



Special Edition

Thoughts from the Board of Supervisors Retreat

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Board of Supervisors Retreat

On June 29 and 30 the Board of Supervisors conducted a two day retreat at Frying Pan Park – a preserved working farm in Herndon. The retreat gave us a chance to spend a significant amount of time discussing several topics in greater depth than allowed at Board meetings. As I stated in my closing remarks at the retreat, I thought the retreat was very useful and provided for a lot of open and honest dialogue between board members. It is this open and honest dialogue that I believe will get us to better answers for the citizens of Fairfax County.

Below are some thoughts on the major things discussed at the retreat.

FY 2011 Shortfall Projected at \$315M – More Taxes Are Not the Answer

July 1, 2009 marks the start of FY 2010 where we closed a \$650M shortfall without increasing taxes on the average homeowner. The good news is that it appears (at least for now) that the assumptions we used developing the FY2010 budget are still sound so no additional FY 2010 shortfall was identified. I expect that this will change as we proceed through FY 2010.

The bad news is we are already looking at \$315M shortfall for 2011. The identified shortfall already takes into account no raises, cost growth or salary increases built in like last year's \$650M shortfall included. Unfortunately, discussion immediately turned to equalizing the real estate tax rate (\$199M) and increasing the motor vehicle fee (\$27M) to eliminate \$226M of the shortfall.

I restated my opposition to the motor vehicle fee as just another way to pick the pockets of our citizens; not to mention the fact that it is not tax deductible on income tax returns like the real estate tax is and it is more regressive. Equalizing the tax rate would hold the taxes the average taxpayer pays constant as we did last year and based on current projections we would have to increase the rate 11 cents.

During the seven years before I joined the board, under former Board Chairman Gerry Connolly, the real estate taxes people actually paid doubled due to out of control spending. In my first year on the board I proposed a balance budget for FY 2009 that actually reduced the tax burden for the average tax payer. I voted for the FY 2010 budget that held the taxes for the average taxpayer constant. We are in a recession and it is time to reverse the trend of our former Chairman and give our citizens some real tax relief as other jurisdictions did last year.

Significant reductions will be more difficult this year because many of the “easy” reductions were made last year. However, there are areas where we should look to achieve those savings including:

- Over the last several years some senior level positions have been created more out of a desire for favorable public perception than actual need. I believe we need to take a strong look at some of these created positions and eliminate them through agency consolidation. I am certain we can and will remain an effective government, providing outstanding services while making government more efficient.

- Review of the open positions – the County still has a considerable number of open positions. These should be reviewed immediately for possible elimination. This has been done with great success by other jurisdictions.
- We need to review our leased space and consolidate into County owned facilities as our workforce shrinks. Unfortunately, the County added a multi floor lease last year despite eliminating positions.
- Evaluate areas where we duplicate state or federal resources and responsibilities for possible reduction or elimination.
- Carry over as much as we can from 2009 to 2010 and into 2011. Currently we are expected to have \$30M available at the end of FY2009 to carryover.
- Look at consolidating agencies and departments to achieve savings.
- Identify additional areas where we can provide the same service to our citizens but do so more efficiently as we did last year when we reduced library hours and restructured some of our human services programs

At the retreat I made a case for having an outside professional review of the budget to get an independent, non-vested interest look at areas for savings. The consensus of the Board was to establish some sort of countywide “Ad Hoc Citizen’s Budget Issues Committee”, much like the Citizen’s Budget Committee I formed when I first took office. I think this has the potential to be helpful.

I believe, as I did in the private sector, that employees are an organization’s most important asset. We are living in difficult times but believe we should look to find a way to fund some increase for the county employees in FY 2011 and will work to do so.

The FY 2011 budget process will be more difficult than the FY 2010 budget process, and although community involvement is important, it will take more than just community involvement processes to solve this problem – it will take serious fiscal leadership and making some very difficult decisions. This is why we need to get moving as soon as possible. As always, I appreciate your comments and suggestions.

Becoming a City – Slim Just Left Town

Much was written in the press about the retreat discussion of Fairfax County becoming a city. This is an appropriate time for one of my favorite sayings – “This idea has two chances of success – slim and none and slim just left town”. Some of the discussion is worth commenting on given the County’s rush to urbanize and to find other ways to tax.

There seems to be a fascination with transit oriented development (TOD) and urbanization as the answer to all of our transportation and other problems. I believe that a certain amount of urbanization has its benefits and is inevitable if Fairfax County is going to continue to grow and

succeed. However, we need to be careful to protect our suburban neighborhoods and communities. For many in Fairfax, these neighborhoods and communities are the reason they came to and stay in Fairfax County. We boast the best schools, the best parks, low crime rates, the best educated workforce and the best jobs in the county – how many cities with over a million people can make the same claim? We should focus our urbanization in areas that need revitalization (Springfield Mall, Tysons, Merrifield, etc) and in our key transportation corridors but at the same time protect our suburban neighborhoods.

We have the opportunity to build something unique in Fairfax County – a place where my children can raise their children with access to the best jobs, schools, and parks – in a mix of urban, suburban and rural enclaves connected by a functioning transportation system. A conversion to city status will not get us there any faster.

In the end what it really comes down to - the only real change would be the new City of Fairfax County would be able to levy additional taxes without a referendum. The other benefit often mentioned – taking over transportation responsibilities – could be accomplished (if we desired) without becoming a city. A benefit not mentioned would be an elected chief executive (mayor) – I believe this is an element worth considering in our current County form of government.

One of the greatest losses of the conversion to city status would be the loss of city and town status for Fairfax, Herndon, Vienna and Clifton. People choose to live in these localities because of their character. One of our State Senators said it the best – we need to fix the problems we have before we start creating new ones.

Affordable Housing – Defining the Problem

The retreat agenda included a fairly lengthy discussion on our affordable housing programs. The staff prepared an in-depth binder titled “Housing Fundamentals: How Affordable Housing is Provided in Fairfax County” documenting the myriad of programs provided by or administered by the Housing Authority. Many use federal and state funds. The discussion gave me a chance to ask some questions about some of the numbers and where the assistance was actually going.

The Package included a handout called “May 2009 Snapshot; The Need and Who is Being Served” which provided me an opportunity to ask a few questions about the affordable housing waiting list. I was a little surprised by some of the answers. Prior to the retreat I had asked where the people in our Homeless Shelter had been living prior to being in our shelters – 25% were living in a jurisdiction outside of Fairfax County prior to becoming homeless. I also inquired about the 5,057 listed as on the waiting list for Housing Choice Vouchers, Public Housing or Fairfax Counties Rental Program in the 0-30% of AMI category and where they were currently living. I was told many are currently living outside Fairfax County and others are living with relatives or in their parents’ home. Housing is supposed to be providing details as to the breakdown.

One question I asked prior to the retreat but still have not received an answer to is how many units in Fairfax County have become affordable over the last year due to the decline in housing values. Housing continues to cite a study on the loss of 9,305 affordable units from 2002-2008.

During this time period the county purchased 2,200 units. The market has clearly impacted the affordability of homes in our region. In addition, the County now requires 20% of new housing built to be in the affordable range to receive density bonuses. I believe we should understand these numbers as they are part of defining our problem.

In my opinion we have a long way to go defining the affordable housing problem. We need to start by asking the question “who should be served?” and then actually helping the ones that need help. We have serious issues with our wait list and who gets served. I do not believe we should be asking our citizens to pay to relocate people into Fairfax County and we should not be asking our citizens to pay for housing for people that have other options. For many people, living with your parents and sharing housing with a roommate is part of the process of getting to your own housing. The saddest part of the current process is that too often those truly in need get lost in the bureaucracy. On at least three occasions in the last year my office has helped families (one of which was living in a car with her child behind the shopping center where she worked) negotiate the bureaucratic maze to get assistance – one where our County agencies often do not talk with each other. On another sad note we just closed several of our waiting lists cutting off aid to some that are truly in need. We clearly need to be helping our residents that have been impacted by the foreclosure crisis get back on their feet.

The Board did not reach any consensus on if and how we would provide additional affordable housing dollars, especially given the budget shortfall. The good news out of this discussion was that I believe the Board reached consensus that we should focus affordable housing dollars on those who cannot provide for themselves – those truly in need - and that we should focus our aid through our non-profits as they are more efficient at providing service. Non-profits do a much better job of getting families on their feet and off public assistance than government bureaucracies will ever do. I think there is some disagreement on who should be served and how. Personally, I left with more questions than answers.

Transportation – State or County Responsibility?

At the retreat we were briefed on the dismal state of transportation construction and maintenance funding from the Commonwealth:

- A \$2 billion or 72% reduction in the highway construction program.
- A \$391 million or 15% reduction in administrative and support programs.
- Elimination of state formula distributions because there are not enough funds to allocate by district.
- A \$348 million or 13% reduction in the VDOT maintenance and operations program.
- No funding for repaving of residential streets, significant reduction of grass mowing and closing of many rest stops.
- Many of the design activities that were performed by the state have now been transferred to the County

In summary – no funding for new construction and decreased funding for maintenance.

Because of the Commercial and Industrial tax approved by Fairfax County in 2008 – the county has some of the last remaining sources of funds for any transportation improvements although the numbers are small.

Many residents of the County believe that road construction and maintenance is a County responsibility as it is in many jurisdictions across the country and in parts of Virginia – including all cities and a few counties including Arlington. For most of Virginia road construction and maintenance is a state responsibility – it is failing miserably.

At the retreat County staff proposed that we again explore taking over the responsibility for transportation from the state. The Board reached a consensus that this was worth another look. This has been looked at in prior years (1990 being the latest) and was rejected primarily due to the large price tag associated with it. It does have the benefit of keeping transportation control local and additional funds would stay 100% in the county. I agreed that the prospect is worth another review. It is also worth noting that this can (and should) be done without obtaining city status.

During the retreat I again expressed my dismay at the lack of progress and the continued delays in the start and schedule for the Environmental Impact Study (EIS) for I-66 outside the beltway to Gainesville. This study was started in the late 1990s and stopped in 2003. I initiated a movement to get the EIS moving again in my first months as a Supervisor in early 2008. The timeline for the EIS was promised in late 2008. I understand this has been delayed until late 2009. The EIS is crucial because it is a necessary first step towards a creative public-private partnership that can leverage private dollars when we have few to no public dollars. The EIS has been funded since the late 1990's – further delay is inexcusable.

Finally Moving Forward on Fiscal Transparency

One of the very first things I did as a Supervisor was present a motion to bring increased fiscal transparency to Fairfax County by creating an online budget and expenditure database that would give taxpayers a simple and easy way to examine how their tax dollars are being spent.

When County staff started to delve into the specifics of creating the financial database they discovered a portion of state code that prohibits us from putting all of our financial information online. After I discussed this issue with State Senators Ken Cuccinelli (R-Fairfax) and Chap Peterson (D – Fairfax), they both agreed to sponsor a bill that would allow us to move forward on our financial database. Unfortunately, a majority of the Board of Supervisors decided not to support the bill and the legislation died in Richmond due in large part to a lack of formal support from the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors.

I'm pleased to report that after a year and a half of pushing for increased fiscal transparency in Fairfax County, we finally had a positive discussion on the subject at the retreat. Despite our current limitations, County staff has spent a considerable amount of time studying how other states, counties and cities provide financial information to their citizens. With the County on the verge of purchasing new financial software I am confident we will soon be able to implement

some of the “best practices” in fiscal transparency from around the country. I am also optimistic that in next year’s General Assembly session we will get the change in state code that will allow us to put all of our financial information online.

Working to Save Clifton Elementary School

Fairfax County Public Schools is considering plans to permanently close Clifton Elementary School, reportedly due to problems with the wells and the high cost of renovation. Two studies are currently underway. One study is to address overcrowding in elementary schools in the southwest area of Fairfax County and the second is to address the current state and possible renovation of Clifton Elementary. These studies are scheduled to be released later this week. Once released, we will know what issues need to be addressed. Reportedly, one solution being proposed is a new elementary school on the Liberty Middle School site.

I fully understand the significance of Clifton Elementary School to the Town of Clifton and the community and I will do everything I can to make certain that the school is not permanently closed without an extremely good cause. It will be very hard to convince me that building a new school is a less expensive proposition than fixing the water problem. The school’s potential closure was discussed at the Clifton Town Council meeting I attended on Tuesday, July 7th.

The School Board will be addressing these issues at its upcoming July 13 work session. I will continue to keep you informed on my efforts as well as those made by the Springfield District school board member, Liz Bradsher. Please let me know if you would like to get more frequent updates on this issue and we will put you on a separate email list.

Lyme Disease Town Hall Meeting – July 22, 2009, Centreville High School, 7:00 PM

On July 22nd Supervisors Herrity and Frey will be hosting a Town Hall Meeting at Centreville High School to raise awareness of the dangers of Lyme disease and the practical steps that can be taken to reduce the risk of contracting the disease. There will be presentations by the Fairfax County Wildlife Biologist, as well as representatives from the Fairfax County Disease Carrying Insects Program. Congressman Wolf’s staff will also be present to answer questions regarding what is being done on the national level and there will be a chance to ask questions to all of our presenters. We encourage all parties interested to attend.

Lyme disease is a very real problem, in Virginia the number of reported cases has doubled over the last few years, and in the last two years alone we have seen around 400 confirmed cases of the disease in Fairfax County. This number would be even more startling if we knew the amount of cases that went unreported or misdiagnosed as it is believed the majority do.

Lyme disease is a serious illness that if left undiagnosed, can cause complications such as arthritis, back pain, numbness, and even heart failure. Because of the high risks involved it is important that we take steps to educate ourselves on the various ways that we can protect ourselves and our families from contracting Lyme disease, as well as know what to do if we do contract the disease.

In an effort to educate and raise the awareness of the public on the dangers and serious implications of Lyme disease, Supervisors Herryty and Frey would like to invite all interested persons to a Town Hall Meeting on July 22nd, 7 pm, in the Cafeteria of the Centreville High School, 6001 Union Mill Road, Clifton, VA 22152.

Fairfax County Park Authority Director to Hold Listening Forums throughout Fairfax County

Fairfax County Park Authority Director John Dargle, Jr. is holding a series of “Listening Forums” throughout Fairfax County in order gather input from citizens on how the Park Authority can best meet the community’s needs. After the “Listening Forums” have concluded, Park Authority staff will use the gathered information to guide decisions regarding the organization and the agency’s service delivery. If you are interested in the future of our parks I strongly encourage you to attend. For more information on this event please visit <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/listeningforums.htm> or call the Park Authority’s Public Information Office at 703-324-8662.

What: Springfield District Park Authority Listening Forum

When: Thursday, July 30, 2009 at 7:00 PM

Where: South Run RECenter, 7550 Reservation Rd, Springfield, VA

The *Herryty Report* is a monthly publication from the Office of Supervisor Pat Herryty to keep citizens informed on the issues facing Fairfax County. Communication is important to Supervisor Herryty and he encourages your feedback on the items in the *Report* or other issues that concern you. Past issues of the *Herryty Report* can be found at <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/springfield/herryty-report-newsletter.htm>. To sign up for the Herryty Report please go to <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/springfield>. If you no longer wish to receive the *Herryty Report*, please send an e-mail to springfield@fairfaxcounty.gov with “Unsubscribe” in the subject line.