

## ***Serious Budgetary Plight***

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Governor Mark Warner addressed a joint meeting of the General Assembly money committees last week. Governors are required to report to the legislature this time of year on the state of finances as a prelude to considering a new biennial budget early next year.

"It should come as no surprise that we face another very difficult budget," Warner said in his prepared remarks. "Even with an economic recovery, there will be a substantial gap between available resources and spending requirements." He called for "renewed civility and bipartisanship to address Virginia's fiscal challenges."

But it took a senior Republican member of the House Appropriations Committee, Delegate Jim Dillard of Fairfax, to spell out the real seriousness of Virginia's budgetary plight in a letter to his colleagues mailed the day after the Governor's speech.

"I am deeply troubled that the state revenue crisis is severely damaging core services," Dillard wrote. According to Dillard's accounting, the Commonwealth faces a \$900 million deficit in approving a budget next year. That number includes \$352 million in one-time savings passed in 2003 that must be made up and the statutorily required increases to meet costs such as increased school enrollment and Medicaid and health care costs.

Add to that number \$1.26 billion that Delegate Dillard says is the amount the legislature underfunds the cost of programs that it mandates. That makes for a "true biennial resource shortfall" of \$2.16 billion.

Even the large number \$2.16 billion does not include "rebenchmarking non-SOQ educational programs such as K-3 class size reduction, SOL remediation, English as a Second Language instruction, and programs for at-risk 4-year-olds – or the \$324 million the State Board of Education has recommended to update the Standards of Quality in each of the next two budget cycles. It does not include the \$27.3 million needed to address the waiting list for urgent mental retardation services or the \$12.9 million needed to complete enrollment of children eligible for FAMIS medical insurance or the \$33 million needed to house homeless families who are being turned away from shelters. It does not include the \$3.5 billion needed over the next 6 years to clean up the watershed, preserve dams, maintain parks, and ensure natural resources management."

Delegate Dillard and I share common backgrounds of having been social studies teachers and having worked for Fairfax County Public Schools in various positions for about 30 years each. Over the years we have often appeared before high school government and other classes and debated current events. We would assume contrary positions on issues in order to enliven the debates. On the seriousness of Virginia's budgetary situation, Delegate Dillard and I have no differences. He is providing a real service in making the public aware of the rest of the story on the budget, as somber as it is.