

## Local News

## General Assembly wraps up 2019 session

By Alan Suderman  
Associated Press

Virginia lawmakers wrapped up this year's scandal-marked legislative session Sunday after passing a state budget that includes pay raises for teachers and state employees and significant new spending on public education.

This year's session has been unlike any other in recent memory, with the state's top Democratic elected officials facing calls to resign.

Gov. Ralph S. Northam and Attorney General Mark R. Herring acknowledged that they wore blackface in the 1980s, while Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax has been accused by two women of sexual assault, which he denies. The lieutenant governor gave a surprise speech Sunday just before the Senate adjourned in which he compared himself to Jim Crow-era lynching victims.

This year's session was already highly charged before the wave of scandals started at the beginning of February. All 140 legislative seats are up for grabs in November, and Democrats had high hopes of flipping control of both the House of Delegates and the state Senate as President Trump has led suburban voters to flee the GOP in recent Virginia elections. But Republicans are counting on the recent scandals to help hold their narrow majority, as they portray themselves as the stable hand in a time of turmoil.

"The General Assembly brought stable leadership and delivered results on the issues that matter most at a time when the Commonwealth needed it most," Republican House Speaker Kirk Cox said.

Some notable legislation that passed this year includes a tax overhaul that will mean refunds of up to \$220 for many taxpayers, a study on

legalizing casinos and a measure requiring Dominion Energy to clean up coal ash pits.

Here's a look at the key issues:

#### TAXES AND SPENDING

A key question looming over the session was what to do with a massive windfall in state taxes projected to be generated by changes in the federal tax code. A 2017 federal tax overhaul slashed tax rates but also put new limits on how businesses can account for losses and what kind of deductions individuals can take — changes projected to boost state tax revenues.

The GOP-led General Assembly balked at Democratic Gov. Northam's initial proposal to keep most of the money and spend it on areas he said the state has long neglected. Instead, lawmakers decided to return the money to taxpayers by issuing refunds of up to \$220 this year and increasing the state's standard deduction in future years.

Lawmakers passed a budget that includes new money for many of the areas outlined by Gov. Northam, including pay raises for teachers.

Gov. Northam said in a statement that he was "heartened that the budget reflects a number of our administration's priorities."

#### GAMBLING

Gambling interests in Virginia went on a spending spree with donations and hiring lobbyist during this year's session in hopes of legalizing casinos and sports betting.

Lawmakers balked at outright approval of proposed casinos in Bristol, Portsmouth, Norfolk, Danville and Richmond, but did approve a broad study of casinos and sports betting and are set

to take up the issues again next year.

Last year, lawmakers legalized slots-like betting machines at the Colonial Downs horse track and off track betting parlors around the state, including one scheduled to open this spring in South Richmond. The racetrack pressed for a study, angering some lawmakers who backed casinos.

"It's pretty rich that Colonial Downs is the one pushing so hard for a study when not only did we not study their issue last year, but they essentially hoodwinked the vast majority of the General Assembly," said Republican Delegate Israel O'Quinn, who advocated for a casino in Bristol.

Colonial Downs supporters said there were no attempts to mislead last year and the state is taking the right approach by studying the casino issues further.

#### OTHER ISSUES

A heavily lobbied push to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment met with success in the Senate but was blocked by House Republicans.

A plan to put tolls on I-81 to pay for improvements that had the backing of Gov. Northam and some Republican lawmakers fell apart in the face of opposition from the trucking industry and the Virginia Manufacturing Association.

The General Assembly also approved legislation last Friday to require Dominion Energy to recycle or store in lined landfills millions of cubic yards of coal ash currently located at sites around the state.

Dominion said it also supported the plan. The company had argued for years that leaving coal ash in unlined pits was safe and the best alternative.

Coal ash is waste left from burning the fossil fuel to produce electricity.

## 'Mayorathon 2019: Policy Jam' set for Feb. 28

Mayor Levar M. Stoney will participate in a in-depth, informal discussion about his first two years in office from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 28, at the Virginia Commonwealth University Institute for Contemporary Art, 601 W. Broad St.

More than a dozen area nonprofits have joined with host moderators from Richmond magazine and The Spark Mill to present "Mayorathon 2019: Policy Jam." The mayor will be quizzed about issues facing the city, with suggestions

for priorities for the mayor and City Council to undertake during the remainder of Mayor Stoney's term through December 2020.

Richmond magazine held an initial mayorathon leading up to the 2016 election.

Seating is available on a first-come, first-served basis, with an overflow space available to view the event. Doors open at 5:45 p.m., with beer, wine and snacks available for purchase.

Details and RSVP: richmondmag.com/mayorathon2.

## Richmond woman files \$30M lawsuit alleging rights violation in police traffic stop

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

An African-American resident of Richmond is seeking \$30 million in damages from the City of Richmond and the white police officer who put her in handcuffs during a traffic stop for a defective headlight and tail light — a restraint practice the suit alleges affects mostly African-American drivers in violation of their constitutional rights.

Attorneys for Thelma N. Brown filed the suit Feb. 6 in Richmond Circuit Court seeking \$10 million in compensatory damages from the officer who made the stop, Benjamin J. Frazer, and the City of Richmond and \$20 million in punitive damages aimed at deterring police officers from willfully using handcuffs during such stops.

"Only a judgment in such a large amount will act to punish police departments, in general, and the City of Richmond, specifically, as well as identify and develop strategies to actively discourage ... discriminatory practices and equal justice violations," states the lawsuit filed by attorneys David P. Baugh and Christopher L. Anderson.

The city was served with the suit Feb. 13, but the officer is not listed as having been served yet, according to court records. The city's policy is to bar any comment on pending litigation beyond the responses and paperwork filed with the court.

The incident that led to the suit began with the stop around 11:30 p.m. Nov. 19 on Midlothian Turnpike near Ms. Brown's residence. Officer Frazer ultimately issued Ms. Brown two tickets, one for each defective light. Those tickets ended up being dismissed Jan. 4 when the cases were heard in Richmond General District Court, according to court records.

The lawsuit revolves around Ms. Brown's interaction with Officer Frazer before the tickets were written.

When the officer approached her car, Ms. Brown "demanded to know why the officer pulled her over. She said he would not tell her, but instead asked for her license and registration, and it escalated from there," Mr. Baugh said.

The interaction was captured on Officer Frazer's body camera, Mr. Baugh said, which is expected to be a key piece of evidence if the case goes to trial. Previous court rulings make it difficult for civilians to prevail in suits involving police officers.

The suit claims that Ms. Brown "was subjected to threatening and intimidating behavior" and "was compelled to exit her vehicle and handcuffed by the side of the street."

Mr. Baugh said that an informal survey he conducted indicates that it is a frequent practice for officers to tell African-American drivers to leave their cars during a stop and to place the driver in restraints — a practice that Mr. Baugh said white drivers rarely are subjected to and which he called "a denial of equal protection rights."

According to the suit, Officer Frazer "placed the plaintiff in fear and concern for her life" based on his behavior and demeanor and Ms.



Mr. Baugh

Brown's awareness of news reports concerning police shootings of unarmed African-Americans."

Her concern mounted, the suit states, when she noticed that Officer Frazer's summons book displayed political stickers supportive of two people she considers hostile to African-Americans, President Trump and Vice President Mike Pence.

According to the suit, Officer Frazer intended for Ms. Brown "to see and be intimidated at the sight of the political stickers."

The suit also blames the city for failing in its duty "not to hire or retain officers who are prejudiced;" failing in its duty to train officers to properly engage with the public without creating fear and anxiety; and failing to do any studies to determine if the Richmond Police Department "discriminates against African-Americans in the application of traffic and criminal charges."

As a result, the suit states, "has engaged in a pattern of negligent indifference or calculated tolerate to efforts ... to actively deprive African-American citizens of equal treatment under the law."

## New study shows disparity in number of city police encounters with African-Americans

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

African-Americans in Richmond are involved in nearly two out of three civilian encounters with police officers, with lopsided contacts when police are checking out suspicious persons or activities, a new study finds.

The study, based on 27,432 field interview reports, or FIRs, that Richmond Police officers submitted between Jan. 1 and Oct. 1, 2018, found that African-Americans comprise 65 percent of those who had contacts with police officers.

The study was produced by a new coalition called the Richmond Transparency and Accountability Project, an umbrella group started in 2016 that includes the New Virginia Majority, the Legal Aid Justice Center and Southerners on New Ground, as well as Dr. Liz Costen, a Virginia Commonwealth University sociology instructor involved in preparing the study.

The study found officers recorded 17,808 encounters with African-Americans during the period, or more than twice the 7,942 contacts with white individuals, the second largest group.

According to the study, the racial disparity was more evident when the contacts were broken down by category. For example, African-Americans were listed in 71 percent of the field reports involving suspicious persons and 66 percent of field reports involving suspicious activities.

The study also found the field reports

overrepresented African-Americans in contacts involving teen curfew violations (98 percent), driving without a valid license, (86 percent), gang activity (79.6 percent), trespassing (78 percent) and disorderly conduct (76 percent).

Interim Police Chief William C. Smith, who released the field reports in mid-January, has not responded to a Free Press request for comment on the findings.

Dr. Costen said field reports provide the first inside look at Richmond Police activity. However, the reports, she said, leave an unanswered question: "Whether police are doing their jobs or whether they are using the letter of the law to disproportionately stop and/or surveil particular groups.

"Given some of the vast disparities that were found, this is an important question," she said.

The study noted the field reports recorded 8,700 encounters involving suspicious persons, suspicious activities or suspicious vehicles, although Dr. Costen noted that the data did not include any information on how many different individuals were involved.

Of the 4,605 encounters involving suspicious persons, 3,271 or 71 percent involved officer interactions with African-Americans.

The field reports also show that African-Americans were encountered 2,346 times in field reports on suspicious activities, representing two out of three of the 3,539 encounters included in the field reports.

In the nebulous category of "other activities," officers reported 3,612 encounters with

African-Americans, or 67 percent of the 5,406 field reports.

Another red flag the study found involved a special category documenting police encounters with individuals in the Broad Street corridor in Downtown — 80 percent of the 45 field interview reports involved police contacts with African-Americans.

The Richmond Transparency and Accountability Project coalition spent two years lobbying City Hall and former Police Chief Alfred Durham for release of the information on police contacts with the public, including leading a protest last August outside City Hall.

Before leaving his post in December, Chief Durham, with support from Mayor Levar M. Stoney, agreed to release the field reports and dropped a previous request that the transparency project pay for the cost of generating this first-of-its-kind look at police work.

Chief Smith released the field report data on Jan. 18. In a letter accompanying the data, he wrote, "Field interview cards are completed at the officer's discretion based on the nature of the interaction with the individual and are not necessarily indicative of criminal activity. ... Please note that officers may have completed field interview cards on the same person multiple times."

Despite the shortcomings, Jasmine Leeward, a spokeswoman for the New Virginia Majority, called the release of the field reports "a huge victory considering the black box around law enforcement activity across the country that keeps the public in the dark on who is policed and what that policing looks like."

## Dominion to ask U.S. Supreme Court to hear pipeline appeal

Free Press wire report

Dominion Energy said Tuesday it will ask the U.S. Supreme Court to hear its appeal after a lower court refused to reconsider a ruling tossing out a permit that would have allowed the Atlantic Coast Pipeline to cross two national forests, including parts of the Appalachian Trail.

Lead pipeline developer Dominion said it expects the filing of an appeal in the next 90 days. On Monday, the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected a request for a full court rehearing from Dominion and the U.S. Forest Service.

A three-judge panel ruled in December that the Forest Service lacks the authority to authorize the trail crossing and had "abdicated its responsibility to preserve national forest resources" when it approved the pipeline crossing the George Washington and Monongahela National Forests, as well as a right of way

across the Appalachian Trail.

The 605-mile natural gas pipeline would originate in West Virginia and run through North Carolina and Virginia.

The appellate ruling came in a lawsuit filed by the Southern Environmental Law Center on behalf of the Sierra Club, Virginia Wilderness Committee and other environmental groups. The denial "sends the Atlantic Coast Pipeline back to the drawing board," the law center and Sierra Club said in a joint statement on Monday.

The groups said they believe it is impossible to build the pipeline "without causing massive landslides and threatening the Appalachian Trail and our clean water."

Dominion said it is pursuing "legislative and administrative options" in addition to seeking U.S. Supreme Court review.

"We are confident that the U.S. Departments of Interior and Agriculture have the authority to resolve the Appalachian Trail crossing issue administratively in a manner that satisfies the

Court's stated objection," the company said in its statement.

Dominion said it believes the issue can be resolved in time to allow partial construction work to resume later this year. A company spokesman declined to elaborate on what kind of legislative and administrative remedies Dominion would seek if the nation's highest court declines to hear its appeal.

D.J. Gerken, a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, said the 4th Circuit's ruling in December made it clear that the Forest Service lacks statutory authority to issue pipeline right of ways over the Appalachian Trail on federal land.

Mr. Gerken said Dominion could conceivably ask Congress to give statutory authority to the Forest Service or another federal agency.

"They are trying to avoid going back to the drawing board and doing a responsible job," Mr. Gerken said.



Meet chair  
of SisterFund **B1**



Strategy for dash  
in Monument Ave. 10K  
**A8**

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# Hooray for the Hoos!

The University of Virginia Cavaliers beat Texas Tech in a nail-biting overtime game to clinch the first NCAA title in school's history

By Fred Jeter

The University of Virginia's dream season could turn into dream seasons —plural.

U.Va. won its first NCAA basketball title Monday night at U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, defeating Texas Tech 85-77 in overtime.

The fun hasn't ended. The celebration of the Wahoos championship will continue at 2 p.m. Saturday, April 13, at Scott Stadium in Charlottesville. The free event is open to the public.

Don't be too surprised if the Wahoos are hunting an encore next April at the 2020 Final Four at Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

Coach Tony Bennett's Cavaliers were victorious this season with only one senior, back-up center Jack Salt, playing a significant role.



University of Virginia Cavaliers players celebrate their first NCAA Tournament championship win Monday night with Coach Tony Bennett, third from right, on the podium at U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis. The team's 85-77 victory over Texas Tech came during overtime. It was the first overtime victory in the tournament since 2008 and the eighth in tournament history.

All other regulars are eligible to return next season.

Actually, this championship may have come a year ahead of schedule. It's hard to imagine, but Bennett's Bunch could be even more dominant in another year assuming the team's roster isn't diminished by the NBA draft.

The gifted group of returnees projected for 2019-20 showcases junior Kyle Guy, the Final Four's Most Outstanding Player, and sophomore De'Andre Hunter.

Playing the entire 45 minutes, Guy scored 24 points against Texas Tech while making four 3-pointers.

"This is how it was supposed to end," Guy said in a postgame news conference.

Hunter's career high 27 points in Monday night's final featured a game-tying jumper with 12.9 seconds left to send the

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## School Board mounts effort to contain school construction costs

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

The Richmond School Board is taking a series of steps in seeking to get a handle on the soaring cost of school construction. The ballooning cost is undermining any hope of modernizing city schools for \$800 million over 20 years — the amount the city has promised to provide.

The moves come as five School Board members pushed back against city efforts to blame the board for ignoring the warning signs.

The board is pressing the city to look for ways to save money on three schools already in the construction pipeline and taking a first step to rezoning schools that could lead to some building closures.

On Monday, the School Board also directed Superintendent Jason Kamras to hire an outside expert to evaluate estimates for the three planned schools and two others, a replacement for George Wythe High School and Woodville Elementary School.

The move revives a proposal for an outside estimate of construction costs that was embraced by the board last year, but killed by Mr. Kamras in December as being too expensive.

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## New legal effort launched to remove Agelasto from office

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

Parker C. Agelasto is facing a new legal attack seeking to remove him from his 5th District City Council seat since he moved his residence outside the district.

Just two months after former City Councilman Henry W. "Chuck" Richardson filed a lawsuit in Richmond Circuit Court seeking Mr. Agelasto's ouster, another former City Council member, Sa'ad El-Amin, is seeking a separate removal action in the same court.

Mr. El-Amin filed a request Tuesday for the court to hold a hearing under the state's obscure writ of quo warranto statute



Mr. Agelasto



Mr. El-Amin

to determine if Mr. Agelasto's move means he no longer meets a key qualification to serve — notably that he be qualified to vote in the district he serves.

Mr. Agelasto has publicly acknowledged that he and his family moved last summer

to a home he and his wife purchased in the 4200 block of West Franklin Street in the 1st District, and that he has rented to others his former home on Floyd Avenue in the 5th District.

The statute governing the writ allows the state attorney general, the commonwealth's attorney, a licensed attorney or any "interested party" to file a writ "against any person who intrudes into or usurps any public office."

Under the statute, if the court accepts Mr. El-Amin's claim, it is required to notify Mr. Agelasto and quickly set a trial date

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Mr. Majola

## Rental car scene blows up to jail time for city man

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

Arthur H. Majola went to pick up a rental car his insurance company was providing after his vehicle, which had been damaged in an accident, went into a repair shop.

But he wound up spending 54 days in jail where he became celebrated for engaging in a hunger strike that nearly killed him but forced his release.

A Richmond businessman who operates three online companies, Mr. Majola was arrested and charged July 3, 2018, with making a bomb threat to the staff of an Enterprise Rent-A-Car outlet on West Broad Street in Henrico County.

A short, slender man, he allegedly made

the threat after the staff refused to provide a vehicle when he could not come up with a required \$50 deposit using a credit card — a common policy at major rental car companies. All three of his credit cards were declined.

His case, scheduled for a jury trial in Henrico Circuit Court next Tuesday, April 16, is raising questions about the tough state law under which he is charged.

That law makes it a felony to threaten to bomb or blow up a building. As written, the law makes it a crime to utter the words, even if the words are spoken to blow off steam, the person has no ability to make a bomb and if the threat is knowingly false.

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Regina H. Boone/Richmond Free Press

## Aquatic dreams

Cherish Daily, left, and T'Mya Harrison, right, sixth-grade and eighth-grade students, respectively, at Richmond's Franklin Military Academy, pose with Olympic medalist Simone Manuel Tuesday during Splash Day at the newly renovated pool at the Salvation Army Boys & Girls Club in the East End. Please see more photos, B2.

## Free Press wins 13 awards in annual VPA contest

The Richmond Free Press was recognized with 13 awards, including six first-place awards, at the annual Virginia Press Association competition in writing, photography, news presentation and advertising.

The contest for work published in 2018 was judged by members of the Iowa Press Association. Winners were announced last Saturday at the VPA News & Advertising Awards Banquet in Norfolk.

Jeremy M. Lazarus, Free Press vice president for news enhancement, won first place for large, non-daily newspapers in Virginia for government writing. His winning trio of stories included a look at Mayor Levar M. Stoney's first year in office; results of a city auditor's report showing the Washington NFL team's Richmond training camp failed to live up to economic promises, putting Richmond

taxpayers on the hook for millions of dollars; and City Councilman Parker Agelasto putting his seat on the council in jeopardy by moving outside of the district he represents.

On the story about Mayor Stoney, the judges wrote, "This story really captures not only the personality of the subject, but the central point of the analysis of his time in office. Well written."

Managing Editor Bonnie V. Winston and April A. Coleman, Free Press vice president for production, jointly received a first-place award for headline writing.

"Head and shoulders above the rest of the entries," the judges wrote. "Good use of short, clever headlines to grab attention. 'Smoking' headline ingenious," judges wrote about the headline "Warning: Smoking may cause eviction," on an article detailing

a new smoking ban in Richmond public housing that could make violators subject to eviction.

Ms. Coleman also won a first-place award for front page presentation and design based on the submission of three front pages from 2018. The judges considered overall appearance, use of headlines, selection and use of photos and artwork and the variety and importance of news on the page.

"Well balanced, covers a lot of different stories with the information for the readers," the judges wrote.

Staff photographer Regina H. Boone received first place for breaking news photography. She captured workers cleaning

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# Hooray for the Hoos!

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contest in overtime.

Defensively, Hunter hounded the Red Raiders' standout, Jarrett Culver, throughout the contest, holding him to 5-for-22 shooting. "We were determined to win; we had to," Hunter told the media.

In so doing, Hunter may have improved his stock for the NBA draft later this spring. The 6-foot-7 forward has made no formal decision about leaving school early, although some mock drafts have him listed as a lottery pick.

Both Guy, from Indianapolis, and Hunter, from Philadelphia, made the NCAA Final Four All-Tournament team.

Virginia's triumph came before a live crowd of 72,062 in Minneapolis and national CBS television audience. The Cavaliers finished the season with a 35-3 record, its only losses were twice to Duke University during the regular season and to Florida State University in the Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament.

One of U.Va.'s hardest-fought victories was a 57-49 decision over Virginia Commonwealth University on Dec. 9 at John Paul Jones Arena in Charlottesville. VCU led 43-38 with 6:48 remaining in the game.

Virginia's historical run to its first NCAA title came a year after it made the wrong kind of history. In 2018, U.Va. became the tournament's first No. 1 seed to ever lose to a No. 16 seed — University of Maryland-Baltimore County.

This season has been billed as "The Redemption Tour."

U.Va.'s final three victories to claim the title were all classic thrillers. On March 30, U.Va. forward Mamadi Diakite scored at the buzzer of regulation, following a length-of-court pass, to tie the game against Purdue University. Then Virginia survived in overtime for the Elite Eight victory.

In a nail-biter against Auburn University last Saturday, Guy swished three free throws with under a second left to keep the season afloat.

Virginia reached a stunning 66-6 in the past two seasons and 254-89 overall in Coach Bennett's 10 campaigns in Charlottesville.

## New legal effort to remove Agelasto

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to hear evidence, either with a jury or by a judge alone, and determine if he should be removed from office.

Mr. El-Amin stated Wednesday that he reluctantly filed after all other parties with authority to do so declined to take swift action against Mr. Agelasto, who, "because he is no longer domiciled in the 5th District, is no longer eligible to hold that seat."

In a statement he issued about his suit, Mr. El-Amin said, "We are in a pretty sad place here in Richmond when Mr. Agelasto has with virtual impunity arrogantly ignored the Virginia Code" requiring a local and state elected official to live in the district he or she serves and "City Council, the city attorney and the commonwealth's attorney have turned a blind eye and deaf ear to Mr. Agelasto's perfidy."

Mr. Agelasto did not respond to a request for comment.

His attorney, former Virginia Attorney General Anthony F. Troy, declined immediate comment as his client has yet to be served with court papers.

Commonwealth's Attorney Michael N. Herring confirmed that he met last month with Mr. El-Amin and had considered filing the same action after reviewing Mr. El-Amin's legal research.

Mr. Herring, though, rejected Mr. El-

Amin's claim that he ignored the matter.

Instead, Mr. Herring said he made a settlement offer to Mr. Agelasto and his attorney that would avoid the mandatory trial that the writ process requires.

In an email to the Free Press, Mr. Herring spelled out the terms: "If Mr. Agelasto announces his intent to resign by year's end (rather than trying to stay on through the end of his term in 2020 as he previously announced), I will not file an action seeking a declaration that he has vacated his office.

"I believe his announcement would allow for an orderly campaign process this fall to choose his successor," Mr. Herring stated.

"While I disagree with many of Mr. Agelasto's policy positions, I think he has and continues to represent the 5th district well. Litigation during the budget season would be distracting and disruptive. I am taking this position as an exercise of my discretion. For what it's worth, I also appreciate and respect Mr. El-Amin's stance."

Mr. El-Amin said he was told that Mr. Agelasto had agreed to the settlement, but Mr. Herring did not confirm that. Mr. Agelasto has not made an announcement about stepping down from City Council. He also is fighting the Richardson suit, which seeks a declaratory judgment from the court that Mr. Agelasto has vacated his seat.

In that suit, Mr. Troy asked the court to dismiss the case.

Mr. El-Amin stated that he started his process in February when he asked council members to address the matter. He said he was rebuffed when City Attorney Allen L. Jackson advised City Council that the issue of a council member's residency was outside the scope of council's authority and that the members should leave it to a judge or jury to decide, if it came to that.

Mr. El-Amin stated that he halted his plans to file the writ in order to meet with the commonwealth's attorney. He said he decided to proceed after learning last Friday of Mr. Herring's decision not to file the writ.

"I felt that I had no choice but to file the challenge," he wrote.

"What concerns me more than anything else is that if nothing is done about Mr. Agelasto, this will give other politicians the green light to move out of their districts to a more favorable district. And if they are challenged, they can point out the fact that Mr. Agelasto did it," he continued.

"What is at stake here is the "one person-one vote" principle," he stated. Mr. Agelasto's move means the 1st District now has two members on City Council, while the 5th District has none, he stated.

"It is for these reasons that I cannot sit back and let this happen without something being said and done," Mr. El-Amin stated.

## UVA championship

The state of Virginia is no stranger to NCAA basketball title winners.

The University of Virginia claimed its first NCAA Division I men's crown Monday night in Minneapolis.

Before that, the Old Dominion University women won the 1985 NCAA Division I title.

In NCAA Division II men's hoops, Roanoke College won in 1972, Old Dominion University in 1975 and Virginia Union University in 1980, 1992 and 2005.

The VUU Lady Panthers won the NCAA Division II title in 1983 and Hampton University's women took top Division II honors in 1988.

Also Virginia Wesleyan University won the NCAA Division III men's championship in 2007.

In addition to Guy and Hunter, other key starters for the Wahoos are juniors Ty Jerome and Diakite and freshman Kihei Clark.

Top reserves are sophomore Jay Huff and junior Braxton Key, who had six points and 10 rebounds against Texas Tech off the bench.

The 35 wins this season stand as a school record. And while U.Va. is renowned for its conservative, grind-it-out style, the 85 points was the most by a NCAA champion since 2009, when the University of North Carolina topped Michigan State University 89-72.

Among Virginia's unsung stars is the Cavaliers' Associate Head Coach Jason Williford from Richmond.

Williford is in his 10th year on the Virginia staff after previous assistant coaching gigs at American University and Boston University.

Williford was an All-Metro player at Richmond's John Marshall High School before signing as a student with the Cavaliers. He was joined on the 1990 All-Metro team by Kendrick Warren and Thomas Meredith of Thomas Jefferson High School, Ted Berry of Huguenot High School and Yuri Barnes of Manchester High

School in Chesterfield County.

Coincidentally, both Williford and Barnes went on to star for U.Va.

Williford later played professionally in Iceland and Korea before returning to Richmond and serving as assistant coach at John Marshall in 1999 and 2000.

Williford is highly respected in the coaching ranks. His name frequently pops up when there are coaching vacancies.

Coach Bennett becomes part of just the second father-son duo to coach in the NCAA Final Four. His dad, Dick Bennett, led the University of Wisconsin to the Final Four in 2000.

The other father-son coaches reaching the Final Four were John Thompson Jr. and John Thompson III, both with Georgetown University.

Coach Bennett's Wahoos won the best-in-the-land honors despite having no substantial senior leaders, and despite an absence of homegrown talent.

Virginia's only in-state player is deep-reserve freshman Jayden Nixon. And while Nixon grew up in Charlottesville, he played high school ball in Connecticut.

This was U.Va.'s third trip to the Final Four. The Cavaliers made it in 1981 with Ralph Sampson leading the charge and again in 1984 when Olden Polynice was the NBA-bound center.

While Virginia could lose Hunter, and possibly even Guy, to the NBA draft, there is more talent headed to John Paul Jones Arena.

U.Va.'s incoming freshmen next season include 6-foot-11 Kadin Shedrick from Holly Springs, N.C., and 6-foot-3 Casey Morsell from St. John's College High School in Washington. Both are ranked among the top 100 players in the nation by most scouting services.



Hooray for the Wahoos!

Scores on the Virginia Cavalier's path to the NCAA Tournament title:

- Virginia 71, Gardner-Webb 56
- Virginia 63, Oklahoma 51
- Virginia 53, Oregon 49
- Virginia 80, Purdue 75 (OT)
- Virginia 63, Auburn 62
- Virginia 85, Texas Tech 77 (OT)

## School Board mounts effort to contain costs

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"We want to make sure that there's no discrepancy in construction costs going forward," School Board Chair Dawn C. Page said as the board voted 9-0 Monday night to hire an independent cost evaluator. "We cannot delay the process any longer. We want the right numbers."

The move came after Darrin Simmons Jr., the school system's chief operating officer, confirmed to the board that the current estimated cost for the three schools is \$140 million. That total, however, has been reduced by \$2.8 million because of a reduction in the amount to be paid to the schools' designer, RRMM Architects of Chesapeake.

Last December, Mr. Kamras unilaterally rejected a city-backed proposal to have the city and RPS jointly pay for a cost evaluation based on internal findings that the original estimates for the three schools were not matching up with projected costs, according to the School Board's minutes.

The board expressed surprise last month after the Free Press reported the cost of the three new schools — George Mason and Greene elementary school replacements and a replacement for Elkhart-Thompson Middle — had jumped by \$30 million from the original 2017 estimate of \$110 million.

The report of ballooning cost was considered a surprise even though the information had been shared with Mayor Levar M. Stoney, six members of the School Board and four members of City Council at a Feb. 6 joint meeting of the Education Compact. The higher figures also had been known to Mr. Kamras and top city officials, including the mayor's chief of staff, as long ago as September, according to a city statement.

During a School Board discussion Monday night that included Robert Stone, the city's interim chief capital projects manager, 4th District School Board member Jonathan Young pressed for recommendations to save money on the construction of the three schools before final contracts are awarded.

According to Mr. Young, Mr. Stone promised to return by mid-May with recommendations on ways to shave costs, called value engineering. Mr. Young said Mr. Stone estimated the proposals might lead to savings of \$2 million per building.

The board also approved creation of a rezoning commission that is to include board members and citizens to work with a consultant and come up with a series of plans for revamped attendance zones that would include the three new schools.

In a separate move, the board created a three-member committee of Mr. Young, Elizabeth Doerr, 1st District, and Cheryl Burke, 7th District, to work with the superintendent on a plan to return to the city property that could be sold to raise money.

Mr. Young said he expects the committee to consider selling the closed Albert V. Norrell Annex Building and the little-used Arthur Ashe Jr. Athletic Center.

He said he also would propose that RPS sell the aging Technical Center campus on North Side, with career and technical programs either shifted to high schools or relocated to a South Side building that Altria has donated to the school system.

## Rental car scene blows up to jail time

Continued from A1

The offense, a Class 5 felony for an adult, is punishable by up to 10 years in prison. It is a misdemeanor for a juvenile.

Whether Mr. Majola even made such a threat is uncertain. Cameras inside the rental car office recorded his interaction with the staff and show him calmly talking with the staff and leaving quietly. There is no audio, but the transaction clearly looks ordinary.

Henrico Commonwealth's Attorney Shannon L. Taylor, who authorized the case, has acknowledged that the recording provides no proof of the threat.

She told the Free Press that the tape shows that neither of the two rental car staff members, both Caucasian, who waited on Mr. Majola appear to feel threatened. Neither recoiled in obvious concern or offered any body language that indicated they felt like they were in jeopardy.

They will be the main witnesses against Mr. Majola in their insistence he issued a bomb threat.

Mr. Majola is adamant the charge is bogus and has turned his life upside down.

"I didn't make a bomb threat," Mr. Majola insisted in an interview with the Free Press. "When I talked about blowing up Enterprise and the insurance company, I meant I was going to sue them and make them pay for putting me through this. I have a little bit of experience with courts. I don't know anything about explosives. I'm not a violent man, and my record shows that. It's just a ridiculous charge."

Whether such testimony will be enough to clear him remains to be seen. Based on the strict language of the law, Ms. Taylor continues to seek a conviction.

However, in other types of crimes, the state Supreme Court has modified tough language in the state criminal code to reflect commonsense experience.

For example, the state's highest court has long ruled that the use of curse words and foul language is a crime only if the "cursing and abusing" are "fighting words" intended to provoke a fight. Simply uttering foul words is not enough to justify a charge, the court has ruled.

The high court also has ruled that the misdemeanor crime of assault requires a showing of an intent to batter, meaning that the person accused of assault must be shown to intend to hit the person allegedly assaulted.

Mr. Majola has pleaded not guilty and hopes he will not be convicted and slapped with a felony label or a long prison term. Already, he has proven to be a tough customer for jailers.

After his arrest and placement in jail without bond, he immediately began a hunger strike. He refused to eat the Henrico Jail food and mostly avoided water. Within weeks, his health began

deteriorating, resulting in Henrico Sheriff Michael Wade sending him to the hospital to recuperate. Mr. Majola ate in the hospital and was returned to jail, where he resumed his hunger strike.

Mr. Majola said he was sent repeatedly to the hospital to prevent his death.

By September, Sheriff Wade called Ms. Taylor for help, telling her that the county had spent \$45,000 on Mr. Majola's care at the jail and hospital. That was the first time she heard about the case.

Ms. Taylor said her office no longer seeks cash bail, leaving it to judges to decide whether any should be imposed. She said she was surprised that Mr. Majola's public defender had not pushed for bail hearings to have his release reviewed and said she reached out to make that happen.

His attorney, Adam Jurach, could not be reached for comment.

However, Ms. Taylor initially dropped the case when it came up in Henrico General District Court on Sept. 27, ensuring Mr. Majola could go home.

Ms. Taylor, however, then brought the case to the grand jury, which indicted him on the same charge of making a bomb threat.

He was re-arrested Dec. 5. But this time, Ms. Taylor agreed that Mr. Majola could remain free on a personal recognizance bond so he didn't spend more time in jail before trial. He was freed on his promise to return to court for pretrial hearings and the trial. Before the bond was issued, he threatened to start a new hunger strike if he were to be returned to jail.

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## Free Press wins 13 VPA awards

Continued from A1

red spray paint and graffiti from the statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee on Monument Avenue.

The judges wrote, "Local impact of national story. This is a dramatic photo and does a good job encapsulating a larger story in one image."

Staff photographer **Sandra Sellars** and Free Press freelance photographers **Ava Reaves** and **Clement Britt** won first place in the **picture story or essay** category for a collection of photos from the January 2018 inauguration of Gov. Ralph S. Northam, Lt. Gov. Justin E. Fairfax and Attorney General Mark R. Herring.

"So much to look at," the judges wrote.

"Every image captures a moment, not just a scene. Wonderful mix of official moments and impromptu joy. I especially liked that inaugural guests and performers were shot in context, emphasizing their presence at this specific event."

And Free Press freelance photographer **James Haskins** won first place in the **sports news photo** category for his photograph of a dog going airborne over a large pool to catch a toy as hundreds of spectators watch at Riverrock 2018.

"Head and shoulders above the field," the judges wrote. "This is a great shot!"

Second place honors went to:

- Ms. Sellars for picture story or essay and general news photography; and
- Mr. Lazarus for government writing.

Third-place awards went to:

- Mr. Lazarus and Free Press writer Ronald E. Carrington for general news writing;
- Ms. Winston for editorial writing;
- Ms. Sellars for sports feature photography; and

- Ms. Coleman, Ms. Reaves and Free Press freelance writer Samantha Willis for combination picture and story.

The Chesterfield Observer won the Sweepstakes Award in the large, non-daily newspaper category, while Richmond Magazine won the 2018 Award for Journalistic Integrity and Community Service for a commemorative issue dedicated to the life of the late tennis great and humanitarian Arthur Ashe Jr., a Richmond native.



**Graduation celebrations** B2



**Meet honorary chair of 'Jazz InsideOut' annual benefit** B1

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# Richmond Free Press

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## Words matter

**Renter receives settlement from local landlord following racist, vulgar abuse and discrimination**

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

Winter Whittaker knew what to do when the wealthy white real estate owner called her “a dumb a\*\* n\*\*\*\*r” and “a black b\*\*h” after she repeatedly and fruitlessly asked him to fix the leaking roof and other serious problems with the Meadowbridge Road home she rented from him on North Side.

The New Jersey transplant recorded the bigoted rants.

And when landlord H. Dean Parsons dared the 47-year-old car dealership clerk and mother of two to sue him for failing to carry out his responsibilities, she bravely took him on.

Armed with the recordings containing his hideous comments, she hired an attorney and prepared to sue him for \$5 million for housing discrimination and other violations of Virginia’s landlord-tenant laws, including his failure to return most of her security deposit after she moved out when the lease ended.

That left Mr. Parsons with one apparent choice — to stroke a big check before Ms. Whittaker took her case to a judge and jury in Richmond with help from attorney Helen Hardiman, a Richmond-based housing discrimination specialist, and Daniel P. Watkins of Clare Locke LLP in Alexandria, who joined the suit as lead counsel for Ms. Whittaker without charge.

The size of the check is unknown because of an agreement

Please turn to A4



Ms. Whittaker

### Speaking through art



Regina H. Boone/Richmond Free Press

John Marshall High School students Denaisja Jones, 16, left, and Nikisha Flemming, 15, put finishing touches on a 13-week mural project at the North Side school titled, “The Voices of John Marshall.” The students participate in ART180’s after-school community program, with the mural designed and created by 15 students with the co-leadership of local artist-volunteers Austin “Auz” Miles and Justice Dwight. It is one of 16 projects ART180 has throughout the city.

### City Council approves 2019-20 spending plan, but with flaws

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

“We made it,” City Council President Cynthia I. Newbille said after the council approved the 2019-20 budget Monday night without discussion.

There was no comment on the shaky nature of a spending plan that relies on one-time revenues, a raid on the city’s pension fund and the city’s first ever cigarette tax to cover expenses, and also depends on rising property values amid warnings from some Wall Street mavens about a coming recession.

Overall, the \$746.2 million spending plan that City Council approved increases city outlays by nearly 4 percent over the current budget. The budget package means city spending will amount to \$3,272 for each the 228,000 estimated residents, or about \$120 more per person in the fiscal year that begins July 1.

As expected, the approved budget will deliver big wins for school staff and city workers in the form of the largest pay increases in years, including 5 percent for teachers and other staff with help from the state, and 3 percent for city employees, except for police and firefighters whose pay was boosted previously.

Richmond Public Schools also garnered the nearly \$18 million it had sought to pay

Please turn to A4



The deadline to register to vote in Virginia’s June 11 primary elections is Monday, May 20.

Republican or Democratic primaries for candidates vying for the House of Delegates, the state Senate and a number of local offices are being held in 73 localities, including in the Richmond area.

Area voters will go to the polls on Tuesday, June 11, to cast ballots in primaries for the Henrico County Board of Supervisors, the Henrico sheriff, the Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors, the Hanover County Board of Supervisors and for the 62nd District in the House of Delegates, and state Senate candidates in the 10th, 11th, 12th and 16th districts that include jurisdictions stretching from Richmond to Petersburg.

If there is a Democratic and a Republican primary in your district, voters will be asked to choose which primary they would like to participate in. Virginia law also requires voters to show an acceptable photo ID in order to vote in person. That includes a Virginia driver’s license, a U.S. passport, a student photo ID issued by a college or university in Virginia, an employer-issued photo ID or a photo ID issued by the Virginia DMV.

To find out if there is a primary election in your district, contact your local voter registrar’s office or go to [www.elections.virginia.gov](http://www.elections.virginia.gov).

Voters also have until 5 p.m. Monday, May 20, to update their voter registration information in order to vote in the primary.

Registration and updating information can be done online at [vote.virginia.gov](http://vote.virginia.gov).

### Richmond food justice corridor gets boost with \$250,000 grant

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

Arthur L. Burton has spent more than three years organizing a food-based approach to uplift the health and economic prospects of poorer sections of Richmond, particularly in and around public housing communities.

After bringing together volunteers to create four community gardens, he has spent the past 17 months lobbying state officials to back the initiative to make urban agriculture a centerpiece of enabling residents to improve their well-being and become more self-sufficient.

The Kinfolk Community nonprofit he founded and leads is being strengthened with a \$250,000 grant from the Virginia Cooperative Extension at Virginia Tech. Mr. Burton hopes this is the first step to increased state and community support.

The initial grant is to enable Kinfolk Community, and the umbrella Community Unity in Action coalition of public and private partners, to continue developing a food justice corridor of vegetable gardens in the East End and near Downtown and to undertake other initiatives in the coming months.

If all goes well, Mr. Burton said the salad greens, cucumbers and other items now growing in the gardens will be sold to a Richmond school kitchen for summer school meals or to a Church Hill store. Residents also may learn to can and sell the fresh items to boost their incomes.

He said the coalition, which also includes the Richmond City Health District and insurance giant Anthem, is planning to host cooking demonstrations to help families create healthier meals from the fresh

Please turn to A4



Jeremy M. Lazarus/Richmond Free Press

Arthur L. Burton checks the fresh broccoli growing at the Willis Road garden, one of four gardens established by the Community Unity in Action coalition he leads to improve and raise overall prospects of low-income Richmond area residents.

### RRHA rolls back plan for Dove Court replacement units

By Jeremy M. Lazarus



James Haskins/Richmond Free Press

This 2013 photo shows a portion of the newly opened Highland Grove mixed-income apartment community in Highland Park that replaced the 60 units of public housing in what previously was known as Dove Court. The community that nestles Dove and 1st streets also replaced Carrington Gardens, a decaying privately owned apartment complex.

The Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority may be pulling back from its promise of providing a replacement unit for each public housing unit it tears down.

At least that is the case in the continuing development of the Highland Grove community in North Side, a redevelopment that was once cited as a model for the authority’s future communities when it was begun 12 years ago.

Please turn to A4

# Renter receives settlement from local landlord following racist, vulgar abuse and discrimination

Continued from A1

between Ms. Whittaker, her attorneys and Mr. Parson and his attorney, Thomas M. Wolf of LeClairRyan.

But it was enough for Ms. Hardiman and Mr. Watkins to send news releases to the media announcing “an important settlement” by Mr. Parsons and his family real estate business, Intermont LLC.

The settlement apparently did not bar Ms. Whittaker and her attorneys from sending to the media copies of the unfiled lawsuit detailing the nightmarish conditions that Mr. Parsons created for Ms. Whittaker and other black women tenants living in the allegedly deteriorating properties owned by Mr. Parsons and his family company.

That information exposed the largely hidden, racist side of the prosperous Mr. Parsons and undercut a previous media portrayal of him and Intermont as a real estate success story through the ownership of 375 rental homes and apartments, largely in majority African-American neighborhoods.

Instead, Ms. Whittaker’s video and audio recordings, as well as other documented complaints assembled by her attorneys, show that Mr. Parsons created his fortune by creating pain for tenants by allowing Intermont’s property holdings to deteriorate and then verbally browbeating those who complained, bombarding them with racist and vulgar demands that they move out.

A prime example is a recorded exchange between Mr. Parsons and Ms. Whittaker when she told him she would sue.

“I don’t give a good godda\*\*. You’re just another dumb a\*\* n\*\*\*\*r I got to go to court with, and I go to court every damn day with them,” Mr. Parsons is heard saying on the recordings. “It ain’t no big damn deal to me.”

In another recorded exchange, Mr. Parsons tells Ms. Whittaker, “I hate renting to single black b\*\*\*\*es. Just get the f\*\*\* out of my house.”

In addition to Ms. Whittaker, the legal team had statements from three other renters who detailed the same pattern of racist abuse from Mr. Parsons when he was asked to repair broken toilets, water leaks and broken windows.

Considered an extreme example, Mr. Parsons is just one of many owners who are taking advantage of rising rents to offer decaying properties to people desperate to find something affordable. Hundreds of renters have faced deplorable conditions and had their lives disrupted after city inspectors, responding to complaints, ended up condemning apartments when repairs were not made.

The Flats at Ginter Park, Hawthorne Hall, Somerset Glen and Ashton Square are among the complexes that were, at one point, condemned by the city Department of Planning and Review’s Property Maintenance and Code Enforcement Division as unfit for human habitation, forcing tenants to move.

In the case of the Flats at Ginter Park and Hawthorne Hall, a Richmond judge last year forced the sale of the properties after the owners refused to take any action to repair a litany of problems, including a lack of heat and hot water. New owners are investing in renovations, and it is unclear whether those complexes and the others are now habitable.

Mr. Parsons appears to have avoided such city enforcement actions. While efforts to obtain records on city inspections of Intermont properties were not immediately successful, Richmond court records showed no summonses for Mr. Parsons or his company for failing to make repairs.

Ms. Hardiman said fair housing watchdog Housing Opportunities Made Equal, which has a track record of legally going after property owners who discriminate, was not involved in Ms. Whittaker’s case.

Heather M. Crislip, president and chief executive officer of HOME, would neither confirm nor deny that Mr. Parsons has ever drawn the organization’s attention. In response to a Free Press query, she stated that HOME does not comment on its investigations, except when there is a positive outcome, and sometimes not even then.

“We were outraged” by a published report on the Whittaker case and about “such shameful discriminatory statements,” she stated.

She added that HOME welcomes information and complaints involving housing discrimination so they can be investigated.

# City Council approves 2019-20 spending plan, but with flaws

Continued from A1

for teacher salary increases and to cover the second year of Superintendent Jason Kamras’ turnaround plan. RPS also won budget support for borrowing \$19 million to give school maintenance a significant one-time boost.

Other beneficiaries include bus riders, with GRTC receiving \$800,000 extra to improve service to a new Church Hill grocery store and extend service hours to areas of South Side.

The council also agreed to borrow \$15 million to beef up street paving — a one-time shot in the arm for the city Department of Public Works to address decaying streets — and approved a proposal to increase a city lending program aimed at assisting developers to create less costly housing from \$2 million to \$2.9 million.

The biggest losers are smokers, and possibly employees of the convenience stores that rely on the sales of cigarettes. City Council is counting on raising \$3 million from adding a 50-cent city tax to the price of a pack of cigarettes, with \$600,000 to be sent to the Richmond City Health District to pay for programs to help smokers quit.

Store owners warned City Council that customers will bypass them to buy smokes, gas and other products in nearby stores in Henrico and Chesterfield counties that do not have a local tax. The owners’ prediction: Sales and sales tax collections for the city would fall and the drop would force layoffs of 100 or more store clerks.

“This is an investment in the city’s future,” Mayor Levar M. Stoney said Tuesday in cel-

ebrating approval of most of his priorities, despite having the council reject his proposal for a 9-cent hike in the property tax rate, the city’s most significant form of tax revenue.

The council avoided a tax increase, not by shrinking the government, but by gaining recognition for a projected one-time increase in property taxes of about \$6.5 million, based on a revised estimate of real estate tax values from City Assessor Richie N. McKeithen.

Another \$3 million came from approving 1st District Councilman Andreas Addison’s idea of offering incentives to get some of the 200 city workers who are eligible for retirement to leave so they could be replaced by newer, lower-paid workers.

The only problem is the impact that proposal will have on the city’s struggling pension plan.

In 2014, City Council approved a similar, two-year plan with the goal of generating \$6 million in salary savings. The plan generated only about \$3.5 million over the two years after about 132 employees retired, but it cost the city’s pension plan \$15 million, according to Leo Griffin, executive director of the Richmond Retirement System.

The city is spending about \$790,000 a year to repay that cost, a bill that will take 20 years to pay off, he said.

Mr. Griffin said the RRS, which has assets



Mayor Stoney



Dr. Newbille

of about \$744 million, was not asked to evaluate the cost of the new plan, but he said he expects the assets of the system will take another hit with the latest program.

The new program comes at a time when the system is paring its expectations for investment returns, Mr. Griffin said, and also changing its mortality projections to reflect that retirees are living longer.

In a briefing for City Council on May 6, Mr. Griffin indicated the change is expected to drop the funded status of the system’s major benefit program from 65 percent to 60 percent, requiring the city to pay more in support each year as RRS seeks to reach a healthy level of funding, which is regarded as 80 percent to 90 percent.

That is bad news for city retirees, who have not received a cost of living increase in at least a decade, and who have previously been told that such a COLA would depend on the system reaching at least an 80 percent funded status.

Meanwhile, the council avoided taking steps to deal with the huge deferred maintenance issue the city faces.

For example, the council followed Mayor Stoney’s lead and provided \$19 million for replacing roofs, boilers and air conditioning systems and dealing with other problems in the city’s aging schools.

But that was just for the 2019-20 school year, and the amount is far short of the \$95 million

the School Board projected is needed. Through 2024, the mayor proposed and council approved spending \$4 million in the 2020-21 budget year for maintenance, \$3 million in the 2021-22 budget year, \$2.5 million in the 2022-23 budget year and nothing in the 2023-24 budget year.

In addition, as the mayor promised, he outlined a plan to spend an additional \$650 million on new school construction through 2040, but that plan does not include money for maintenance of school buildings.

The street paving program follows a similar pattern. Bobby Vincent, director of the Public Works Department, has outlined a need for a minimum of \$110 million to resurface the city’s streets and a need for \$225 million to overhaul the streets’ fabric.

Council endorsed the mayor’s plan to provide \$15 million in the 2019-20 fiscal year and also endorsed the mayor’s plan to cut that spending in each of the following four budget years to about \$5 million a year.

And that doesn’t count a host of other capital improvement projects that are unfunded. For example, Fire Chief Melvin Carter hoped to get a start on planning to replace outdated fire stations, only to see most of the money stripped away so that the council could use it to balance the 2019-20 budget.

Councilman Michael J. Jones, 9th District, acknowledged as he reviewed council’s budget that “once again, we’ve kicked the can down the road” when it comes to dealing with maintenance and capital improvements. In his view, the council needs to come to grips with that problem.

# RRHA rolls back plan for Dove Court replacement units

Continued from A1

In a decision that could set a precedent, RRHA has decided not to replace 22 of the 60 public housing units in Dove Court that were bulldozed in 2008 at Dove and 1st streets to make way for a mixed-income community called Highland Grove.

Instead of units for public housing, RRHA plans to turn those 22 units into affordable housing for people with annual incomes four to six times the average \$10,000 a year income of public housing residents. The new homes would start at \$185,000, officials said.

Responding to a Free Press query, Damon E. Duncan, RRHA’s chief executive officer, stated, “I cannot speak” about any promises about one-for-one replacement of public housing units made before his arrival in March.

However, he stated that “RRHA is committed to ensuring that all eligible residents affected by redevelopment continue to have HUD assistance at either the Dove site or any other

RRHA developments.”

City Councilwoman Ellen F. Robertson, the council’s champion for public housing who has been involved with redevelopment planning for this section of the 6th District she represents, did not comment on the loss of the public housing units.

Built and managed by private developer Laurel Street, the Highland Grove community currently is comprised of 128 apartment units, including at least 30 units for which RRHA pays the rent for families who qualify for public housing and meet the landlord’s requirements.

RRHA also subsidizes rents in eight other units in Highland Grove or in other communities as replacements for Dove Court.

That leaves the 22 units. Those units will no longer exist, according to RRHA. Instead, they are being rolled into a new subdivision being planned for the Highland Grove community and offered to households making \$46,000 to \$65,000 a year.

New single-family homes have long been part of the plan for

Highland Grove’s development, although it has taken far longer than expected to get the single-family homes underway after the completion of the apartments in 2013.

RRHA is now engaged in winning city approvals for the subdivision that ultimately could have 139 to 155 new attached and detached homes.

If all goes well, RRHA could begin hiring contractors by early next year to start installing streets and alleys and laying concrete pads for the first 33 homes to be built along Dove Street on land once occupied by the Virginia National Guard headquarters and armory that has been demolished.

Sales of homes would dictate the future pace of the proposed development that would be on three sides of Overby-Sheppard Elementary School.

RRHA plans to use \$3.5 million left from a failed effort to build a replacement for Overby-Sheppard Elementary School to begin the work as it also seeks one or more housing developers to undertake the single-family home portion of Highland Grove.

# Richmond food justice corridor gets boost with \$250,000 grant

Continued from A1

produce.

“This has been a long road,” Mr. Burton said. “But finally, we have begun to make real progress.”

The produce will come from gardens Kinfolk Community and the nonprofit partners oversee, including a fledgling garden that opened last year in Gilpin Court through efforts of the late Lillie Estes and others. Another garden is underway on the grounds of Faith Community Baptist Church in Church Hill, Mr. Burton said.

Volunteers from groups such as Fit4Kids, the Richmond Food Justice Alliance and Faith Leaders Moving Forward as well as Richmond Public Schools planted a garden earlier this spring in the courtyard at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, he said, that is seen as a supplier to the school’s cafeteria.

Mr. Burton also has created the largest garden on nearly an acre of family property off Willis Road in Chesterfield County.

A longtime community organizer, Mr. Burton has sought to boost community self-sufficiency. He began more than six years ago in the Mosby Court community, where with support from a

\$75,000 city grant, he launched a youth conservation corps and worked with residents to grow gardens beside their apartments. He also started a job search operation in Mosby Court that helped dozens of people secure work.

After the grant ran out and funding dried up for the conservation corps, Mr. Burton started working on the food-based approach to community uplift with nonprofit and government agencies.

He has refused to be discouraged at the slow pace of development, preferring to focus on the positive. “We need to look for the opportunities we have, rather than worrying about what we don’t have.”

He sees many other initiatives lacking a strong connection with the low-income residents such efforts are supposed to help.

Mr. Burton is hopeful the supportive connections he has made with Virginia Tech, the Virginia Department of Education and other agencies will result in additional financial support for an urban agricultural model he believes can ultimately change lives.

“All of us who are involved hope the state’s investment will cause the city to be more serious” about supporting the work, he said.



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