembly.

Governor Warner proposed an amendment to the adopted budget that would have added an additional \$3.2 million to further fund the At-Risk Program used by local school divisions to target students at risk of dropping out of school, to reduce class size, and to provide special vocational training or other special programs. Much to the astonishment of most everyone and over the strong vocal opposition of some of us the House of Delegates rejected the amendment by a vote of 52 to 47.

Voting to reject additional funding for at-risk students were Northern Virginia Delegates Richard Black (R), Robert Marshall (R), Joe May (R), Michelle McQuigg (R), Harry Parrish (R), Jack Rollison (R), and Jay O’Brian (R), along with Majority Leader Morgan Griffith (R) and Speaker of the House Vance Wilkins (R).

Equally shocking was the House’s rejection of the Governor’s proposed amendment to fully fund the Jobs for Virginia Graduates program by a vote of 57 to 39. The program has more than a 90 percent success rate in keeping students in school and into employment upon graduation. Voting to reject this amendment were those delegates listed above except that Robert Marshall and Jack Rollison did not vote, but additional Northern Virginians voting against the amendment were Delegates Jeannemarie Devolites (R), Jim Dillard (R), Tom Rust (R), and Scott Lingamfelter (R).

The Senate rejected an amendment to a bill that would have imposed a \$5 tipping fee per ton for solid waste disposal. The fee would have increased the funding available for land conservation, environmental protection, water quality improvement, and landfill closings by 30 percent. Additionally, the fee would have made Virginia less attractive as a site for out of state trash.

These votes provide clear guidance to the voters on legislators’ true priorities.