

STUDIO 54

Finding His Voice

Radio host John Reid has never had a problem expressing himself. But now he's more open than ever.

BY JASON ROOP



ON HIS TIME

HOW BROADCASTER JOHN REID HAS NAVIGATED A LIFE OF UPS, DOWNS AND WHAT HE CALLS AN “AWKWARD EXISTENCE” THAT INFORMS A NEW CAREER MILESTONE.

A CLOCK RUNS MOST OF JOHN REID'S LIFE.

He's on the road this morning by 1:45, bound for Williamsburg. He arrives by 3 to pick up his credentials, pass through security, arrange his makeshift studio on a table outdoors and be on the air by 5:30, set to talk for the next four and a half hours.

When Reid left his job 15 years ago as morning co-anchor at WRIC-TV 8 in Richmond, he swore he'd never again work the sunrise shift.

But here he is. Back to broadcasting. Back home.

And the sun won't rise till 6:09 a.m.

In a few hours, President Donald Trump will step into an air-conditioned tent not far from Reid, on the back lawn of the Jamestown Settlement — the site of America's first permanent English colony and the destination of a gazillion school field trips.

It's July 30 — 400 years to the day since colonists convened the first House of Burgesses, the beginning of representative democracy in America. Today's ceremonies will kick off related educational and cultural programs across Virginia.

With Trump's presence, anything could happen.

Reid brought his show here because he knows this event will resonate with his audience on Newsradio 1140 WRVA. The station is 94 years old, with the biggest

signal reach and highest ratings of any Richmond news and talk station.

It also airs the most politically conservative programming. Voices later in the day include the nationally syndicated Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, with Richmond-based Jeff Katz as host of the weekday drive-time call-in show.

Reid's program mix, with producer Trey Yeatts, is less politically charged. It includes his conservative and libertarian perspectives alongside interviews with guests from across the spectrum. From 5:30-10 a.m., it hits on news, business reports, entertainment updates, weather, traffic and sports.

“The last thing I want it to be is boring,” Reid says.

Since broadcasting atop the Eiffel Tower at Kings Dominion a year ago, Reid has worked to get the show out of the studio, off Basie Road in Henrico County. Most Fridays, he takes it to sites of interest across Richmond and elsewhere for “Reid on the Road,” and for occasions such as today.

At the Jamestown Settlement, faint shouts from protesters are audible in the distance. A bomb-sniffing dog checks camera equipment. In front of Reid's broadcast setup, dignitaries and guests move through a line toward a metal detector.

Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam speaks — “pretty high on the pandering scale,” Reid remarks on air — and slips away before the president is scheduled to



After a career as morning anchor at WRIC-TV 8 in Richmond, Reid set off for a career in political communications and public relations. But he returned to town in December 2017 to become morning host on Newsradio 1140 WRVA, heard on 1140 AM and 96.1 FM.



By the time the American Evolution ceremonies end at Jamestown Settlement on July 30, Reid has been up for 12 hours. He'll attend another event before heading back to Richmond

arrive. Most Democratic legislators aren't in attendance.

Since Reid signed on this morning, Trump has tweeted about terrorism, infrastructure, immigration law loopholes, the left's stance on open borders, the weakness of the Chinese economy and the "really crashed" ratings of "Morning Joe & Psycho."

Then at 9:55 a.m. comes a tweet that he's on his way to Jamestown.

"Word is the Democrats will make it as uncomfortable as possible," Trump writes, "but that's ok because today is not about them!"

These are heady times for public discourse — and by extension, the role of talk radio.

The president talks like no president in history. Encountering an opposing view seems to come with shorter fuses and fiercer tribe loyalty. Social media makes it easy to hold close those who agree. You can cultivate friends and timelines that reflect your worldview. There's little persuading, more perturbation and less patience with

the other side.

This is the environment in which Reid enters the world of talk radio, where discourse has been both revered and reviled.

People continue to tune in, making news and talk the No. 1 radio format, Nielsen reports. They're a big part of a broad audience. Nearly 90 percent of Americans ages 12 and older listen to the radio in a given week, according to a state of the media report released by the Pew Research Center in July.

There's an intimacy to radio that lends itself to community ties, relevant information and strong connections. It's also blamed for attention-grabbing division, bombastic personalities and overheated hype for the sake of ratings.

Is healthy debate still possible?

Can we speak with each other and really listen?

Can we disagree and come out the better for it?

Reid says yes.

On air, he says, his personality as a consensus builder helps. He aims to show respect, give room to guests with opposing views and work to understand the

esty," says one of Reid's bosses, Gregg Henson, program director for Entercom Richmond's WRVA and its sports radio station, WRNL the Fan, which airs on 910 AM and 106.1 FM.

"John is a Southern gentleman," Henson says. "He'll listen, he'll hear you out. You don't ever hear him get upset on the air, but he's very pointed in his comments."

Friends and colleagues say Reid simply is nice — but not Mr. Rogers. He pushes buttons and speaks his mind, and at 6-foot-3 can wield a commanding presence. But he walks the line between opinionated and genial.

Reid, 48, attributes that to an "awkward existence" he's lived between groups that can be socially, politically, diametrically opposed.

"Half my life I'm around liberal, pro-gay people who can't believe that they're talking to a conservative Republican," Reid says. "And then the other half, I'm around very conservative people, some of whom never thought that they would engage with an openly gay guy."

Depending on the situation, Reid can find himself coming out twice. As gay, as a Republican. The process continues to be challenging, he says. But he's able to leverage it as strength in communication, both off and on the air.

"I try to be respectful of both groups," he says. "And I try to unify people if I can. It's not going to happen every time. But when you've lived most of your adult life under those circumstances, one revelation away from people rejecting you — and sometimes very harshly — you learn to navigate."

other sides. He also wants to be the same person you'd meet off the air.

That's what it takes to succeed in this job — "complete and total hon-



Production assistant Matthew Leibowitz listens in while Reid interviews Delegate John McGuire during the on-location broadcast at Jamestown Settlement.



Reid's office at WRVA is filled with memorabilia from travels to 85 countries and political campaign trinkets. Framed photos include a zero-gravity NASA experience Reid took, a family picture at his sister's wedding, he and his partner, Alonzo, and a signed photo from President Trump.

Before he graduated from high school, Reid was using his voice to take him places — like the Statue of Liberty.

He grew up in Tuckahoe Village with his older sister, Lisa, and their parents, Jack and Judi. His dad, who later served in the House of Delegates from 1990-2008, was the principal at Robious Middle School and eventually worked with Henrico school superintendents. His mom took a variety of jobs that allowed her to be home with her children by 3:30 in the afternoon.

Reid attended Carver Elementary in Henrico and Byrd Middle, now Quiocassin. Then he entered the private college prep school, St. Christopher's, where he graduated in 1989. He was an Eagle Scout and president of the student government, and had a knack, one fellow student recalls, for performing spot-on, brave impressions of teachers.

He enjoyed speaking, at school and Scouting events, and eventually put together a demo reel to try out for voice-over gigs with the help of two people who worked in radio. One was Tim Timberlake, who for years sat in the host chair at WRVA.

Reid had a "rather prodigious ability to do voice work," Timberlake recalls, "to be a good announcer even that young."

Reid says he started launching FedEx

packages toward David Wolper in Los Angeles. The prolific producer's credits included "Roots," "Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory" and the 1984 Summer Olympics. After 10 letters Reid broke through, he says. Wolper put him in touch with the producer of Liberty Weekend, the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty in 1986.

That's how he ended up, at 15, giving a five-minute speech at the event's closing arena show, representing the youth of America. He was on stage with first lady Nancy Reagan, met Lee Iacocca and spoke with Walter Cronkite, who later sent him a note saying, "Well you sound like you have a career in broadcasting."

As he was preparing for high school graduation, his dad was working on his run for the House of Delegates. It was a good time to head out of Richmond for college.

"I didn't want to be the son of the guy in the General Assembly," Reid says. "I wanted to be my own person."

He earned a bachelor's degree in political science at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and started interning at the CBS station there. After graduation he left for L.A. to intern in Ronald Reagan's press office and explore the entertainment and news industries.

He returned to Waco as the overnight producer for the CBS affiliate, working 10 p.m. to 10 a.m. on "Good Morning Central Texas."

Reid persuaded the station to give him a shot on-air covering the Baylor

homecoming parade. "When I came to work on Monday," he recalls, "they said, 'You're on the air and you're going to be a reporter now.'"

He loved it.

In addition to reporting on serious news, like the Ku Klux Klan marching through town, Reid looked for ways to stand out. When it finally snowed one Christmas, he was the only reporter around. He sweet-talked a janitor at the tallest building in Waco to let him in, where he set up a broadcast from the roof.

A job opening at Channel 8 in Richmond brought him home in 1994. He worked as a weekend anchor and investigative reporter before landing a spot on the morning show as a co-anchor.

There was nowhere to go but up. Channel 8's morning show was fourth in the ratings, Reid says — behind Channel 12, Channel 6, and the cartoons on Fox.

Television news looked a lot different 20 years ago. There was no social media, no roving around the studio, no behind-the-scenes peeks.

The morning show team coalesced with Reid and Gwen Williams as co-anchors and Keri Abbott reporting the weather.

"We just clicked," says Abbott, who now works in sales in Richmond. "We just had fun." And they started to see ratings growth.

It was Reid who pushed for new ideas, Abbott recalls — anything to make them stand out. More cross-talk between anchors, more hot topics, lifestyle segments and different ways of presenting the news than simply sitting behind the desk.

"We're not going to beat Channel 12 doing another version of Channel 12," Reid says. "I have always had fights with consultants, because they want you to do it exactly the same way as everybody else."

But his news director and station managers were open to change.

"He brought to the table something new, something fresh," Abbott says.

To celebrate Richmond's first snow of the season, Reid hired someone from the Byrd Theatre to bring in a snow machine to make it snow on set.

It was innovative, but Reid had to promise to clean up the artificial snow. He says the evening anchors, Lisa Schafner and Rick Young, weren't too thrilled when they saw how the machine left marks on the studio floor.

Another experiment was Pump It Up Friday, where they opened the studio into the parking lot at the Arboretum station. They invited bands and other community groups — sometimes 300 to 400 people would show up. Police directed traffic.

Channel 8 finally broke out of its rat- **13**

ings slump, hitting second place — and for at least one ratings book, Abbott says, even first.

But not everything was fun and games. Reid wasn't yet fully out, and says he was anxious that revelations about his personal life would hurt his professional career.

He also faced a crossroads in television, figuring out whether he wanted to forge a long career in Richmond or try something new. He opted to make a move. "I want to do stuff," he says.

Former Gov. George Allen, a Republican, had won election to the Senate — "an amazing governor," Reid says, "and a dynamic guy."

A job as director of communications for Allen's Senate office opened up in 2004. "I thought: 'This is my chance. I'll go to Washington, I'll see how this works out.'"

It freed him, both personally and professionally, kicking off a second career in political communication and public relations.

Philip Crosby, executive director at Richmond Triangle Players and a longtime voice for LGBTQ issues, met Reid in the 1980s.

It wasn't Reid's orientation as gay that surprised him, Crosby says: "The revelation for me was when he went to work for George Allen."

Crosby's had his share of maddening political debates with Reid on Facebook — and that's OK, he says. "We love the country, we love everything about it equally as much," he says, even if they have totally different ideas about making it better.

Reid says Allen, a social conservative, never had an issue with his personal life. He says Allen told him, "You're a good person, just do a good job."

Others took a different stance.

Reid recalls a blog that aimed to out gay Republicans working on Capitol Hill and their bosses as hypocrites. When a left-wing journalist called Reid about his personal life, he says, Reid told him he wouldn't dignify such questions at work. "But if you see me at a gay bar you can ask me a question," he said, "because I'm a very friendly guy."

The experience demonstrated to him that for some people, he would never be "out enough" that he couldn't make everyone happy. So he's never had a flip-the-switch coming-out moment where a weight lifted off his shoulders.

"I'm glad that I'm more comfortable with who I am," he says. "But I wouldn't say that I've ever felt totally free, because I've always been attacked."

Reid worked with Allen's office until 2007, when the senator lost re-election to Jim Webb. From there, he had stints as director of communications for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and with private public relations firms. One sent him overseas to the Middle East for three years. He's traveled to 85 countries.

When Trump became president, Reid presumed that he would continue his public relations career. "I kept hoping ... that my fortunes would turn and all these PR firms would want a Republican" to help them build relationships with the new administration.

Instead, he says, things got more toxic. "It was so polarized and ugly."

That's when he learned in the summer of 2017 that morning host Jimmy Barrett was leaving WRVA after 16 years.

"In my heart of hearts," he says, "I am a broadcaster."

Reid interviewed and waited while the station transitioned to new owners. Entercom was buying WRVA from



Reid arrives for his show, which runs from 5:30-10 a.m. on WRVA, around 5 a.m. Ratings show that the station is growing among its key demographic, and managers say there are signs of increased interest from younger listeners.

iHeartMedia, formerly Clear Channel — along with such sister stations as XL102, Q94, Mix 98.1 and the Beat 106.5.

Reid was the first Entercom employee hired in Richmond, on Dec. 4, 2017. He returned to his hometown. His partner, Alonzo Mable, moved with him from Washington. They started their relationship that year, Mable says, and "it's been a hit since."

Like other media outlets, WRVA has faced layoffs, financial challenges and a changing industry. But ratings are up, says Henson, the program director.

The station's key demographic, men ages 25 to 54, has grown 12 percent from Nielsen's winter ratings book to its spring ratings book, he says.

Results of the May to July ratings period, published last week, show WRVA has moved from eighth to sixth place, according to the Nielsen Topline radio ratings of Richmond-area listeners 12 and older who tuned in to the average quarter hour.

The station also is seeing sellouts at 300-seat events called Politics and Pints, where Reid, Katz and a liberal guest discuss current issues onstage. People are paying \$50 and more for tickets.

"We're growing," Henson says, "and a lot of that is because of John."

The clock is ticking toward the end of Reid's show from the Jamestown Settlement, where the Virginia legislature is divided, a good chunk absent, because of the president's pending appearance.

It's too bad, Reid says. Elected officials should set aside differences during ceremonial events that are bigger than themselves.

"It doesn't mean you have to vote for him," he says.

"It's not an endorsement of their policies. It's called grace and class. I'm sure a lot of people will say Donald Trump doesn't have that, but even Donald Trump shows up for the ceremonial stuff."

He speaks on air about the issue. Trump will become the first sitting president to address the Virginia General Assembly in 400 years, and it is symbolic. The event should be considered and remembered for its historic implications, he says, a colony that almost didn't survive, the struggle, the determination and ideas that began the evolution of a country into "a remarkably successful society," he says on air.

That should be "inspirational to everyone."

Reid signs off at 9:54 a.m. With the show's producer back in Richmond, Reid records a few quick intros to play later, introducing the president's remarks on air.

He hands his equipment off to a production assistant, goes through another Secret Service screening, and is inside the tent by 10:07.

He finds a folding chair in the back, settling into one of the areas reserved for dozens of media representatives forming the White House press pool. He checks his phone, looks at the program and surveys the rows of about 700 people ahead of him. He leans over to whisper, "Which one do you think is a protester?"

A protester? Here? In this tightly secured environment?

Reid turned out to be right. **S**

Jason Roop is a former editor of Style and the founder of Springstory. He appears as an unpaid guest in Friday segments on WRVA to discuss water-cooler headlines and weekend events. Style did not make this story available to Reid or anyone at the station before publication.

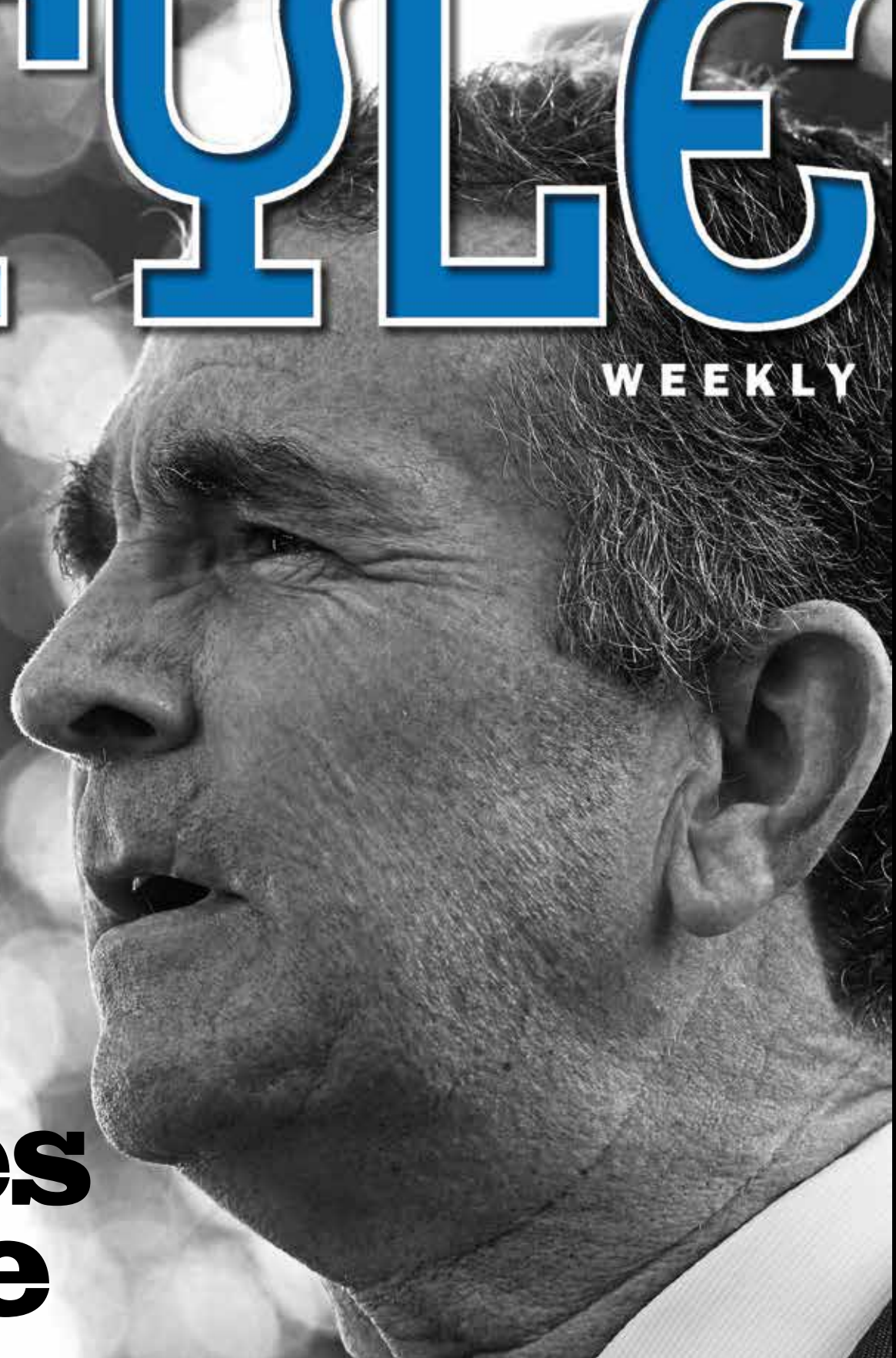
STYLE

WEEKLY

Virginia Democrats
secure their power.
But who will
control the party?

by Jason Roop

Shades of Blue



Locking It Down

With their new majority, progressive Democrats call for swift action. How far they go depends on the governor who some people counted out.

by Jason Roop
photos by Scott Elmquist

You can have more than one comeback. When Gov. Ralph Northam handily beat Republican Ed Gillespie two years ago, politicians and media outlets seized on the victory as symbolic of a blue wave crashing on President Donald Trump's term.

That may have been accurate, or not, amplified because it was one of the few off-year gubernatorial elections. It happened in the midst of the great Washington upheaval, a Virginia story conveniently but perhaps only partially fitting a national story line.

After all, Virginia's previous governor was a Democrat, and the commonwealth voted for President Barack Obama and candidate Hillary Clinton. The red had been turning purple for years, most noticeably in Northern Virginia.

Northam also was no poster child for progressives. He said he was more moderate and talked with *The New York Times* about twice voting for President George W. Bush.

"He's a conservative enough Democrat that Republicans once tried to talk him into joining their party," says Stephen Farnsworth, professor and director of the Center for Leadership and Media Studies at the University of Mary Washington.

That wasn't the case for his further-left foil in the 2017 Democratic primary, Tom Perriello. The two men represented such different wings that *The Atlantic* called their race "A Fight for the Soul of the Democratic Party in Virginia."

Still, Northam's win was an illustration of the changes at play.

He led an all-blue lineup in the state's top three elected offices — governor, lieutenant governor and attorney general.

While the Virginia Senate wasn't up for election, its Republican majority was slight. In the House of Delegates, which was in play that year, a coin flip in one race eventually determined the majority as Republican, 51-49.

But Democrats had flipped much more, taking 15 seats from Republicans.

Enthusiasm fueled the party's election-night celebration at George Mason University in November 2017, kicked off by a triumphant Thomas Perez, chairman of the Democratic National Committee. "The Democratic Party is back, my friends," he said. "We're back big time."



At his party's election-night triumph Nov. 5 in Richmond, Gov. Ralph Northam, with his wife, Pam, at his side, declares that Virginia has turned blue.





Things were off and running for Virginia Democrats — until a boulder dropped in their way 15 months later. That’s when Northam’s medical-school yearbook page came to light, in February, heading into an election season in which all seats in the General Assembly were at stake.

The yearbook page representing him included a photo of two men at a costume party, one in blackface. Was it Virginia’s governor? He said yes, and then no, and then held a widely panned news conference in which he acknowledged appearing in blackface at another event as a young man portraying Michael Jackson.

The end certainly was near.

Fellow Democrats called for his resignation. And the hits kept coming for the

party — Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax suddenly faced public accusations of sexual assault from two women, which he denied, and Attorney General Mark Herring acknowledged that he too had worn blackface as a University of Virginia student.

Northam apologized and receded from interviews and public appearances. He said he would embark on a listening tour and appointed the first cabinet-level position designed to address diversity and inclusion in state government hiring.

Northam made it clear that he was holding onto his seat. But as his party revved up for the November elections, he took a low-key approach in the campaigning.

When it all shook out, the public made its judgment about Northam, longtime political analyst Bob Holsworth says: “There was no price to be paid.”

Gov. Northam maintains his position

as the leader of the Virginia Democrats, and his party was on the better side of that boulder — uphill, looking down. It captured the Senate and House of Delegates, giving it control over the General Assembly.

“We’re incredibly excited to have the trifecta,” says Susan Swecker, chairwoman of the Democratic Party of Virginia.

Pols and pontificators took stock of the news.

Was Northam’s post-scandal strategy effective? Did the electorate simply accept his apology and move on? Perhaps voters simply focused on their localities, not tying their candidates to the governor in the first place.

Did Republicans perform poorly? Was President Trump a factor? Or maybe there’s general acknowledgement that Virginia’s governor can’t run for re-election,

so in two years the time is up anyway.

Swecker won’t waste time analyzing, at least for the public record, the politics of the February scandal. As for how the party might handle Fairfax’s troubles, “I can’t really speak to that,” she says, deferring to House and Senate leadership.

For her and the party, it’s more about moving forward with the majority at hand. “Governor Northam’s in a strong position right now and he’s been a good partner to us this year,” she says. “And he’s incredibly popular in Virginia.”

It’s tough to contradict that notion, says Rich Meagher, associate professor in the political science department at Randolph-Macon College. The election served as Northam’s “triumphant return from the wilderness,” he says.

It turned out that Northam just needed to hang on.

With the General Assembly session set to convene in January with the first Democratic majority in decades, Northam is leading the agenda for legislation and shaping his first two-year budget that wasn't inherited from a previous governor.

"I think he's going to treat this session as his coming-out party," Meagher says.

That's the kind of vision that sends shudders down the spines of Republicans who worry that Virginia will be reshaped in unfathomable ways.

"We fully expect Virginia to fundamentally change, and pretty quickly," Republican Delegate Todd Gilbert said in a day-after election interview on Newsradio WRVA. The 15th District representative, set to serve as minority leader of the House, predicted "buyer's remorse" among voters.

"When people really find out how hard the progressive wing of the Democratic party in the statehouse is pushing them to fulfill their goals," Gilbert said, "it gets a little scary."

Fright for some, ebullience for others.

Soon after the Democratic majority was secured, those progressive voices were electrified, singing loud and clear through the social-media fog: There should be no delay, no excuses, on the kinds of dramatic change Virginia Democrats have sought.

How the party strikes the balance between its moderate and progressive forces will be one of the themes of the legislative session and budget to come. It also will make clear whose influence is most felt, and whose power is most significant.

For now, the more moderate Northam is at the helm.

It's the natural course of events, Mea-



Gov. Ralph Northam faced a much more dire situation in February, when his medical-school yearbook page revealed a racist photo. Protesters, opposite and below, joined Democratic leaders in calling for the governor's ouster. But he stayed in office, holding a news conference, above, to apologize and acknowledge another incident where he appeared in blackface.

gher says. "Every party has a kind of problem with the moderates who are looking at compromise and caution, and the firebrands" who want to use a voter mandate to make bold changes.

With leadership positions to appoint, Democrats huddled in a closed-door meeting — with phones taken at the door, Swecker says, to quell tweets and

maintain privacy. They chose Delegate Eileen Filler-Corn of Fairfax County as speaker of the House, setting aside other roles for more progressive candidates.

There also will be lines of power emerging along geographic areas, rural vs. urban, as well as generational, the establishment vs. newer members rising in the party.

The party chairwoman, Swecker, notes the makeup of leadership along with the body at large as more diverse. "We have a General Assembly that looks more like the people of Virginia," she says, which leads to wider perspectives and better legislation.

The election highlights several shifts, Holsworth says.

Until recently, he says, a lot of Democrats in Virginia succeeded by being progressive on social issues and moderate on business and economic issues. But in recent years, progressives have emerged stronger and "the consensus about what it means to be a Democrat has begun to fray."

Another shift is that there's a more powerful black caucus, Holsworth says, and that many of the new Democrats are women — "and they're going to occupy a more important role than ever before in Virginia."

That points to such legislation in the areas of gun safety, criminal justice reform, the minimum wage and the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, he says.

Farnsworth says to look for areas of agreement that won't cost much to the taxpayer, which allows the party to play down the labels of "tax and spend liberals."

To do it, the leadership must align.

"You have the speaker designate, the majority leader designate in the Senate, the governor," Farnsworth says. "All three keys are going to have to turn for the party to move forward. And so they'll move most quickly on areas of common agreement."

Sure enough, the governor rolled out his agenda swiftly, attempting to gather momentum and lay the groundwork for unity.

As for the kinds of "scary" stuff to which Gilbert refers, Farnsworth says it's important to recognize that Northam "is not going to go along with a far-left governing agenda."

But there will be tensions. "It's always easier in the minority for a party to stick together," he says. "For parties in control, that's when the divisions become clearer."

One of them will center on the regulation of Dominion Energy, a key contributor of the governor's. There's a gen-





parties are so high, Kondik says: “It’s hard to convince people to vote against their own interest or their own side because someone from their side has problems.”

Also worth considering is Virginia’s one-term-at-a-time rule for governors, Keena says: “That might change how we’re talking about the Northam scandal. We might be looking at this in a different way.”

The governor lay low in the months after the scandal, but took a more prominent role at a gun-violence rally at the State Capitol in July after a shooting at a Virginia Beach government building.

However you look at it, it’s another comeback for Northam — and the party.

The governor who was less visible during the campaign was front and center at the Hilton Hotel downtown Nov. 5, where Democrats

gathered on election night.

Sen. Jennifer McClellan, who’s being watched as a potential gubernatorial candidate, handed the mic off to Northam, who congratulated the party faithful and declared that “Virginia is officially blue.”

He led a call-and-response, raising his voice. “When I say blue, I want you to say ‘wave,’” he said. “Blue ... wave ... blue ... wave.”

Northam said the message was clear that voters wanted Democrats to continue their progress. “Tomorrow the work begins,” Northam said. **S**

erational divide among Democrats on accepting money from Dominion.

“Progressives weren’t dependent on the establishment for money,” Holsworth says of the elections.

Progressives may not be as visible as the governor, Delegate Dick Saslaw of Northern Virginia or Filler-Corn. “But the progressives have come out, and have won elections for the Democrats,” Holsworth says. “And they weren’t dependent on any of the conventional sources of money.”

Also at stake is how the party might attempt to hold onto its power. Bipartisan legislation passed the General Assembly to pave the way for independent redistricting, a way to avoid gerrymandering issues.

“For me it’s the most important issue,” says Alex Keena, a political science professor who studies the issue at Virginia Commonwealth University. “I hope they will do the right thing.”

When Republicans were in control, Democrats agreed to independent redistricting. But that could be something they reconsider.

“If you look around the world at examples of politicians promising redistricting reform,” Keena says, “it’s so often the case that they don’t follow through.”

Thinking back to Northam’s position in February, and where he stands today, it’s

a stunning turnaround — and perhaps a lesson in power and influence.

“I think that we’re in a time where scandal probably in general means less, or has

less of an effect,” says Kyle Kondik, managing editor of Sabato’s Crystal Ball at the University of Virginia Center for Politics.

That may be because the stakes for both



Democrats selected Delegate Eileen Filler-Corn as their designee for speaker of the House. She represents the more moderate wing of the Democratic party and is from Northern Virginia. Sen. Jennifer McClellan of the Richmond area, right, is considered a contender for the next gubernatorial election.



STYLE

WEEKLY

What
About

the Boulevard?

Richmond officials say the city desperately needs revenue. But a potential gold mine has been sitting undeveloped for nearly two decades.

by Jason Roop



And Around It Goes

For almost 20 years, city officials have paid for consultants' reports, debated baseball, interviewed community members, sought development proposals — and even made a bid for Amazon. Is a clear future in sight for the Boulevard?

by Jason Roop

photos by Scott Elmquist

A pot of development gold lies at the end of a high-traffic rainbow of swooping lanes that brings together interstates 95 and 64.

From this intersection, traveled by 125,000 vehicles a day, you'll take the Boulevard exit. Turn right at the Clarion Hotel and pass Wawa — the newest development in this area, which opened to great fanfare Oct. 18.

Across from the Greyhound bus station, on your left, is the Diamond, home of the Richmond Flying Squirrels.

The baseball team's staff members are busy inside. Spring arrives March 20, and opening night is now two weeks away for the Double-A affiliate of the San Francisco Giants — Thursday, April 4. There will be fireworks.

In a year, there may be another celebration to anticipate — or perhaps a moment of recognition to mark the bittersweet amazement that this concrete marvel has withstood upgrades and patching-up, the departure of the Braves and the arrival of the Squirrels.

The Diamond will turn 35 years old in April 2020.

Along the way, the debate about baseball on what is now Arthur Ashe Boulevard nearly became a cottage industry in Richmond.

There have been consultants' studies, myriad proposals, regional maneuvering and hearty arguments, City Council resolutions, editorials, protests, polls, a task force and community meetings. Should it stay? Should it go? Who should pay?

Voters in *Style's* Best of Richmond poll once declared that the "Local Issue You're Most Sick of" was "Proposals for Relocating the Diamond."

That was eight years ago.

Hardly anyone bothers arguing about it anymore.

Three Richmond mayors have filled portions of their terms addressing the

puzzle, but ultimately leaving it unsolved: Rudy McCollum, L. Douglas Wilder and Dwight Jones. A fourth mayor, Levar Stoney, is at bat.

Around the Diamond, home of the Richmond Flying Squirrels minor league baseball team, is one of the few publicly owned urban tracts of land in the United States. The site pulls in \$400,000 in total tax revenue a year to the city when its total economic impact could be \$339.3 million a year, according to one consultant's report.

Fear not, everyone seems to agree, the debate over baseball on the Boulevard has run its course. Signs held high by impassioned voters at City Council meetings likely are rotting in the landfill.

Baseball has survived in this part of town for 65 years, since the Richmond Virginians played at Parker Field.

What also hasn't

changed, fundamentally, is the land around the Diamond. It's a rarity in landlocked Richmond, "arguably the most valuable development site in the city of Richmond," says Bill Pantele, real estate and business lawyer and a former City Council president.

Beyond Richmond, it's "one of few underdeveloped, publicly owned urban

tracts of land in the United States,” the city’s Department of Economic and Community Development says. This is hot property.

Yet these 61 acres lie in wait.

“The site generates no more than \$400,000 in total tax revenue to the city,” the city wrote in 2016, citing an analysis by the Pittsburgh-based consulting firm Tripp Umbach — when its economic impact could be reaching \$339.3 million a year.

For now there is no development or growth. There is fencing, tall grass and a parking lot that’s empty most of the year.

If you stand outside the south end of the stadium, just beyond right field, you can see a vast expanse behind a padlocked gate, straight through to the Cookie Factory Lofts and the dome atop the Science Museum of Virginia.

“The development industry is just waiting for that property to be made available for development,” Pantele says.

Richmond’s ballpark remains surrounded by a field of dreams.

The Richmond Braves played at Parker Field beginning in 1966 before their new home, the Diamond, opened for the 1985 season.

Richmond and the counties of Chesterfield and Henrico built the ballpark for \$8 million, with half contributed by a regional entity, the Richmond Metropolitan Authority, and the other half coming from donors.

After 16 years, the ballpark was showing signs of age in 2001.

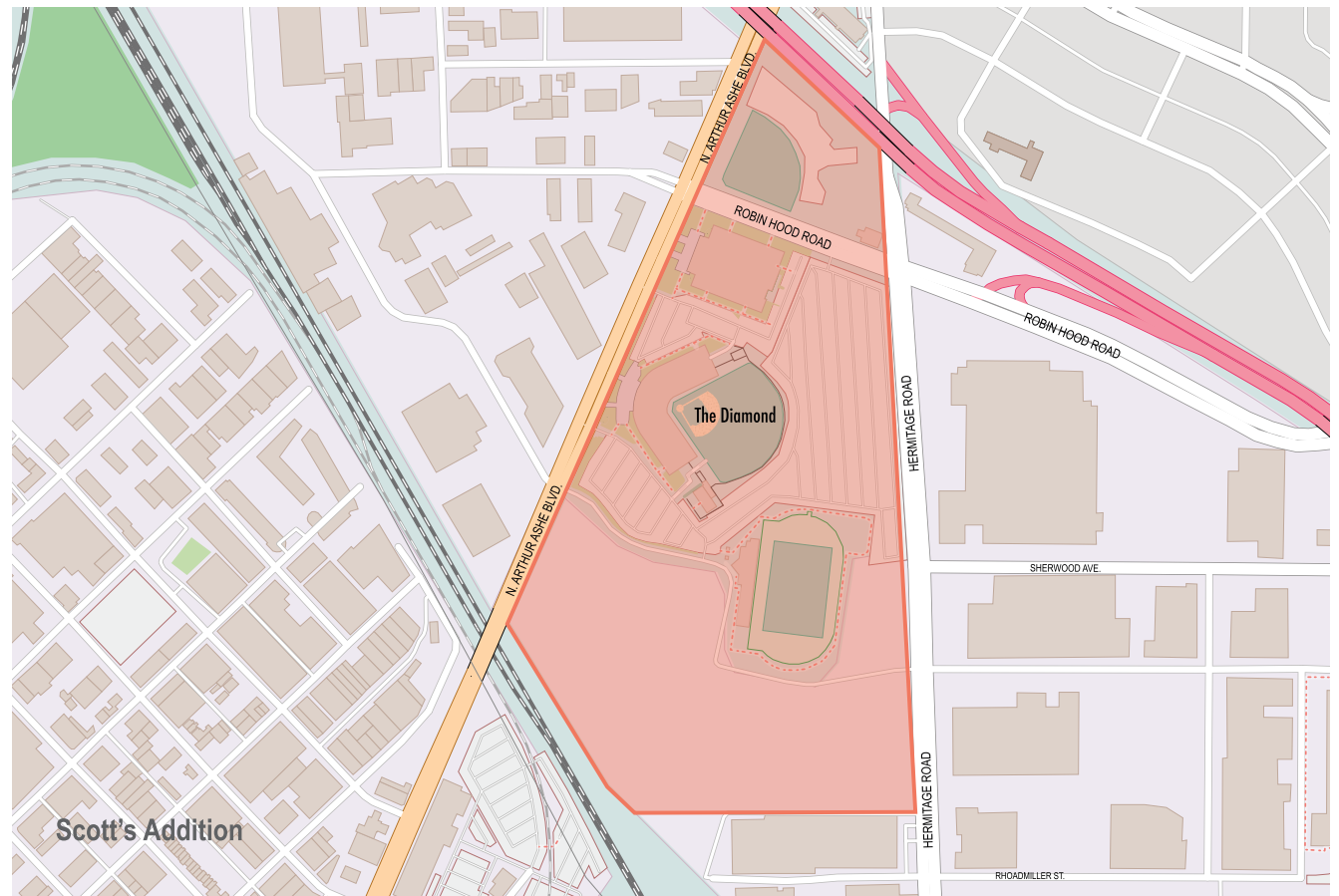
“It’s leaking, cracking, creaking, and if you’re in the wrong seat, downright uncomfortable,” writer Harry Kollatz Jr. described in Richmond magazine.

The Braves begin talking about a renovation and wondering about a new stadium. The regional authority was poised to make an upgrade. City Council decided to study the long-term ballpark needs in 2001, with City Manager Calvin Jamison responsible for figuring out the viability of a new stadium.

Jamison’s position as city manager existed under a different form of government before the Richmond’s city charter change, when the mayor, then Rudy McCollum, was selected by City Council from among its members.

While options for the ballpark were being considered, a delegation of civic leaders, business owners and elected officials prepared for the Richmond Chamber’s 2002 intercity visit — an annual trip to another city to study urban planning approaches.

This time, it was to Pittsburgh, where PNC Park had opened the year before, in



City officials offered up the Boulevard property as part of a bid for Amazon to locate its second headquarters here. Though it called the site unabashedly urban, Richmond was unsuccessful in luring the mega-corporation.

the spring of 2001, for the city's Major League Baseball team, the Pirates.

The stadium was beautiful and gleaming. Jamison liked what he saw. As one person on the trip recalls, Jamison immediately began chatting up other members of the delegation about a new ballpark for Richmond.

What if they could build a new stadium, beside the James River, next to the Federal Reserve Building downtown?

It is from these moments when you can trace the beginning of the uncertainty about the future of baseball in Richmond. Visions of new stadiums danced in heads. Proposals began to spring up about relocating the ballpark.

A group of business owners known as Richmond Ballpark Initiative, or R.B.I., worked with the city in 2003 to explore locations for a new stadium — among them such sites as Manchester, Fulton, Mayo Island and Shockoe Bottom.

This didn't sit well with the counties. McCollum, a former official on the intercity trip recalls, also was less than thrilled that Jamison's idea had thrown a wrench into the counties' plan to renovate the stadium.

Regional officials had little interest in footing the bill for a ballpark farther into Richmond that cost \$55 million to \$65 million. And along the way, pressure was increasing from the Richmond Braves, whose contract was coming to an end in 2004.

The debate grew complex. Virginia Commonwealth University entered the picture, with the idea that it might purchase the Diamond.

A new mayor, former Gov. L. Douglas Wilder, came onto the scene with his own priorities and another big public-private project under debate, a new downtown performing arts center, aka CenterStage.

He asked his chief of staff, Paul Goldman, to study the idea for a ballpark in Shockoe Bottom. "I strongly recommended against it," Goldman wrote in a *Style* Back Page opinion. "His review agreed."

Life moved on. So did the Braves. When the 2009



baseball season rolled around, they were playing at a new stadium built in Gwinnett County, Georgia.

Flash forward through more attempts to move the ballpark and a group of locals who worked with a developer to come up with a renovated ballpark in the same area with development around it. The Greater Richmond Chamber convened a task force in 2012 focused on moving baseball to the Bottom.

In 2015, Jones and his chief of staff, Grant Neely, roped the backers of a proposed independent, regional children's hospital — predominantly philanthropists Bill and Alice Goodwin — into the issue.

They put forth the idea that the hospital would be valuable to the Boulevard — but only if the Diamond was gone. The hospital proposal eventually was pulled.

Then in 2016, the city asked for developers to submit ideas for the 61-acre site — not including the Sports Backers stadium there. To respond, the city asked for experience "with urban mixed-use, mixed-income redevelopments exceeding investment of \$500 million."

There were six proposals. The timeline called for presentations to city staff in March 2017. Nothing came of it.

These days, the political focus on big development has shifted to a 10-block area downtown, where a group of investors pitched a \$1.4 billion development plan that includes a replacement for the Coliseum, hotel, housing, retail and other amenities.

To help pay for it, the city proposes drawing a boundary around 80 blocks of downtown to form a tax-increment financing district. From that area, taxes are frozen at the current rate. Any tax growth from that area over that rate, or any taxes from new development within that area, known as a TIF district, would be committed to the project for 30 years.

It's such a complex deal that it's been in the works for more than two years. Many questions have gone unanswered. No financial feasibility study has been released from the city's financial adviser, Davenport & Co. The identities of investors and other details have been kept secret.

At a recent question-and-answer event called Mayorathon, Stoney said that behind-the-scenes negotiations with lawyers would last into the summer. Two weeks ago, he introduced a budget that must be balanced with an increase to the real-estate tax, from \$1.20 to \$1.29 per \$100, and the creation of a cigarette tax of 50 cents a pack. City Council is studying the budget for the next six weeks.

No one is talking much about the Ashe Boulevard site, or the taxes it might generate.

And it's unclear what, exactly, is happening.

During a reporter's visit to the Department of Economic and Community Development on a recent Friday, most folks had left for the day. But an official suggested sending an email. That was answered by an initial email from the interim director, promising a response, but none came. A phone call went unreturned. An interview request went unanswered.

And the only news to emerge publicly in the last year has



The Diamond is on the avenue whose name recently changed to Arthur Ashe Boulevard.



The city councilwoman for the 2nd District, Kim Gray, sees the Arthur Ashe Boulevard property as "the highest potential revenue generator for the city."

been that the city offered up the property to Amazon in its bid, through the Greater Richmond Partnership, to land its second headquarters. Local media outlets retrieved as much information as they could using Freedom of Information Act requests.

Its pitch for "Amazonians" called the property "Unabashedly Urban," and touted the transportation, livability, infrastructure and other strengths of the site. Amazon ultimately chose New York and Northern Virginia.

Today, developers are waiting for the property to go back on the block. But will the city act as a developer, trying to dictate how the area will be used? Or will it let the developers be moved by the market, letting the buyer determine the highest and best use and getting out of the way?

Just down the Boulevard, within walking distance, Scott's Addition has flourished mostly through an initial historic designation and natural development that followed.

"I still see this as the highest potential revenue-generator for the city, and in turn, for schools," City Councilwoman Kim Gray says, during a cold weekday morning on the property in early March. The 2nd District she represents includes this land.

The 2008 consultants' study crunched the numbers for a scenario in which a ballpark is rebuilt on the Boulevard site. The stadium and surrounding development, it concludes, "can directly sustain 693 jobs annually and contribute \$94.7 million to the economy of the city of Richmond."

It cites 110 jobs, \$15.6 million in eco-

nomic impact and \$100,000 more through sales, meal, lodging and business and professional license taxes.

"In addition," it says, "the construction of the baseball stadium and associated commercial and residential properties generates a one-time impact of hundreds of millions of dollars in spending and thousands of jobs in the city of Richmond."

One key element of the property has passed the area by — some say for the better.

Beginning in 2014, the state started studying how to improve rail service along the 123-mile span between Richmond and Washington. Part of that effort required a decision on train stops locally. Would it be at the Staples Mill Station, Main Street Station, a new Boulevard station — or a combination of those?

Virginia Commonwealth University's president emeritus, Eugene Trani, and others lobbied for a single stop at the Boulevard area to kick off growth in what he referred to as a new kind of downtown. A report accompanied the idea, called "A Second Center: the Westward Expansion of Downtown Richmond."

Not happening, says Jennifer Mitchell, director of the Department of Rail and Public Transportation. Keeping both Staples Mill and Main Street Station "turned out to be the best combination for Richmond," she says — and that's what the state has handed over to the federal railroad administration in its environmental impact statement.

Mayor Stoney and his team never embraced Trani's idea.

"We're letting a 60-acre property in the heart of the city collect dust instead of generating the next big thing for Richmond to keep the momentum going," says a former city official who asked not to be named.

The rail improvements will be a long

time coming. First, the Long Bridge must be expanded between Virginia and Washington. That could take another eight to 10 years. And then work on the Richmond segments. The new service won't be high-speed, but it will be more reliable with more capacity, she says.

Another development for the property came with the arrival of Levar Stoney as mayor, who brought with him some knowledge of meetings with the Richmond Flying Squirrels through his former job as secretary of the Commonwealth under former Gov. Terry McAuliffe. An agreement was reached between VCU and the Squirrels for the team to stay in Richmond while plans were worked out for VCU to build a new stadium, which would be rented out to the Squirrels.

But all eyes are on property now occupied by the state's Alcoholic Beverage Control warehouse next to the Diamond. That entity may be moving, opening up the area for a new stadium, and clearing the tract of land on which the Diamond sits for development.

Gray says she asks for updates about Ashe Boulevard every time she meets with the mayor or chief administrative officer, but has received nothing new from them.

"But think about what really this would mean to our city's tax base," Gray says. "It would require so little. ... They want to give up 80 blocks of revenue for a Coliseum, but this is already here and happening, and all we have to do is make it a priority." **S**



Mayor Levar Stoney with Richmond Flying Squirrels' Vice-President and Chief Operating Officer Todd "Parney" Parnell during a ceremony to announce that the Squirrels are playing host to the 2019 Eastern League All-Star Week in July. It will feature events including a country music jam at Richmond Raceway, celebrities and the all-star game.