

County Budget FY 2025

BY SUPERVISOR DAN STORCK
MOUNT VERNON DISTRICT

Thank you to everyone who reached out to me regarding the County Executive's Proposed FY 2025 Budget. This year presents one of the toughest budget challenges since I took office. We're still recovering from the pandemic, facing increasing demands for County services, flatter commercial property revenues and rising costs. Like you, the County is seeing higher prices for everything from construction projects to the cost of copier paper.

Thank you to our County Executive Bryan Hill for initiating the FY 2025 budget process by asking each County department to propose a 7% spending decrease. These significant reduction considerations at the beginning of our process helped get us to our proposed budget today. By working together, we are able to propose a lower real estate tax rate increase from 4 cents to 3 cents per \$100 of assessed value and the Board will adopt this budget on Tuesday, May 7.

County investment in the Mount Vernon District has been extraordinary, improving services and the support we deliver to you. This year alone, we opened the new Lorton Police Station & Animal Shelter, a new trail segment from

Mount Vernon Estate to Richmond Highway, began Original MVHS renovations and celebrated the one-year anniversary of the Lorton Community Center, Senior and Teen Center, Library and Park. These types of investments are where your tax dollars are being spent, providing the resources Fairfax County residents need and expect.

Exceptional County staff are a critical component to help us achieve our goals; from Public Works, Planning and Zoning, Public Safety, Schools, Neighborhood and Community Services and others. 80% of our budget is devoted to the staff compensation necessary to recruit and retain the employees essential to support our residents and businesses.

Maintaining our world class education system continues to be a top priority. This year's school budget is equally challenging, and I know first-hand from my time on the School Board that they need to continue looking at the per student costs and increase teacher pay, while looking for ways to reduce non-teacher costs. A recent state study revealed Virginia state education funding falling almost \$2,000 per student behind national, regional and nearby state aver-



Dan Storck

ages. If we received full state funding by this measure or even existing required Virginia education minimum standards, we would be talking about substantial tax decreases today, not increases.

Some elements of this budget package still concern me. The consolidation of the Animal Protection Police Officers (APPO) to the Animal Services Department (ASD) and the reductions in the Fire and Rescue Department are two of those concerns. I will be monitoring these service levels and community impacts. As part of the APPO and ASD consolidation, I would like to see a co-responder system implemented, similar to our existing police and mental health co-responder model.

Looking forward, I will be ensuring that the County stays focused on finding cost savings and capturing all of our entitled existing revenue. Through my role as Chair of the Board's Audit Committee, we will be looking at costs, savings, efficiencies and revenue opportunities. As the Economic Development Committee Chair, we will be increasing our focus on office space repurposing, data facility needs and growing opportunities in AI and Space.

As always, I recognize that the buck stops with us on ensuring a vibrant, supportive and attractive community where folks want to live, learn, work and play. Greater affordability is crucial and getting a fairer deal from Virginia can help that. Currently, the state directly returns about 23% of what County residents contribute in state taxes, although indirect services for higher education, the justice system, etc., account for additional support. Refunding back to us just 1% of the state income taxes we now send to Richmond could allow us to reduce our real estate tax rate by \$.25! Increases in federal and state funding for our renowned schools, best in the U.S. public safety departments, mental health services, affordable housing, childcare, parks and many other priorities would make a big difference in reducing County funding for these services.

I have heard from many seniors and families during this budget process and we, as a Board, must do a deeper budget dive, advocate for more federal and state funding and find more progressive ways to fund County needs. I hope this information helps explain the many budget challenges we are facing together, even as my Board colleagues and I look for ways to reduce costs to you, our most valuable resource.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Shortage of Affordable Housing

To the editor:

I want to shed light on a critical issue that affects every member of our community: the dire shortage of affordable housing. This shortage impacts not only individuals and families struggling to make ends meet, but also drives inflation, exacerbates economic disparities, and hinders the well-being of working Fairfax County residents.

The root cause of this crisis lies in the fundamental economic concept of scarcity. Despite surging demand, our housing supply remains inadequate, leading to skyrocketing prices and forcing many to bear the burden of unaffordable living costs. I am one of the residents affected by such prices. Recently, I retired from the military and searched for housing that could support my family of five. Prices for four-bedroom houses hovered near \$1 million, and three-bedroom houses cost nearly \$700,000. With home ownership

out of my price range, I settled for a rental home at \$3,600 a month — higher than I've ever paid. Utilities cost around \$100 per service. I am fortunate to have a working spouse, older children without childcare needs, and retiree benefits. I cannot imagine how others could afford to live here.

It is crucial to recognize that no amount of wage increases, rent controls, or stipends can overcome inflation without addressing the underlying issue of insufficient supply. For decades residents have embraced the notion of unlimited space and suburban sprawl, fueled by a car ownership culture. However, the reality is that land is finite and scarce. We can no longer afford to build housing as we have grown accustomed to, with single-family homes boasting generous parking spaces and expansive yards.

Suburban sprawl fostered car dependency as people drove to

work, school, and shopping, while federal grants promoted car-centric transportation systems at the expense of mass transit. Car-centric devel-

opment ensured that parking would be considered with all housing plans. The result was more traffic, scarce land

SEE LETTERS, PAGE 23

Let Us Know Your View

Connection Newspapers welcomes views on any public issue. Letters must be signed. Include home address and home and business numbers; we will only print your name and town name. Letters are routinely edited for length, libel, grammar, good taste, civility and factual errors.

Send letters

Online www.connectionnewspapers.com/contact/letter/
By email: editors@connectionnewspapers.com

By mail to: Letters to the Editor The Connection
1606 King St., Alexandria VA 22314

You can comment on our Facebook page or find us on Twitter
www.facebook.com/connectionnewspapers
<https://twitter.com/alexgazette>
<https://twitter.com/mtvernongazette>
<https://twitter.com/followfairfax>

Never miss an issue, get a free digital subscription,
<http://www.connectionnewspapers.com/subscribe/>

Special-Ed Students Enjoy Day Prom

FROM PAGE 8

fruit, cheese and cake, plus gift cards for the volunteers.

Inside the gala banquet hall, the students danced to rock music provided by deejay Andrew Larris (MC Laz). And Frostick beamed, seeing them all having such a good time. "We're just happy to be a part of it and hope we can do this every year for the students," she said. "It meant so much to both the parents and kids to have this opportunity."

Dressed in a beautiful pink gown with sparkly, silver jewelry and shoes, Chantilly junior Caroline LHeureu said, "I'm having fun. I like the dancing and talking with my friends."

"It was wonderful to see how ecstatic the students were to get dressed up, have their photos taken, meet new people and dance," continued Frostick. "And the moms were over the moon to go clothes shopping with their children. They were beyond excited – so many happy tears were shed along the way."

Junior Kate Westover, wearing a lacy maroon dress, said it felt good being there. Before coming to the prom, she said she'd been "looking forward to having fun" and she was indeed "having a good time." Kate said her favorite singer is Justin Bieber and what she liked best about the event was "dancing to the music."

Senior Cordis Colburn said he was hav-

ing fun and enjoying the music, too. But, he added, he was especially excited about the cake – which he then focused on eating as soon as it was served to him, relishing every morsel before returning to the dance floor.

Centreville High brought a contingent of nine students – four boys and five girls, shepherded by special-ed teacher Rawan Almaghribi. And although they don't have cosmetology students at their school, she said, "Our students all came from home looking beautiful." And she was as pleased to be at the prom as they were.

"I have a strong passion for kids with multiple disabilities," she said. "And when I see them improving, I feel happy like I achieved something. Often, people think these students can't do anything, but they do have skills and can learn. We prepare them for the future so they can get jobs and not just sit at home."

For example, said Almaghribi, "I have a student who waters the plants in the school – but in the beginning, it was hard to get him to leave the classroom. Now, though, he'll go to the third floor and water the plants there, and he's so happy. He's autistic and could initially only say a few words. But now he'll proudly say a whole sentence, 'I water the plants.'"

She also noted another student who used to disrupt the class because he'd eat whatever he found on the floor. So instead, she

taught him to sweep that floor, "so he'd learn that trash goes in the trash can and you don't eat it. He's proud of himself for learning that, and he's enjoying keeping the floor clean."

Regarding the Day Prom, although Almaghribi wished that more general-ed students were there "so it would be more inclusive," she was delighted to see her students having fun. "I see happiness all over their faces," she said. "Here, they have the same opportunity the general-ed students have. I'll miss them during the summer; and when I think about this prom and them, it'll give me motivation to come back in the fall."

One of her students, junior Dulce Barra-Zepeda, said she liked the prom and was having a good time, and then cheerfully headed to the dance floor to join her friends. Also enjoying himself was gregarious Centreville senior Shiv Vuppalachchi.

Calling the dance "good," he said, "I like making friends, eating the food, dancing, having lots of fun, and having conversations with my friends." His favorite songs are "Lose You to Love Me" by Selena Gomez and "Firework" by Katy Perry.

In his spare time, Shiv likes to do Tae Kwon Do and Jiu Jitsu, play basketball and tennis, do research on the computer, and participate in Best Buddies. Saying that he'd really been looking forward to attending the prom, he added, "Let's have more day proms, every day."

Ticked Off



By KENNETH B. LOURIE

For approximately 14 and half, years I experienced a very unexpected side effect from my ongoing cancer treatment. It may be a coincidence but ever since I began chemotherapy, my body chemistry apparently became unappetizing to two of our least favorite insects: ticks and mosquitos. Previously, I had been what seemed like a magnet to these two bloodsuckers. I realized that effect my chemotherapy was having (as they seemed to default to my wife instead) and enjoyed every unique minute of their disinterest. I am writing this column, to say that the party, such as it is, is over. And there is yet again a coincidence: I have been off my chemo/targeted therapy for four months or so. As such I am no longer medicated. My warranty, so to speak is up, and my body has once again become a relatively enticing and safe haven for ticks and mosquitos – and I'm not too happy about it. To invoke Don Imus: I am "torqued" off about this change.

In addition to killing cancer cells, the various types of chemotherapy, toxic as there were/are to me, they were even more toxic to the insects. Somehow the word/consequences of taking a bite out of me traveled around the insect world and I was – or so it seemed, off limits and/or the insect advisory was proceed/bite at your own risk. And this was quite noticeable. Instead of representing an unending chemical attraction to insects; all sudden, after a few months of infused chemotherapy, I became anathema to these insects. It was never so clear as it was that first summer (I began infusions in early March) when the insects need to establish their dominance in nature's harmony or something akin to that. And for both ticks and mosquitos, the road to their afterlife involved biting and latching on to me like there was no tomorrow (and when I slapped or picked them off, very often there was no tomorrow). It wasn't exactly a cure for cancer, but it was something of significance, something that made my life as a cancer patient more manageable (like the installation of mobile televisions at the infusion center mounted on flexible arms which enabled the patient to watch television while infusing away your day – and hopefully not your life. But in this context when your life is very much hanging in the balance, "one less thing," as "Forrest, Forrest "Gump" said repeatedly matters disproportionately to the actual task at hand. And no more ticks and/or mosquitos, certainly qualified. Can you imagine? No more swatting, slapping, spraying, picking 'tweezering' and disinfecting. You were, for the first time in your life (and for me, that meant 54- and one-half years), the king of your castle. It truly was "Serenity now"/then. Right this second, I just picked a G. D. tick off my neck as I felt it crawling. It's creepy writing about it but it's creepier when it happens – in real-time, in your safe place no less, in my home office/domain.

This major inconvenience happens, as I said coincidentally with the stoppage of my cancer medicine, which creates its own rather disappointing scenario/problem. In addition to the discomfort (bug wise) I feel when I'm outside – now that the warmer weather is mostly here, I feel tremendous anxiety and fear, if I'm being honest, with respect to my now no-more-cancer-medicine-being-taken. And that medicine is not being taken because I'm cured. Hardly. It has stopped because a side effect of the drug used to treat my thyroid cancer was – and is, possibly damaging my kidneys. Well, those researchers were right. My kidneys are now down to about 25% of normal. Moreover, kidney damage is irreparable so all that the doctors can do, generally, is try and prevent the kidneys from further deterioration. Unfortunately, there's no medicine for that – as there is for almost anything else. As a result, I am now left with untreated cancer, damaged kidneys, and more mosquito bites and tick "embeds" than I've ever had in my life. Talk about adding insult to injury. I can live with the cancer and kidney damage (though possibly for fewer years than I anticipated) but making me suffer while doing so seems like cruel and unusual punishment. (Is there a constitutional lawyer in the reading audience?) Whether there is or not (Jamie Raskin), I do need the best. Moreover, I need someone who can help me beat the thyroid cancer, the damaged kidneys and the encroaching ticks and mosquitos.

And do so in a relatively timely manner because every day that I'm left to fend for myself is one less day that I feel like I'm beating the odds. And not beating the odds makes Kenny a very dull boy and one who really hates mosquitos and ticks – for all the wrong reasons.

Kenny Lourie is an Advertising Representative for The Potomac Almanac & The Connection Newspapers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FROM PAGE 12

relegated to fewer homes, and restricted prosperity.

The housing shortage is the symptom, but banning responsible development makes it an incurable disease. The impact of this housing shortage extends beyond mere financial strain; it affects the very fabric of our communities.

The shortage forces many members of our community to commute long distances, live paycheck to paycheck, and consequently are unable to build emergency funds, save for retirement, or even afford necessities such as food and healthcare. Even long-time homeowners contend with ever-rising real estate tax assessments that consume their disposable incomes.

It is imperative that we support initiatives aimed at addressing this crisis, such as Supervisor Rodney Lusk's proposal for an affordable housing development at the Franconia Governmental Center site. By approving projects like the Franconia development, which may provide approximately 120 affordable units, we take a significant step towards alleviating the housing shortage. Moreover, dedicating a portion of these units to vital professionals such as teachers, first responders, and medical professionals would provide critical services to our

community.

Consider the profound impact that affordable housing can have on our residents' financial well-being. A mere \$500 monthly savings in rent equates to a \$9,000 annual pay raise (after accounting for state and federal taxes). This not only enables hard-working individuals and families to retain more of their earnings but also generates much-needed tax revenue for the county.

If assessed for even half the value of comparable properties, this development could generate as much tax revenue as 21 single-family homes, or over \$138,000 annually. I can think of no other policy that would put more money in the pockets of people while also growing the wealth of our county.

Addressing the housing shortage is not just an economic necessity, but a moral obligation. Housing is a human right. Fortunately, most of us don't have to choose between two evils. By prioritizing the construction of affordable housing units, we can mitigate inflationary pressures, foster economic growth, and ensure a brighter future for all members of our community.

Jacob Harrer
Springfield, Va.

Be a part of our:

Wellbeing pages, the first week of every month.

Delight in our HomeLifeStyle sections, the second week of every month. Peek at the top real estate sales, glimpse over-the-top remodeling projects, get practical suggestions for your home.

Celebrate students, camps, schools, enrichment programs, colleges and more in our A-plus: Education, Learning, Fun pages, the third week of every month.

Senior Living, fourth week of every month.

Questions?

E-mail sales@connectionnewspapers.com or call 703-778-9431

