

Delegate Buddy Fowler's 2015 Virginia General Assembly Report

I am happy to report that the 2015 General Assembly adjourned ahead of schedule this year, the first time in 15 years, demonstrating the clear contrast between Richmond and Washington. While the Federal Government is gridlocked with partisanship, Republicans at the State Capitol in Richmond are leading and governing.

The General Assembly has passed a conservative, responsible, and most importantly **balanced** state budget that spends \$1 billion less in general funds than last year's originally-adopted budget, rejects Obamacare's Medicaid expansion and reprioritizes funding for pay raises for state employees, teachers and state troopers. The adopted budget pays down our debt, pays cash for higher education capital projects, and deposits \$129.5 million into Virginia's "Rainy Day Fund", bringing the fund total to \$429 million. The budget eliminates \$33 million in debt proposed by Governor McAuliffe, as well as \$11.7 million in additional fees! The budget also shores up the Virginia Retirement System and the Teacher Retirement Fund, reducing unfunded liabilities and saving future taxpayer dollars.

Jobs and the Economy

The House of Delegates remains laser-focused on improving Virginia's economy. We passed legislation to attract innovative new companies to Virginia (**HB1662, Uber & Lyft**). In addition, we passed **HB1360**, which allows entrepreneur access to a new financial capital source called "Crowdfunding". We also fought to protect Virginia's status as a right-to-work state (**HJ490 Constitutional amendment**) and defeated job-killing legislation that would hurt small businesses. I was proud to be a co-patron of the Right-to-Work constitutional amendment. I am also happy to report that I received an A+ Rating from the VA Chamber of Commerce on issues important to Virginia businesses, and a 100% Rating from the National Federation of Independent Business for my support of issues confronting small business.

Strengthening our Schools – Classroom Success Agenda

I believe that every child in Virginia, regardless of their zip code, deserves access to a high-quality education. For the first time ever, both the House and Senate passed a constitutional amendment to establish innovative charter schools as an option for families who want a more educational choice. In order to become law, the amendment must pass again next year and then be approved by the voters. This is a major first step. The House and Senate also passed **HB1490** which improves Virginia's SOL testing process by providing for expedited retakes. We passed **HB1672** to redesign the School Performance Report Card so that it is more effective in communicating to parents and the public the status and achievements of the public schools. **HB1674** and **HB1675**, which provides local school division with greater flexibility with respect to school accreditation and graduation requirements also passed. **I was proud to be a co-patron of all four of these bills.**

We also enacted additional safeguards to protect student privacy by prohibiting the collection of student social security numbers and by requiring the Department of Education to develop uniform policies related to the collection, storage and use of student's personally-identifiable information.

Finally, the House and Senate also passed legislation to block the executive branch from unilaterally imposing Washington D.C.'s Common Core on Virginia. And we put more money into classrooms, funding a 1.5 percent pay raise for our teachers. This is the second pay raise for our teachers in three years.

Higher Education

Making college more affordable was a top priority, and I supported several bills to do that, including legislation to cap unreasonable mandatory student fees, encourage colleges to offer affordable “flat-fee” degrees and make it easier for families to find the information they need about college costs. The House budget also includes additional funding for additional in-state tuition slots, financial aid and transfer-student grants. The General Assembly also passed **HB 2320**, which establishes a more affordable, \$4,000 per year online degree program for Virginia students.

Public Safety

The General Assembly also passed legislation to make college campuses safer. We passed, and I supported, legislation to aid victims of sexual assault and protect students on college campuses. The General Assembly passed legislation to aid victims of assault and to protect students on college campuses. **HB 1785** requires campus police to notify the local Commonwealth’s Attorney of a victim-initiated investigation within 48 hours. **HB 1928** adds certain additional violent misdemeanors to the state DNA database. **HB 1930** requires colleges to provide independent counseling services to victims and to inform them of all their legal options, requires mandatory reporting of sexual assaults where necessary to protect the health or safety of the public, and requires that all cases be confidentially reviewed by a team that includes law enforcement. The General Assembly also addressed a significant, and unfortunately growing problem, Human Trafficking. I co-patroned **HB 1964** which creates a standalone sex trafficking statute that increases awareness of Human Trafficking and institutes harsher criminal penalties for those who seek to harm young people for financial gain.

Ethics

Combined with the meaningful steps the General Assembly took last year, this legislation significantly strengthens Virginia’s ethics, transparency and disclosure laws. These changes will increase transparency, hold elected officials accountable, and help restore trust in government. During the 2015 General Assembly session, we passed **HB 2070**, which made the following changes:

- adopted a \$100 aggregate annual gift cap,
- created an ethics advisory commission,
- required lawmakers to seek pre-approval for travel,
- doubled the frequency of reporting,
- required all disclosure be filed online for easy review by the public,
- required legislators to report gifts to family members,
- and implemented mandatory ethics training.

It is important to note that **HB2070** represents a **bipartisan** effort and passed both the House and State Senate unanimously and was signed by the Governor.

Health Care

The Budget Bill, (**HB1400**), which passed the House by a vote of 95-5 and the State Senate by a vote of 38-1, rejects Governor McAuliffe's attempt to expand Medicaid under Obamacare and instead provides \$132.9 million to strengthen the healthcare safety net. This funding will provide targeted services to 22,000 seriously mentally-ill patients, including a prescription drug benefit, doubles operational funding for free clinics to over \$6 million per year, funds behavioral health community services including three new PACT teams and six new drop-off centers, and increases funding for children's psychiatry and crisis services. The General Assembly also passed legislation (**HB1275 & HB 1276**) that provides for the construction of two new Veteran's Care Centers – one in Northern Virginia and one in Hampton Roads – which will bring the total of Veteran's Care Centers to four. **I was a co-patron on both of the bills for the new Veteran's Care Centers.**

Compensation

The VA General Assembly also made increasing the compensation a priority for state employees, state supported local employees, the State Police, and public school teachers. I am happy to report the following:

- Provides 2% across-the-board raise for state police and state employees, which also addresses the issue of salary compression for senior classified employees
- \$4 million to rollback cuts to state police overtime
- 2% pay raise for state-supported local employees
- 1.5% teacher pay raise, including support staff
- 2% college faculty pay raise
- Total compensation package is \$153.5 million

Local Government

I am also pleased to report that the General Assembly did not balance the state budget on the backs of local government but actually provided additional funding to assist local governments in balancing their budgets!

- Restores \$30 million in funding cuts adopted by the supplemental budget to address shortfall
- 2% pay raise for state-supported local employees
- Deposits \$193 million into teacher retirement fund, saving localities over \$30 million in required teacher retirement costs

This was just a summary of some of the most important issues of the 2015 VA General Assembly. If you have any questions about these issues, or others not mentioned, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

