

2012 Session of Virginia's General Assembly Has Begun

January 13, 2012

Dear friends,

The Virginia General Assembly began its 2012 Session on Wednesday, with all 100 Delegates and 40 Senators taking their oaths of office marking the beginning of their terms.

Over in the House, opening day ceremonies concluded in just a few hours. In the highly unlikely event that something went awry in the House it might have gone largely unnoticed. As you could probably tell from the news coverage, media attention was focused squarely on the Senate, where the day's business took considerably longer to complete.

The election of 20 Republican and 20 Democratic Senators guaranteed that every aspect of opening day activities in the Senate would be closely monitored. The media was waiting for a pitched partisan battle. What they got instead was a Senate with members disagreeing, but doing so in a thoroughly "senatorial" way.

The most contentious debates in the Senate were marked by civility. Instead of over-the-top rhetoric and wild accusations, discussions over the merits of changes to the Rules, assignments to standing committees, and the constitutional prerogatives and responsibilities of the Lieutenant Governor were the focus of the day. These are not debate topics that guarantee excitement among viewers and spectators. But, they are important nonetheless.

The core of the disagreement between the two parties is the role of Virginia's Lieutenant Governor, who presides over the Senate and is empowered by the Constitution of Virginia to break tie votes in all but a few circumstances. The Lieutenant Governor's responsibilities in Virginia are similar to those of the Vice President of the United States, who is the presiding officer of the United States Senate and empowered to break ties in that body.

Because Lieutenant Governor Bolling is a Republican, the Senate's partisan "tie" effectively becomes a 21-to-20 Republican majority. So for the first time in four years, Republicans are the majority caucus in the Virginia Senate.

STATE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

The first day of every General Assembly session concludes with the Governor's State of Commonwealth Address to a joint session of the House and Senate. This year, Governor McDonnell's address marked the impressive progress Virginia has made over the last two years and detailed his legislative priorities. Virginia now has the distinction of having the lowest unemployment rate in our region, and the Governor is committed to continuing that progress. His agenda includes multiple measures to further strengthen Virginia's business environment to create jobs.

Continuing his efforts to make state government more efficient and effective, Governor McDonnell also outlined his proposals to streamline state government by reducing and consolidating some state agencies, departments, boards and commissions. To keep government spending under control, the Governor announced a new effort to study and address unfunded federal mandates. And to ensure that Virginia does not experience a pension crisis like the ones plaguing several states, he is proposing the greatest employer funding of the Virginia Retirement System in Virginia history.

Making improvements and instituting reforms to Virginia's education system is a major component of Governor McDonnell's agenda. He is proposing that Virginia's state-supported colleges and universities receive a significant funding boost. He is also proposing major reforms and increased funding for Virginia's public schools.

COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS

Like most legislative bodies, the Senate uses a committee system to review legislation. After a bill is submitted, it is sent to one of eleven standing committees for review. Each of the committees considers specific areas of legislation. The members of the committees screen bills, sometimes suggesting amendments and determining whether or not they should be considered by the entire Senate.

I've been appointed to serve on five Senate Committees. I will continue serving on Agriculture, Conservation & Natural Resources; Commerce & Labor, on which I have been appointed as chairman; Finance; Transportation; and I have been appointed for the first time to the Senate Rules Committee.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

We are now set up in our offices in Richmond. My legislative assistants, Sally Antonelli and Sue Saddington, are staffing our office here, located in Room 331 of the General Assembly Building.

You can contact us by sending an e-mail to District10@senate.virginia.gov, or by sending a letter to me at Senate of Virginia, P.O. Box 396, Richmond VA 23218-0396. You can also call us at [804.698.7510](tel:804.698.7510). We appreciate your input.

Watch for more news from Richmond next week.

Sincerely, John Watkins
Senator of Virginia District 10