

Budget Challenges

As the 2009 General Assembly session moves forward, I want to take this opportunity to update you. This year legislators will face many critical issues throughout the short 45 day General Assembly session, but one will loom heavy over all, the budget. The Governor recently projected close to a three billion dollar shortfall in the state budget we passed last year. Unfortunately, the prospect of an even greater shortfall, closer to four billion dollars, is a very real possibility. The difficult task of cutting an already streamlined budget will be at the forefront of all discussion. This will only be successfully accomplished through an approach that includes voices from all sides of the political spectrum and bipartisan support. The Governor and legislators must put aside their own self interests and partisan politics aside and place the best interest of the Commonwealth first.

The Governor has recommended a number of cuts that will be taken into consideration. He has suggested doubling the cigarette tax, shortening jail sentences, a 15% cut to public universities, slashing jobs from the Department of Transportation, and withdrawing \$500 million from the Rainy Day Fund. Unfortunately, it is going to take much more. As a result of the Governor's inaccurate revenue estimates for Fiscal Years 2009 and 2010, he has placed the burden of responsibility on the members of the General Assembly to continue to make the needed cuts that will deal fully with the shortfall. We must adjust state spending to reflect a more realistic projection of little if any growth at all, or risk significant future shortfalls.

There is no question that making cuts will be painful. But, now is not the time to wait for the next Governor or the next General Assembly session to remedy the situation. We must act now, and act decisively. Now is the time for us to tighten our belts and get back to the fiscally conservative, common sense principles that have made us the best managed state in the country. We need to make real attempts at reform and increased transparency, which is why I have proposed a bill that will provide legislators a line item inventory of earmarks inserted into the budget during conference committee and prior to a vote in order to avoid wasteful spending. I am sponsoring bills that will pursue common sense principles such as cutting per diem for law makers if they don't get their work done and session is extended. Too often in recent years, the session has had to be extended for several days and weeks at the tax-payers expense. Our inability to complete our work on time should not penalize tax-payers. I have again asked for transportation funds to be put in a double lock box so legislators cannot dip into it for their own pet projects. We must prioritize our spending while continuing to make Virginia the best place to live, work and raise a family. Budgetary cuts are not fun and they are definitely not popular. But, they are needed and they need to be made strategically.

I have gained much insight through my recent meetings with constituents, representatives from educational institutions such as William and Mary, Thomas Nelson Community College and Virginia Military Institute, and those in the banking, medical and agricultural industries. They have all assisted me in better understanding the impact that they will face from budget cuts and a struggling economy. I have been encouraged by my visits from Leadership Historic Triangle, Garden Clubs and Kiwanis groups. I continue to receive regular calls, letters and invitations which are an insightful resource on how to better represent the people of the Third Senatorial District.

In my further attempts to better represent the Third District, I am seeking your opinion on how you believe the General Assembly should deal with the budget shortfall and other critical issues. Please visit my new website and follow the link for my legislative survey in order that I can know how to best serve you in the upcoming weeks.

Finally, if you find yourself in Richmond during session, please feel free to stop by my office and visit. My staff and I are always open to your comments, so please do not hesitate to contact us. In Richmond, I can be reached at 804-698-7503 or via e-mail at district03@sov.state.va.us. Thank you for your continued support and please let me know how I may be of service to you. With kindest regards, I remain

Very truly yours,

Thomas K. Norment, Jr.