

Work is Well Under Way at the Capitol

January 23, 2012

Dear friends,

It seems that we have barely taken our oaths of office, and already we are beginning week three of the 2012 session of the General Assembly. Work has begun in earnest in this long session, not just on the 800 bills and resolutions that have been introduced thus far this year in the Senate alone, but also on a biennial budget for the Commonwealth.

My colleagues in the House are also working to review, refine and complete work on more than 1,500 pieces of legislation, as well as their version of the budget.

I am the chief patron for nearly 40 of 800 Senate's bills and resolutions, and as I have said before, as a lifelong businessman, I continue to gravitate to issues related to our economic well being and efforts to make our government operate as efficiently as the private sector. Legislation I sponsored also addresses issues that were priorities in my re-election campaign -- in education, renewable energy, transportation, government efficiencies through reorganization, and the environment.

All legislation, after it is "dropped" into the system is referred to a committee for review, discussion, and its first vote. If approved and reported out of committee, it is discussed and voted on by the full Senate. Five of my bills have completed that part of the process and now await consideration by the House of Delegates. Among them were bills dealing with insurance trade practices regarding certificates of insurance; unemployment compensation; and criminal background checks for mortgage lenders and mortgage brokers.

Another high-profile bill you may have read about is HB251, which dealt with congressional redistricting for Virginia. This bill was approved in the Senate last Friday, and sets in place districts for Congressional elections this fall. I anticipate it will now be signed by Governor Bob McDonnell. It will, however, still require Department of Justice approval in accordance with the Voting Rights Act.

Other legislation of note includes bills on the Commerce & Labor Committee, on which I serve as the chair. We have created two subcommittees -- one to deal with payday loan legislation, most of which would limit the percentage rates charged; and another that will address the health insurance exchange legislation. This subcommittee will address legislation that would implement a competitive health exchange program for Virginians and that would help individuals and businesses provide affordable healthcare in the Commonwealth.

On Thursday afternoon the Agriculture, Conservation and Natural Resources Committee voted to approve Sunday hunting on private property. From my point of view, this really amounted to a property rights issue, and it did not open up the state parks and other recreation areas that are owned and operated for and by the public. Virginia was one of only six states that had a complete prohibition on Sunday hunting in place. I felt that the limitations warranted its approval and my affirmative vote.

Business continues to be vigorous here at the Capitol, and I and my staff have enjoyed speaking with constituents and representatives of business and community organizations, such as the past commander of American Legion Post 201 in Powhatan; representatives from the Voice of School Nutrition in Virginia; dental hygienists and others from the VCU School of Dentistry; and the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

This week promises to be just as brisk, as we continue to review and discuss legislation in committee and on the floor of the Senate, and as other groups and individuals visit the General Assembly to voice their opinions, present their legislative agendas, or to simply observe and be a part of the process of governing Virginia.

I encourage and invite you to visit the General Assembly. I value your opinion and hope that you, too, want to have a part in writing the newest pages in the history of our great Commonwealth.

If you are unable to come to Richmond, you can follow the developments in legislature on the General Assembly website at <http://legis.state.va.us/>.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

John Watkins