

OPINION

Letters To The Editor

Ebony rezoning/Dollar General litigation update

To the Editor:

As we approach the end of another year, we want to share where we stand with the litigation and thank those who continue to support this important cause to protect Ebony's historic legacy, its residents and home life, the sanctity of the Prospect Cemetery and Church, its authentic rural country setting, and the two local stores that have evolved to serve the community for decades.

This fight to save Ebony from destructive commercialization began in the summer of 2019 when we heard the adjacent landowner was receptive to an offer to build a Dollar General between us and the Prospect Cemetery – across the road from the two local stores – in the heart of Ebony's historic center.

The fourth year of litigation began March 1, 2023. On February 28, 2020, a rezoning decision by Brunswick County Board of Supervisors to enable the Dollar General construction was legally appealed for the purpose of correcting very serious errors that were made with their Jan. 29, 2020 3-2 vote.

This case was appealed to the Virginia Court of Appeals (VCA) on August 18, 2022 after the Summary Judgment ruling in favor of the County was appealed. Prior to this ruling a different Brunswick County Circuit Court judge who presided over the Demurrer filed by the County to have the case dismissed ruled to allow the claims of the Plaintiffs, Anne Edwards Hartley and

Prospect Cemetery Association, to proceed to trial.

All requisite VCA filings were completed in January of this year and on November 16, 2023 both sides presented oral argument to a 3-panel judge in Richmond. We await a ruling from the VCA.

While the litigation does not restrict rights to move forward with plans to build the Dollar General, the developer, PAR5, has elected not to; nor have they purchased the land. The Well and Septic Permit that had been approved for the store has since expired. The landowner has also rejected an opportunity to sell the land to an alternative buyer.

The litigation has kept hope alive for Ebony.

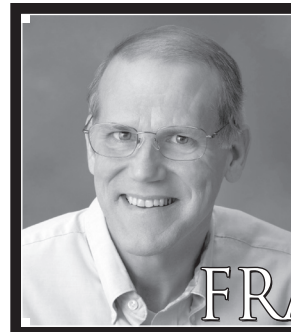
MORE INFORMATION AND TO SUPPORT

For more information about the background, litigation, and how to donate to the legal fund for the opposition, please visit <https://keepebonycountry.org/>. And stay connected via the Facebook page: Keep Ebony Country

The best way to support this fight is through donations to the legal fund for the Appeal. If you can help and want to add your support, please make check to "Keep Ebony Country Fund" and mail to Keep Ebony Country, c/o Kay Whitehead, PO Box 36, Ebony, VA 23845.

Wishing everyone a very Merry Christmas and Happy New Year,

**Anne and Al Hartley
Ebony Preservation Group**



FROM THE DESK OF

**SENATOR
FRANK RUFF**

My Perspective

By now, you may have seen the headlines about my pending retirement from the Senate. That decision did not come easily and was certainly an emotional one for me to make. I had to choose between what I believe was my purpose for the last thirty years and what was best for my family and my health.

I had high hopes when I approached the surgery that they would be able to get the cancer out of my body and I would be able to go merrily down the road to full recovery. Recently, my hopes were dampened by learning that there was much left to be dealt with. I, therefore, came to the realization that not only was it unfair to my family to go through the ups and downs of session while trying to balance that with treatments, likewise, in my opinion it would be a disservice to my constituents.

What Others Are Saying

Clearly, it has been humbling to hear what others are saying.

Governor Youngkin:

"Senator Frank Ruff is a titan in Virginia politics," Youngkin said in a statement. "His invaluable expertise, dedication to public service, and wealth of knowledge will be dearly missed in the Senate of Virginia."

"Throughout his career, he has been a champion for rural Virginia and our community college system, led the way on economic development and enhancing Virginia's workforce and has been a true steward of the Commonwealth's resources and ensuring our public services are effective and efficient. I am immensely grateful for his decades of service to the Commonwealth and its people. Suzanne and I are praying for the entire Ruff family as Frank navigates this incredibly difficult health journey."

Outgoing majority Leader Dick Saslaw:

In an era of intensifying partisanship, retiring Senate Majority Leader Dick Saslaw, D-Fairfax, called Ruff "one of those centered people you could talk with and negotiate with. It's a big loss for the Commonwealth."

Incoming Senate Minority Leader Ryan McDougle, R-Hanover, called Ruff "the consummate statesman" and a strong voice for rural Virginia.

"In Frank Ruff, Virginians living in rural communities had an effective and accomplished champion," McDougle said. "Frank successfully fought for workforce training, for a community college system that offers greater opportunity for every region, and for economic development in regions that otherwise might have been left behind."

Incoming Majority Leader Scott Surovell, D-Fairfax, said he is disappointed to see Ruff leave. Surovell called Ruff "a solid member with a lot of wisdom and the kind of experience we need with all the turnover we've had, but he's got to do what's right for his family."

Outgoing Minority Leader Tommy Norment:

"I have been a member of the Senate every day of Frank Ruff's tenure. His unwavering dedication to the people and the region he represents, and his commitment to Virginia, is simply unsurpassed."

Frank's fellow senators know him to be a 'workhorse', tirelessly devoting the long days and hours necessary to pass landmark legislation, to protect Virginia's rural heritage through his work with the Center for Rural Virginia and the Tobacco Commission, and to expanding opportunities for the people of his region through his leadership on workforce development and with our community college system. Frank's work has changed countless lives for the better.

Frank's fellow senators also know him as one of the nicest, kindest, and most humble of public servants. In a field where attention is frequently drawn to those who draw attention to themselves, Frank has distinguished himself for his diligence and quiet effectiveness. The Commonwealth of Virginia and the Senate of Virginia are indebted to Frank for his service. I, personally, have been fortunate to know Frank as a close and trusted friend."

It is very humbling that my service in Richmond has been recognized and appreciated.

We love to hear from you! You can reach us at Sen.Ruff@verizon.net, 434-374-5129, or P.O. Box 332, Clarksville, VA 23927.

Benchmark Bankshares announces retirement, staffing changes

KENBRIDGE - Benchmark Bankshares, Inc. (BMBN), the Kenbridge-based holding company for Benchmark Community Bank, has announced the pending retirement of Jay A. Stafford, President of the Company, and Chief Executive Officer of both the Company and the Bank, effective December 31, 2023. Stafford will also retire as a member of the Boards of Directors for both the Company and the Bank on that date.

E. Neil Burke to become Benchmark President/CEO on January 1, 2024. E. Neil Burke to become Benchmark President/CEO on January 1, 2024. E. Neil Burke, Executive Vice President/Chief Financial Officer of the Bank, and Assistant Secretary/Treasurer of the Company has been appointed to succeed Stafford. Burke joined Benchmark in 1999 as a Branch Officer. A South Hill, Virginia, native and current resident, Burke has served in his current position since April 2017, having previously served nine years as Senior Vice President/Chief Financial Officer.

Elizabeth T. Beale joins Benchmark in September as EVP/CFO. Elizabeth T. Beale joins Benchmark in September as EVP/CFO. In September, Elizabeth T. (Beth) Beale joined Benchmark as Executive Vice President to succeed Burke as Chief Financial Officer (CFO). A 26-year veteran of the financial industry, Beale most recently served since July 2019 as Executive Vice President/Chief Financial



Jay A. Stafford retiring as Benchmark President/CEO on December 31, 2023.



E. Neil Burke to become Benchmark President/CEO on January 1, 2024.

Officer for Old Point National Bank, headquartered in Hampton, Virginia. Additionally, Beale served 15 years as Executive Vice President/Chief Financial Officer for Citizens National Bank, Windsor, Virginia, prior to its 2018 acquisition by Old Point. Beale is a Certified Public Accountant and holds her B.S. in Accounting from Elon University in North Carolina. She has been a member of the Virginia Bankers Association's CFO Committee since 2010 and served as past Chair. Beale also serves on the board of the Virginia Bankers

Association Benefits Corporation.

Of Stafford's service, Ernest R. Lail, Chairman of the Boards of Directors of the Company and the Bank said, "Jay has been an inspiring leader for Benchmark. Since he took the helm in the spring of 2017, the Bank's asset size has almost doubled. Significant growth of this type comes with hard work and a clear strategy. Jay's work along with the entire staff of the Bank during these years including the pandemic has been exceptional. His close working relationship with Neil and the management team cultivated a business model that carefully balanced the deposit and loan growth to put the bank in a position of strength. Jay can be proud of what the bank has accomplished under his leadership."

"It has been an honor to have spent my entire banking career at Benchmark Community Bank," Stafford said. "I've had a truly fortunate and unique experience of working for one bank for over 35 years. I take pride in having been a part of Benchmark's growth and consistently strong financial performance, while contributing to growing a bank from two branches with \$30MM in assets to seventeen branches with over \$1B in assets."

But what I value most is the impact and importance of an independent community bank in the communities we serve and the relationships and friendships I established during this time. I have no doubt Neil will do an excellent job as

my successor."

Neil Burke received his undergraduate education from Bridgewater College where he graduated in 1993 with a bachelor's degree in business administration. In 2001, he received his Master of Business Administration from Syracuse University, before completing the American Banking Association's Stonier Graduate School of Banking in 2004. In 2006, he completed the University of South Carolina's Graduate School of Bank Investments and Financial Management program.

On behalf of Benchmark, Burke serves on the Virginia Bankers Association's CFO Committee, presiding as Chair since 2021. He is also currently serving on the GO Virginia Region 3 Project Review Committee.

"We are pleased that Neil has agreed to succeed Jay," Lail continued. "Neil has a deep knowledge and understanding of the Bank. This combined with his financial insight, positions Benchmark well for the future. As they have for the past twenty years, Jay and Neil have been working over the past months to affect a seamless transition. The Board of Directors looks forward to working with Neil and his team to continue the success Benchmark has enjoyed."

Of his appointment, Burke said, "I am so appreciative to the Board of Directors for this opportunity and to Jay for his mentorship over the years. The banking industry has changed significantly in the

See **BENCHMARK**, page 5A

Letters to the Editor

Womack Publishing welcomes letters to the editor on matters of public concern. Letters must be signed with full name and include the writer's address and telephone number (telephone numbers are used for verification only). Letters may be edited for length, clarity, accuracy and grammar. Womack Publishing will accept no more than two letters per month, per person or organization. Womack Publishing reserves the right to edit or reject any letter at the discretion of the publisher. Send letters to: Brunswick Times-Gazette, P. O. Box 250, Lawrenceville, Va. 23868 or email to news@brunswicktimes-gazette.com. The phone number is (434) 634-4153.

Our Mission: to be a written and visual record of what makes our community special

Brunswick Times-Gazette

Published each week by Womack Publishing Company, Inc.
P.O. Box 250, Lawrenceville, VA 23868
Phone: 434-848-2114
Email: sallen@womackpublishing.com
(USPS 952-940-ISSN: 1074-5114)
A Periodical Postage paid at Lawrenceville, Virginia

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
The Brunswick Times-Gazette welcomes letters to the editor on matters of public concern. Letters must be signed with full name and indicate the writer's address and telephone number. (Telephone numbers are used for verification only.) Letters may be edited for length, clarity, accuracy, and grammar. Letter should be mailed the Brunswick Times-Gazette, P.O. Box 250, Lawrenceville, VA 23868 or faxed to (434)848-2115.



Sylvia Allen
MANAGING EDITOR
sallen@womackpublishing.com



Amy Elliott
OFFICE MANAGER
aelliott@womackpublishing.com



Dennis Smith
SPORTS WRITER
(434) 774-4488
dennis.smith@southside.edu



Randy Velvin
GENERAL MANAGER
SALES REPRESENTATIVE
rvelvin@womackpublishing.com

NEWS ARTICLES: sallen@womackpublishing.com
CLASSIFIEDS: aelliott@womackpublishing.com

ADVERTISING: rvelvin@womackpublishing.com
DRIVER: Forrest Phillips

Subscription Rates: Brunswick County - \$66/Year - Elsewhere - \$84/Year - Online E-Edition - \$34/Year
POSTMASTER: send address changes to Brunswick Times-Gazette, P.O. Box 250, Lawrenceville, VA 23868

