

## Taking out the trash

County seeks to discourage new landfill projects

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Chesterfield is looking to get out of the landfill business. The proposed update to the county's comprehensive plan now includes language that discourages the Board of Supervisors from approving zoning for any new public or private solid waste, construction demolition debris or hazardous waste landfills.

The Chesterfield County Planning Commission will solicit citizen input on the draft comprehensive plan during a public hearing at its Feb. 19 meeting.

The new guideline included in the plan's land-use chapter won't apply to the three landfills currently operating in Chesterfield or a construction demolition debris landfill planned for the western Hull Street Road corridor, but it would effectively prohibit any new landfills

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JENNY McQUEEN



ASH DANIEL

## Carrie turns the corner

School Board's Coyner blends equity, social justice and the GOP in bid for House of Delegates

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

As a School Board member, Carrie Coyner, at the Greenleigh mobile home community off U.S. Route 1, has advocated for the corridor's low-income racial minorities. She's now running to represent the 62nd District in the House of Delegates.

It's just after 10 o'clock on a chilly, gray Saturday morning, and other than a haggard-looking cat sauntering across the road, there are few signs of life stirring at Greenleigh, one of several mobile home parks located along Chesterfield's stretch of historic U.S. Route 1.

Inside a double-wide trailer adjacent to the community playground, county School Board member Carrie Coyner sits at a white plastic table with a young Latina girl and quizzes her on colors and shapes. Several boys are working at another table, decorating sheets of paper they will eventually fold into airplanes and send flying across the room. Their mothers sit nearby in metal folding chairs and chat in Spanish.

Some 48 hours earlier, when the Observer interviewed Coyner at her law office about her

recently declared candidacy for the 62nd District seat in the Virginia House of Delegates, she was in attorney mode: dress, heels and makeup. But she seems even more in her element here, in jeans and canvas shoes, interacting with children at the Greenleigh Learning Center.

It's an unusual setting for an up-and-coming Republican politician. Coyner, 37, is carving out a platform, and building a base of support, in the lowest-income corners of Chesterfield.

And it's not a come-lately act. Coyner helped launch the center in 2012 through a partnership that included Elizabeth Scott Elementary School Principal Joan Temple, the Chester YMCA and Chesterfield Police Capt. Kevin Smith. Their objective was to provide a central location for

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Greenleigh's heavily Hispanic elementary and middle school student population to receive additional academic support after school. The center, which is staffed by volunteers and operates solely on donations, receives no tax dollars.

Coyner helped establish a similar program in Broadwater Townhouses, a subdivision with subsidized housing on Harrowgate Road. Broadwater's learning center is now run by staff at nearby Carver Middle School. She also partnered with Chesterfield County Public Schools employee Amy Bartilotti to start a summer reading program that provides books for economically disadvantaged and at-risk students. As part of the program, churches and other groups adopt neighborhoods and throw "reading parties" throughout the summer months.

Coyner's face lights up when Cindy Marroquin, the Greenleigh center's first student participant, stops by for a visit Saturday morning. Coyner still has a photo of the two of them saved in her phone: Cindy, now a sixth-grader at Elizabeth Davis Middle, was in kindergarten at the time; Coyner was in her first year as the Bermuda District's representative on the Chesterfield School Board.

"Look how much older we are now," Coyner says, and they both laugh.

A few minutes later, despite paper airplanes whizzing by their heads, the conversation momentarily turns more serious as Coyner explains to Cindy and her friend what it means to run for the House of Delegates and why she's doing it.

"I'm going to be walking around neighborhoods knocking on doors and asking people to vote for me," she says, "so I can make sure everyone in this community has a voice."

More specifically, Coyner says she thinks she can have "a larger impact" on the state level by applying her skills, knowledge and experience in the areas of education, affordable housing and job creation, while working to secure equal rights, justice and opportunity for all Virginians.

"My service is driven by a deep love of the people who live here," she said. "Decision-making becomes much easier when you step out and really get to know the people in your community. It can't just be people in your neighborhood."

Coyner announced last Wednesday that she is seeking the Republican Party nomination in the 62nd

District, where she hopes to succeed the retiring Del. Riley Ingram as representative of a House district that includes Chesterfield, Henrico and Prince George counties and the city of Hopewell.

It came as little surprise to Richmond-area political observers. Coyner filed her campaign paperwork with the State Board of Elections last July while she waited for the popular Ingram to decide whether he wanted to run for a

15th term. Ingram, who was first elected to the House of Delegates in 1992, said in a telephone interview last week "it's time to pass the torch" to Coyner.

It has been a poorly kept secret for some time that Coyner held political ambitions beyond the School Board. Young, attractive and charismatic, with familial connections to the real estate industry and its deep-pocketed donors, she figured to make a strong candidate whenever she decided to pursue higher office.

Coyner is running, however, at a time of significant political change in Chesterfield. Buoyed by their success in the last two elections, particularly Abigail Spanberger's defeat of incumbent U.S. Rep. Dave Brat last November, local Democrats are entering the 2019 election cycle with momentum and the ambition to increase their presence in a government long dominated by Republicans.

The GOP maintains a particularly tenuous grip on power in the General Assembly following the wave election of 2017, which reduced its House majority from 32 seats to two. Ingram was one of the fortunate Republican incumbents, holding off lightly funded Democratic challenger Sheila Bynum-Coleman by just 819 votes out of more than 23,500 ballots cast. Just two years earlier, Ingram claimed 60 percent of the vote against Bynum-Coleman, who has indicated that she intends to seek the office for a third time this year.

The 62nd District figures to be "a very interesting race," said longtime Richmond political analyst Bob Holsworth. In 2017, Bynum-Coleman beat Ingram by 739 votes in the 62nd District's Chesterfield precincts, where twice as many ballots were cast as in the other three localities combined. An African-American, Bynum-Coleman connected with a growing, typically Democratic-leaning minority population in the southeastern part of the county.

Bynum-Coleman is still waiting to find out if she'll be allowed to run in the 62nd

District. A pending federal court ruling on Virginia's gerrymandered House districts could shift her residence into either the 27th or 66th districts. Regardless, Holsworth acknowledged Coyner's consistent advocacy for low-income and minority families as the Bermuda District's School Board representative and said she's "probably the strongest Republican candidate you can have in that district now."

"She has been ahead of the curve ... she's a good Republican candidate at a time when they are searching for strong women candidates," he added. "If Republicans are going to win with the changing demographics of suburbia, it seems to me that the kind of candidate that is going to be successful in these transitional districts is going to carry a message very similar to Coyner's."

Coyner isn't oblivious to what's happening nationally; she is running to represent a district with a large Latino population during an ongoing impasse over immigration and border security that has resulted in the longest federal government shutdown in American history. She's also seeking the nomination of a political party whose leader, President Donald Trump, has made what many people consider deeply offensive comments about Mexicans.

Asked how she reconciles her politics with her party's at the national level, Coyner said she is committed to living out her faith and personal values – regardless of what a particular national politician says or does.

"We have to get back to focusing on people," she added. "If you have a heart for people, you should want the best for everybody in our community."

John Moeser jokingly refers to Coyner as "the most un-Republican Republican I've ever seen."

Moeser, a senior fellow at the University of Richmond's Bonner Center for Civic Engagement and professor emeritus of urban studies and planning

at Virginia Commonwealth University, worked with Coyner in 2015 to organize a community forum exploring Chesterfield's "poverty divide."

About 250 people attended the event – including members of the Chesterfield School Board, Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission as well as county government officials, business and civic group members and church leaders – and heard presentations about the impact of concentrated poverty on schools and neighborhoods in eastern Chesterfield.

"The more Carries [who run for office], the more the Republican Party can get serious about social issues that require some level of government intervention," Moeser said in an interview last week.

Moeser hasn't always sung Coyner's praises. In early 2014, he was part of a chorus of critics who questioned her legal work on behalf of her father, Chester real estate developer George Emerson, and other developers seeking relief from the county's cash proffer policy.

The issue came to a head when Coyner missed the first two hours of a School Board meeting – in which her colleagues were trying to cut \$8.5 million from the superintendent's proposed budget – because she was representing a client before the planning commission.

Coyner was accused of having a conflict of interest for taking on zoning cases that sought to eliminate or reduce proffers, which at the time provided funding for schools and other public infrastructure such as fire stations, parks and libraries.

Critics claimed Coyner was trying to take money away from the same school system whose interests she was supposed to be representing as a School Board member.

According to a February 2014 story in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Moeser described Coyner's lobbying efforts against cash proffers as "unconscionable" and said "she's got to make up her mind who she serves: whether she's serving her constitu-



ASH DANIEL

Coyner works with students at the Greenleigh Learning Center on Saturday. She helped establish the center in 2012 to tutor Spanish-speaking children after school.



ASH DANIEL

Carrie Coyner greets students at Bellwood Elementary, the first county school to adopt a year-round schedule, on July 23. Coyner was a vocal supporter for taking Bellwood year-round; research shows year-round schooling helps improve academics among low-income students.

ents or whether she’s serving her boss.”

A common acquaintance, Laura Lafayette, CEO of the Richmond Association of Realtors, called Moeser and suggested if he had known Coyner better, he wouldn’t have made the comments he did.

“I told him Carrie is a very good human being and she’s trying to do the right thing for the people of eastern Chesterfield,” Lafayette recalled last week.

In a 2014 interview with the Observer, Coyner insisted she only handles zoning cases in areas that are “dying and have no growth,” communities where overwhelmingly low-income families are clustered in mobile home parks and rental properties. She argued that reducing proffers in these areas, which already have the infrastructure to support new development, would make

it financially worthwhile for builders to come back east and create quality affordable housing instead of continuing to build farther into the county’s western margins.

“If we don’t do something to try and break the cycle of poverty, we may as well just give up,” Coyner said at the time.

Despite the cash proffer controversy, Coyner was unopposed when she ran for re-election in 2015. Ten months later, the Board of Supervisors approved the waiver of cash proffers in certain areas as a catalyst for the county’s community revitalization efforts.

“Carrie is very clear-eyed about the community in which she lives,” Lafayette added. “She sees public policy through the lens of justice and the prism of compassion. She has transcended her office and made

a profound difference in the lives of the people in her district.”

While Coyner acknowledged serving on the School Board has provided a public platform for her views, she had a passion for community service long before she decided to run for elected office.

“You have to speak up for what is right,” she said, sitting at a table at the Greenleigh Learning Center. “Sometimes that’s hard, but it’s what we’re called to do.”

Coyner was still in high school when she began volunteering at the Sacred Heart Center in the Manchester section of Richmond. She and others from the center joined neighborhood families in marching across Mayo Bridge to City Hall to demand that city officials do something about the drugs and violence that were plaguing the community.

After graduating from the University of Virginia and earning a law degree from the University of Richmond, Coyner and her husband, Matt, moved back to her native Chester in 2005 so she could help take care of her father, who had been diagnosed with cancer. Each of her three children are enrolled in Chesterfield public schools; the younger two attend Elizabeth Scott Elementary, which serves a large Latino population and qualifies for federal Title I funding based on its percentage of students who receive free or reduced-price meals.

Since being elected to the School Board in 2011, Coyner has been a consistent advocate for addressing equity issues in the

school system. When Bynum-Coleman addressed the board in September 2016 and cited data showing Chesterfield’s minority students are significantly underrepresented in honors and gifted programs, Coyner noted she had brought up the issue throughout her time in office.

The following month, she nearly broke down at a School Board work session. After a staff presentation that concluded elementary-level participation in gifted education from minority populations was “alarmingly low” and that “prevalent stereotypes of giftedness act as a barrier,” Coyner said the school system must do more to communicate to parents from lower-income communities that they can request gifted testing for their children.

“The parent network of higher-income families, they know the system and they know how to ask for services for their child. My families on my end of town don’t,” she said, fighting back tears. “This is terrible. Being gifted is not based on your income level.”

Lafayette acknowledged Coyner “leads with her heart,” but cautioned against seeing that as a sign of weakness.

“There’s nothing soft about Carrie Coyner,” she said.

Kim Marble, who lives along the U.S. Route 1 corridor and until recently served as president of the nonprofit Jefferson Davis Highway Association, described Coyner as a “reasonable, engaged and responsive community servant.”

“Carrie and I are similar in that we don’t fit neatly into political generalities,” Marble said. “I like that about her. She’s real and she lives out what she believes.” ■

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