

## Notes from the 9 April 2008 Meeting of the Council of Civic Organizations

The CCO Met April 9<sup>th</sup> at the Central Library, President Sam Reid presiding. After the pledge and a moment of silent prayer, a representative of Caroline Farms gave a brief history of her neighborhood. President Reid invited other neighborhoods who wanted to give a similar presentation to do so. A quorum was met and the treasurer's report given. Minutes of last month's meeting were delayed in order to begin the program.

In a dialog with state representatives, the state was represented by Del. Joe Bouchard, Sen. Ken Stolle, Sen. Frank Wagner, Del. Robert Mathieson, Del. Terri Suit, Del. Tata and a Delegate representing Norfolk whose name I didn't quite catch. He came late and wasn't introduced clearly. CC Member Robert Dyer also was present, though he did not participate in either the questioning or the panel.

Joel Rubin presided. He asked all the delegates and senators to speak on anything significant that came out of the current legislative session. This went on for over an hour. At one point, Del. Joe Bouchard suggested it would be better to take questions from the floor, however, Mr. Rubin continued with the format.

- Del Suit addressed mortgage, foreclosure issues that concern the state.
- Del Bouchard spoke about the budget, commenting that income projection was lower than hoped for necessitating budget cuts.
- Sen. Wagner voted against the budget. His reasoning was that the budget predicted a 6% income growth which he thought unrealistic in a recession. State employees will get a 2% pay raise, as will teachers. He figures the state will have to borrow 375 million \$ out of the "rainy day" fund to fund necessary expenses.
- Del. Mathieson discussed the mental health reforms the state is addressing secondary to the Virginia Tech shootings last year.
- Sen. Wagner then addressed energy. There is currently a moratorium on uranium mining in Virginia (which has a large store). He believes nuclear energy should be utilized more.
- Sen. Stolle said 3,000 bills were introduced this year, 1200 made it out. He pointed out Virginia has been named the country's "Best Run" state twice but doesn't think this will happen again since the budget probably will exceed income and will necessitate borrowing from the rainy day fund. He pointed out for the first time, the state has issued bonds in order to maintain infrastructure. He said this is like getting a mortgage to fix the roof.
- The Norfolk Del. drew applause when he maintained the Homestead Bill was defeated this year, but he would reintroduce it next year. Turns out the opponents of the Homestead Bill marshaled forces to defeat it. These "forces" were "commercial interests" who feared their taxes would go up if homeowners were given tax relief. (Editorial Comment: In Virginia Beach, homeowners currently pay 80% of the city budget, leaving the other 20% to be "borne" by Industry and business. I suspect this same ratio or close to it applies in other localities. Editorial Comment #2. My and many

of my neighbors assessments went up this year even in the face of a housing market in the tank. One friend who lives on the Lynnhaven River saw her assessment go down, so it isn't all "high end" neighborhoods being raised.)

· Senator Stolle defended his vote against the Homestead Act saying local governments can cut RE taxes any time they wish. (Editorial comment: This would have been a perfect time to have had a Representative for City Council respond.)

· Sen. Wagner said the Homestead Act was flawed.

Regional Transportation came up again having been struck down as Unconstitutional. It will be revisited as Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads traffic problems demand addressing.

Most of the money allocated to new roads is being spent to maintain current roads.

The current tax on gas is 17 ½ cents which Sen. Wagner says results in a shortfall since cars are more efficient now than in 1987. (Editorial Aside: I found this disingenuous as in 1987, there were few SUV's and until recently there has been a proliferation of these gas guzzlers. I do think in the future, gas tax revenue will fall due to people abandoning SUVs, the introduction of hybrids and the high cost/gallon of gasoline causing less usage).

Finally questions were taken from the floor. Mr. Rubin called on many questioners by their first names which I found odd since I've only seen him at the CCO once in the 10 months I've been a representative. To a few others, including me, he was curt and dismissive.

From the questions:

It appears inevitable that tolls will go back on the roads in Hampton Roads. It appears those in attendance have no problem with that.

One "questioner" suggested a 35 cent/gallon increase on gas to pay for what we need.

Del. Bouchard pointed out we can't spend our way out of this crisis.

Sen. Wagner pointed out that any highway or tunnel always first has to have an Environmental Impact Statement which takes many months, sometimes years.

Del. Bouchard, Del. Tata and the Del from Norfolk had to leave before the question/answer period ended.

One questioner who wasn't called on simply stood up stating he didn't think Mr. Rubin could see his hand. (This after so many people were called on whose first names were used by Mr. Rubin).

He asked why the state wasn't looking "forward", why the state was always playing "catch up" with reference to highways and traffic. Sen. Wagner replied the third crossing if it's ever built will accommodate light rail if it's passed. Something was said about the possibility of light rail from the oceanfront to Williamsburg.

I asked how come it is that Richmond has no problem with traffic and roads. I received a dismissive answer from Mr. Rubin to wit “Toll roads! Richmond got there before we did” without his giving the Representatives an opportunity to answer. I am not convinced this is the right answer. Richmond’s Powhite and Downtown Expressway are toll roads, however, I believe bonds were issued for them before they were built, thus the tolls on the Powhite and Downtown Expressway are to pay off the bonds. It appears to me here in Hampton Roads, the state wants to put tolls on existing roads in order to build new toll roads. I am not opposed to tolls as I believe user fees are fairer than taxing those who do not use the roads, however, I still maintain there is a strong discrepancy between roads in Richmond and roads in Tidewater and I believe that needs to be looked at by our Tidewater Representatives.

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