The Pain of Budget Cutting

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If you go to a Department of Motor Vehicles office you may find it closed that day or closed permanently, as in Sterling and Fair Oaks Mall, or open with exceptionally long lines and wait times. If you are in college or sending a child to college, you may get a bill for a second tuition increase this year, or you may find your classes or degree program cancelled. And if you are unfortunate enough to need mental health services or know someone who does, you may experience an unacceptably long wait of weeks or months to get needed treatment.

These are all part of the "pain" of budget reductions in the Commonwealth as the state struggles to cut nearly five billion dollars from its budget. And contrary to the belief held by some, there is no fat and bloated budget that can be simply trimmed without consequence to someone. That is unless you consider state assistance to public schools, colleges and universities, police and corrections, mental health and other health services, road construction and maintenance to be "fat."

When the bubble burst on the high tech economy and capital gains disappeared and companies went belly-up, state income and sales taxes plummeted, the biggest drop in revenue in the 40 years that records have been kept. At the same time there was the car tax cut, one of the biggest tax relief programs ever enacted in the state.

With increasing demands for state services, rising school and college enrollments, increasing prison populations with a no parole policy, skyrocketing health care costs affecting Medicaid costs, increasing needs for roads and transit with a growing population – something had to give!

The "give" comes with the budget reductions made by the Governor and the General Assembly this past legislative session in the amount of $3.8 billion to balance the biennial budget. It comes with the nearly $2 billion now being proposed by the Governor to meet further shortfalls in revenue.

The budgetary actions are felt by people in our community. Already I have received an e-mail from a constituent at a state university who has seen the teacher preparation program which she has half-completed eliminated entirely. Another e-mail came from a student who questions whether she will be able to continue in college because of the reduction in state financial aid. A state employee who has had minimal or no pay raises for the past few years now finds himself laid off. There is a feeling of panic among the families of individuals needing mental health services. We will all schedule around the days the DMV office, the state museum, and the state libraries are open.

Governor Mark Warner announced the latest round of budget reductions in a televised address to the state. He ended his address by saying:

"As Virginians, we all take pride in the leading role our commonwealth played in America's first century. I believe Virginia can lead America again in the 21st century. But to do so, we have to answer some fundamental questions about the very nature of what we expect from state government.

continued

“ – How do we educate our children and grandchildren for tomorrow’s jobs?

“ – How will we sustain the excellence we have come to expect from our colleges and universities?

“ – How will we keep our communities safe?

“ – How do we protect our environment and enhance the quality of life around Virginia?

“ – What kind of transportation system – what kid of health care system – what kind of mental health system do we expect in the 21st century?”

Perhaps the pain felt in the current budgetary crisis will help us realize an answer to these questions.