

## ***State Budget Plan Put in Place***

Delegate Kenneth R. "Ken" Plum

(Appeared May 12, 2004 in the *Reston Times* and as "*State Budget Plan Finally Put in Place*" in the *Reston Connection*.)

Virginia has a budget for the next two years after several months of grueling debate and compromise. At \$60 billion, the budget reflects a record level of expenditures; but in perspective, the budget is little more than a modest effort at the Commonwealth meeting its constitutional and statutory obligations. While Virginia is the 12th wealthiest state in the country, its state level of spending is among the lowest. Great for bragging rights, but tough for local property tax payers who have had to make up the difference.

The expenditures budgeted for public schools are at a record level. Remember where the state started in its funding for schools: nearly a billion dollars behind in fully funding its share of Standards of Quality and more than a billion dollars behind in re-benchmarking the Standards to reflect inflation and enrollment growth. The budget almost catches the state up on those obligations. Localities will appreciate the additional money, but they will also pick up the shortage in the state appropriation. And the appropriation for colleges and universities will bring to them to the level of funding they had in the 1990's.

The good news in human services is that about 900 slots were funded for the mentally retarded; that's about half the waiting list. Raises were given to the State Police; some of the troopers actually qualify for food stamps on their current salaries. Some money was added for natural resources; current Virginia funding in this area is now 50th among the states. Money was included for Medicaid reimbursements to hospitals, the Nation's lowest, to bring them up to close to the cost of care.

Strangely the budget conferees provided no amount of funding for transportation worth mentioning. A survey of citizen concerns would list transportation as being a major one. Needs in Northern Virginia alone are estimated to be \$13 billion. The Governor's budget proposed additional funding as did the Senate in its budget. House conferees prevailed, and no money was included.

Is the glass half full or half empty? It is, of course, both. I voted for the budget because it makes progress towards meeting Virginia's goals. It leaves a way to go that must be addressed in future years. Hopefully future needs can be addressed without the rancor that was experienced this year.

The legislative session started on the second Wednesday in January on a theme by the House Republican majority that Virginia's revenues were adequate, and the budget could be funded out of economic growth. Now that theory has been disproved by passage of a budget larger than the Governor proposed with significant revenue increases. From that lesson learned and the spectacle of a legislature not able to make up its mind, it is time to return to the civility and fiscal stability for which Virginia has always been known.