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BATTEN
DELEGATE

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After a tumultuous session replete with missed deadlines, parliamentary squabbles, and hastily vetted progressive legislation, the General Assembly adjourned sine today against the backdrop of COVID-19 (coronavirus). One of our final orders of business was passing the biennial budget. Following is an update on both the budget and associated bills that I have not previously discussed. An update on the COVID-19 response will also be provided below.

Although the finalized budget was structurally sound as of last week, the rapid impact of COVID-19 has altered the landscape. Travel restrictions accompanied by closures of schools, colleges, and businesses are currently roiling markets and posing significant financial challenges. Revenue forecasts will undoubtedly require revision. Because the budget is based on economic forecasts made last year, it does not reflect the current environment. I have significant concerns about adopting a budget today that does not take relevant factors into account. I believe the prudent measure is to postpone adoption of the budget, which does not need to be finalized until the June 30 deadline. For this reason, I voted no on the budget today. The budget nevertheless passed, and any adjustments will need to occur in a Special Session. (Yes, there is already talk of a Special Session.)

The budget reflects the legislative priorities of the General Assembly and therefore contains provisions to fund the tax increases and controversial bills passed during the session. My previous newsletter outlined a number of these issues; however, there are several I have not yet discussed. One of the spending provisions accounts for the removal of the Medicaid work requirement. Another provision funds TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) benefits for individuals convicted of drug felonies. This funding stems from House Bill 566 and Senate Bill 124, which removed the requirement that individuals convicted of drug felonies receive treatment and testing in order to qualify for TANF benefits. There's also funding for a tunnel (!) to connect the new General Assembly Building to the Capitol. There is NOT funding for the taxpayer relief fund, which would have returned excess tax dollars to hard working Virginians. There is also not funding for future applicants for Virginia Tuition Assistance Grants who opt to take online college courses. This is especially ironic considering that, as of yesterday, most Virginia colleges moved to mandatory online classes for the foreseeable future.

Make no mistake, there are good elements to the budget. Pay raises for teachers and law enforcement officials are funded, as is a college tuition freeze for the 2020-2021 academic year. Our reserves are also fortified, which protects the Commonwealth's bond rating. Overall, though, the budget reflects aggressive spending and does not address recently-discovered liabilities. I have grave concerns about the budget, and only time will tell whether it is sustainable.

I continue analyzing the legislation passed during this year's session. The final days of session were chaotic and culminated in House Democrats' staging floor fights and parliamentary maneuvers to prevent passage of the ballot referendum allowing voters to opt for an independent redistricting commission to draw district lines (an anti-gerrymandering measure). The battle was ultimately between House and Senate Democrats, with House Democrats opposing and Senate Democrats supporting independent redistricting. Long story short: the legislation passed, and voters can expect to see the ballot referendum in November. I voted in favor of this legislation, as did all of my House Republican colleagues.

During the final hours of the session, numerous bills were edited in conference committees. As a result, I am still reviewing final language. On the bright side, I'm learning that the Senate successfully amended several of the 2nd Amendment bills to make them slightly less restrictive. Likewise, the Senate ultimately killed the paid sick leave legislation due to the unknown fiscal impact. On the flip side, numerous bills passed that will weaken our criminal justice system and trample on the rights of victims. In an alarming twist, this year's session found little mention of the actual victims of crime. Instead, the focus was often on the criminals labeled as "victims" of our justice system. This is an alarming trend that bodes poorly for public safety.

The pricetag of this year's session will be substantial for all Virginians. Gas taxes will rise \$.0.10 per gallon over the next two years then continue rising in pace with inflation. Tobacco taxes are increasing. Localities are now free to raise local taxes on meals, tobacco, and hotel occupancy. Localities can also impose a \$0.05 fee per plastic bag. The "Clean Economy Act" is projected to substantially raise energy costs for all ratepayers. An excellent article on the myriad tax increases can be found [HERE](#).

While the legislature is adjourned, the Governor's office will continue reviewing bills and making amendments. On April 22, the General Assembly will reconvene to review these amendments and any vetoes offered by the Governor. As a reminder, unless a bill has been signed by the Governor, it is not yet finalized. As such, there are a large number of bills that can still be changed before our final adjournment.

COVID-19 (coronavirus) Update

Earlier today, the Virginia Department of Health offered the following update on the COVID-19 pandemic:

- 15 current confirmed cases in Virginia
- 500-600 test kits on hand in Virginia

- Virus seems to be primarily transmitted within households and from people with active symptoms (i.e., individuals who have the virus but are asymptomatic are unlikely to transmit the virus)
- A multi-agency task force is working to address containment issues (including school and business closures)
- Detailed recommendations regarding containment logistics will be forthcoming
- To watch the briefing online, visit <https://viriniageneralassembly.gov/house/committees/commstream.html>, select today's date, and then watch the "COVID-19 update" video
- Visit the Virginia Department of Health website for more information: <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/>

Back in the District!

With the legislative session now adjourned, I am working out of my district office located at 7405 Richmond Road in Williamsburg. Office hours for March are Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 10:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. Please note that appointments are still required. If these times are not workable, please notify my legislative aide, Dayle Brittain, of your preferred time. We will gladly accommodate your schedule. As always, please do not hesitate to contact my office via email or phone. We will respond promptly and look forward to assisting with any state-related matter. Current contact information is provided at the bottom of this email.

Best regards,



P.S. If you're curious about the photo in the upper left corner of this email, the picture shows me with my two seatmates on the House floor (Del. Scott Wyatt is seated to my left, and Del. Chris Head is standing). We've spent MANY hours together now, and I consider myself lucky to be seated near them on the floor!

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Paid for and Authorized by Friends of Amanda Batten

