

2022 VA General Assembly Regular Session Highlights

On March 12, the Virginia General Assembly adjourned Sine Die, marking the finish of a successful 2022 legislative session. Back in November, Republicans in the Virginia House of Delegates set an ambitious agenda for the Commonwealth. We came to Richmond with a clear mandate from Virginians fed up with overregulation, over taxation, and hyper-partisanship: get results. With the partnership of Governor Glenn Youngkin, Lt. Governor Winsome Earle-Sears, and Attorney General Jason Miyares, that's exactly what we've done.

Republicans have worked to empower parents and students, strengthen our schools, grow Virginia's thriving business community, lower taxes on essential goods and services for families, and help workers keep more of their hard-earned cash. Meanwhile, Democrats have insisted on the status quo and openly bragged about blocking legislation that Virginians want and need.

In spite of the roadblocks, we have accomplished a lot for Virginia. I'm proud of that work, and I'm proud to represent the 55th House District in the House of Delegates. There is still a lot to be done, but with the will of people from all over the Commonwealth behind us, we can't and won't fail.

Budget: Setting Virginia's budget for the next two years is the primary responsibility of the General Assembly, and I'm disappointed to say that we did not get that work accomplished in our constitutionally allotted 60-day window.

House Republicans came to Richmond to get this work done. It should have been easy. Virginia's finances are flush with cash, and there's broad agreement on things that need to be in our budget – raises for teachers, more money for schools and law enforcement. But Democrats in the Senate decided to drag the process out and end the session with no budget rather than send significant money back to Virginians in the form of tax relief.

The House version of the budget – which the Senate has rejected – contained \$5 billion in tax relief that Virginians need and deserve, including tax rebates of up to \$300 for every tax filer and up to \$600 for couples. We ended the grocery tax and doubled the standard income tax deduction to put more money back in your paycheck. We also exempted the first \$40,000 in veteran retirement benefits from income taxes.

Taxes: America is in crisis. With inflation reaching record levels and gas prices

soaring, Virginians are struggling every day to get to school and work, and to buy groceries and other essentials their families need.

Governor Glenn Youngkin's Administration projects that Virginia's surplus during the next budget cycle will reach \$13.4 billion. House Republicans are working to return over \$5 billion to Virginia taxpayers in the form of tax relief. Virginians work hard, and they deserve to keep more of the money that they've earned.

Unfortunately, not everyone agrees and in spite of the economic hardship Virginians are facing, they argued against the House Republican Majority's tax relief plan in the House of Delegates. As Vice-Chairman of the House Finance Committee, I am happy to report that we advanced and I supported numerous bills during this General Assembly session that give Virginians much-needed tax relief, but the Democratic-controlled Senate refused to budge.

For example, with [HB 90](#), House Republicans fought to eliminate Virginia's grocery tax. With [HB 935](#), we worked to offer individual filers a tax rebate of up to \$300 and joint filers a tax rebate of up to \$600. We supported a temporary suspension of gas tax hikes in the Commonwealth with [HB 1144](#), a measure Democrats blocked while disingenuously calling on the Governor to provide reprieve from soaring gas-prices by declaring an "Emergency"! We also made efforts to double the standard deduction for Virginia tax filers with [HB 472](#) -- another tax relief measure State Senate Democrats declined to advance.

I believe that when Virginians do well, Virginia does well, and I won't stop fighting to make sure that Virginians are in control of how their hard-earned money is spent.

Broadband: The introduced budget includes \$49.725 million in the first and second year of the budget for the expansion of Broadband through the Virginia Telecommunications Initiative (VATI).

Public Safety: When we ran for office in 2021, our Republican team made a commitment to undo as much of the wrongheaded policies of the last 2 years. Much of the damage was in the area of public safety. Releasing, or failing to prosecute dangerous felons, while at the same time treating our law enforcement offices like criminals is not a good prescription for good public safety.

I'm proud to say that our Republican team passed a number of bills that would have reversed that trend. Our caucus passed legislation that makes the troubled

Parole Board much more transparent, ensuring that any votes cast to release a felon from prison will be done publicly.

For instance, in partnership with Republican Attorney General Jason Miyares, Republicans ushered [HB 283](#) through the House and the Senate, and with it, strengthened Virginia's capacity to identify and prevent human trafficking in the Commonwealth. The legislation requires the Department of Criminal Justice Services to establish training standards for law-enforcement personnel regarding the recognition, prevention, and reporting of human trafficking.

Unfortunately, Democrats still control the state Senate, and they made good on their promise to be a 'brick wall' against our efforts at course correction. They blocked legislation that would have repealed a "good behavior" system in our prisons that would let dozens of killers and other violent criminals out of jail this summer, rather than completing their sentences.

We will not stop working to keep Virginians safe by keeping dangerous felons where they belong – behind bars. However, it's clear that it will take another election and Republicans back in control of the Senate of Virginia to make that happen.

Education: When we began knocking on doors for the last campaign, the number of worried and angry parents who wanted to see major changes in education was striking. At door after door, we heard the same thing – our kids need to be in school, in person, and parents need to have a say in what they're being taught.

What happens in Virginia's schools determines Virginia's future, and we owe it to parents and students to make certain students are getting a top-notch education in a safe and secure environment.

That's why education was such a huge part of the House Republican agenda during the 2022 legislative session, and we made significant strides toward restoring parental rights, protecting students, revitalizing schools, and making certain Virginia schools are the strongest in the nation.

We set the tone for the national conversation about parental rights and masks in schools by passing [SB 739](#), and putting decisions about whether or not students wear masks at school back in the hands of their parents.

Republicans were also successful in restoring race-blind admissions to our Governor's Schools around the Commonwealth. Despite recent events in Fairfax County, it will soon be illegal to discriminate against any child for admission based on their race, gender, or other characteristics. Merit and merit alone should determine who gets into our best schools.

No child can learn when the roof over their head is leaking. We proudly voted to fund a loan program that will leverage \$2 billion in new school construction and repair. Senate Democrats disagree with us on this common-sense measure to fix our crumbling schools, and it remains in limbo as part of the ongoing budget negotiations. Nonetheless we will continue to fight to see this become law.

We also made certain that parents know what their students are learning by passing [SB 656](#), legislation that will ensure parents are notified when students are assigned explicit materials, and requires them to be assigned alternate materials if parents object. We also supported [HB 346](#), legislation that expands opportunities for learning by setting aside funds for laboratory schools in conjunction with Virginia's universities.

Finally, we've made changes to the law that will ensure students have the safest possible learning environment. With [HB 4](#), we reinstated the requirement that school officials report certain violent, sexual, or other egregious misdemeanor crimes to law enforcement and to parents. We also passed [SB 649](#), which requires that schools are notified when one of their students is arrested for certain serious offenses. These provisions are common-sense ways to keep our students safe and our parents and school officials in the know.

Further, we were successful in beginning the process of placing resource officers in every Virginia school. [HB 873](#) requires that every local law enforcement agency – if their local schools don't have resource officers – to train and designate at least one officer to serve as the liaison to schools, effectively creating a 'resource officer on call' for those districts that may not be able to afford them at this time.

The version of the budget that the House passed also includes well-deserved pay increases for Virginia teachers, including a 4 percent raise and a 1 percent bonus during each year of the biennium. Unfortunately, with Democrats stalling on the budget, that raise has yet to go into effect.

Marijuana Legalization

When Democrats left the General Assembly in 2021, they left a mess with the marijuana issue. They legalized possession of up to a pound of marijuana, but with no legal way to purchase it. They allowed people to grow up to four plants but didn't legalize the purchase of seeds.

They also created a broken framework that would have not only legalized retail sales but would have given those with prior convictions for drug sales first chance at retail sales licenses. Our caucus looked at this mess and realized that we had to start over. If Virginia is to have legal marijuana sales, it must be done in a controlled, safe manner.

Meanwhile, the Democrats' mess left stores selling dangerous, unregulated drug products like "Delta-8" THC, a variant of the active drug in marijuana, to the public in a completely unregulated manner. Stores selling gummies, candies, and other child-appealing items loaded with intoxicants popped up all over Virginia.

We passed legislation that will put an end to these sales and ensure that retail sales of intoxicants – if they happen at all in the future – will be done in a safe, controlled manner that protects our communities.

Business/Regulations

After two years of COVID-19 closures and other mitigation measures, and now, a labor shortage and surging inflation, businesses and workers in Virginia need advocates in Richmond. It's clear that overregulation, over-taxation, and government meddling have created nothing but trouble for the business community.

House Republicans are changing that. One of our top priorities during the 2022 General Assembly legislative session has been to pull back the reins on out-of-control bureaucracy in Virginia.

We believe in rewarding good business decisions, not punishing them. We believe in incentivizing growth, not crushing it.

Under new Republican leadership, we spent this session working to make it easier for leaders in business, entrepreneurship, and economic developers to make certain Virginia is the best place in the country to live, work, and raise a family.

Following a “Day One” Executive Order by Governor Glenn Youngkin, the Virginia Safety and Health Codes Board voted to end the COVID-19 the inflexible and outdated COVID standards that had been in place for employers during much of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, Republicans worked to pass legislation that will limit the emergency powers of *any* Virginia Governor, regardless of political party. [HB 158](#) limits emergency orders to 45 days and requires the General Assembly to approve before the Governor can reissue the same rule, regulation, or order. Gone are the days when the Commonwealth’s executive branch can unilaterally declare a state of emergency with no end in sight.

Further, with [HB 1301](#), we acted to help families who are struggling to cover the cost of energy by advancing legislation that would end Virginia’s membership in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI). Even advocates of RGGI admit that it fails to do the one thing it was created to do: reduce carbon emissions. Instead, it’s counted as a success by its advocates because of the cash it brings into the Commonwealth’s coffers. RGGI is a tax parading as a “free market solution.” Virginia needs real solutions. Not more taxes.

In that same vein, the House advanced legislation ([HB 118](#)) to roll back the so-called Virginia Clean Economy Act (VCEA), a “green” measure that makes life a lot more expensive for Virginians (just as gas prices are sky-rocketing). What’s become clearer than ever during recent months is that the Commonwealth of Virginia and the whole of the United States need to embrace an all-of-the-above approach to energy, both as a savings measure and as a national security measure. According to State Corporation Commission estimates, the VCEA means that the average Virginia family pays \$800 more each year in energy costs. That’s a price many Virginians, including our most vulnerable, can’t afford to pay.

As Democrats embrace a top-down, one-size-fits all approach to government, I’ll continue to fight for the rights of community and business leaders, and I’ll make sure your voice is heard.

Agriculture/Conservation: Farmers are constantly on the receiving end of complaints about water quality in the Chesapeake Bay, as more urban areas seek to regulate how our farms operate. It’s not fair to ask farms to bear the costs of cleaning up the Bay on their own. That’s why our budget fully funds the Best Management Practices program with the Department of Agriculture and Consumer

Services. This budget puts more money toward helping farmers pay to keep cattle out of streams and other best practices than any budget in recent history.

The House and Senate passed [HB 206](#), legislation that preserves the integrity of prime agricultural soils, forest land, and other natural and historic resources by requiring applicants for certain solar and energy storage projects to analyze environmental impacts and -- when necessary -- submit a plan to mitigate any harmful impacts.

House Republicans believe that we can move Virginia toward a more sustainable future by empowering innovators, embracing free-market solutions (that don't put the burden on the shoulders of taxpayers), and by supporting policies that make Virginia a hub for clean energy industries and jobs. The House budget also includes, for instance, \$5 million for the Virginia Economic Development Partnership to develop a Wind Industry Supply Chain Grant Fund to support recruitment of a supply chain industry to Virginia for the offshore wind industry.

Life: House Republicans decided to push forward on legislation that we thought would be impossible for anyone to oppose. The House brought forward [HB 744](#), legislation that would make the killing of an unborn baby in an altercation or through some other reckless behavior by someone other than the mother a class 5 felony. Senate Democrats blocked it.

House Republicans advanced legislation ([HB 212](#)) that would have restored informed consent requirements for women seeking an abortion. It didn't establish a waiting period or require an ultrasound – it simply required women to be given information about what they were about to do. Democrats blocked it.

Worst of all, Senate Democrats blocked legislation that didn't even deal with abortion. [HB 304](#) mandated medical care be given to a baby that survived an attempted abortion. Remarkably, this legislation – that provided for care for a child who was already born! I am pro-life, and I will not stop fighting to protect the unborn.

If you'd like to view a complete list of legislation I introduced or sponsored during the 2022 General Assembly session, please visit this <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?221+mbr+H259>. You can also track other legislation in the General Assembly here.

As the delegate representing the 55th House District, I hold your concerns as my highest priority. If ever I may be of assistance to you and your family, please do not hesitate to reach out to me at delbfowler@house.virginia.gov, or you can contact my office at 804.698.1055. Thank you for the privilege of representing you in the Virginia House of Delegates.