

INSIDENOVA

PRINCE WILLIAM

Prince William Today

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BRUCE POTTER
PUBLISHER
bpotter@insidenova.com
571-333-1538

GREG HAMBRICK
SENIOR EDITOR
ghambrick@insidenova.com
703-318-1386

DAVE FAWCETT
SPORTS EDITOR
dfawcett@insidenova.com

EMILY SIDES
PRINCE WILLIAM REPORTER
esides@insidenova.com

JARED FORETEK
MANASSAS REPORTER
jforetek@insidenova.com

KEVIN SULLIVAN
REGIONAL CIRCULATION DIRECTOR
ksullivan@insidenova.com
571-309-1684

CONNIE FIELDS
ADVERTISING
cfields@insidenova.com
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nmarshok@insidenova.com

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Fax: 703-318-5509

MEMBER:



Happy trails, @superPWCS

“Knock knock! Anybody home [House emoji]”
March 19, 2019, 10:10 p.m.

Prince William County Schools Superintendent Steve Walts sent that direct message on Twitter to a female high school student who had not responded to a question he had asked her earlier in the day.

It was just one of over 20,000 direct messages exchanged between Walts, using the Twitter handle @superPWCS, and nearly 2,000 different respondents. A formal complaint about the messages was filed this spring, and the school board hired a private forensics firm and a law firm to investigate, costing county taxpayers over \$110,000.

The end result: The school board did not take a vote to renew Walts’ contract, and he will retire when it expires next summer. Make no doubt about it: Walts did not want to retire. He actively sought and publicly lobbied for a contract extension last year, but the school board did not go along – on a 4-4 vote.

Our kudos to the four school board members who voted against the extension then, saving us from an even more costly outcome, although we doubt they realize how their superintendent was spending his time.

“OK one last communication tonight. If you’d like to send me your first and last name and what grade you’re in I’ll work with [principal’s name] to make sure I get a chance to meet you before the end of the year. How does that sound? [Sleepy face emoji]”

March 21, 2019, 11:13 p.m.

Sent to the same student the next afternoon: “I came to see you at [school] today. They tried to get you but then realized you were absent today. I hope you are all right! [Smiley face

emoji]”
March 22, 2019, 5:31 p.m.

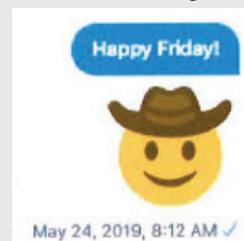
Within the messages the school division has released are a number of innocuous conversations in which Walts responds to requests to attend events, discusses the chances of a snow day, and answers questions about grades and scheduling.

But the fact is he should never have had the first private Twitter exchange with any student – no matter how innocuous. And by holding 2,000 of those conversations he forced the school system to spend over \$110,000 on an investigation and to take valuable time from preparing for the most challenging school year ever.

Worse, Walts’ response when the complaint became public – a video posted on the Twitter account – was to proverbially shoot the messenger. All that did was prompt a multimillion-dollar defamation suit from former School Board Chair Ryan Sawyers, which the school system will have to now spend more time and money defending.

We editorialized when this story first broke that Walts’ time as superintendent was up. We suggested that simply letting his contract expire would be a good resolution. Now we have one more suggestion: Walts, whose contract is worth over \$400,000 a year, should reimburse the school system for the cost of the investigation.

From the selection of messages released, it appears Walts often portrayed himself with a cowboy emoji. Count us among those who are glad he’s riding off into the sunset.



One of Steve Walts’ direct messages sent to a student on Twitter.

COLUMNIST | DAVID KERR

What happens to Republicans after Nov. 3?

Virginia Republicans are a feisty bunch. They have passion and energy, but, alas, during the past 10 years or so, they seem to have shown very little common sense when it comes to picking candidates. That’s evident in their rather abysmal record. They haven’t won any -- that’s zero -- statewide elections since 2009 and they also lost the General Assembly in 2019, which was hard to do since it was so gerrymandered in their favor.

Thing is, in the case of this year’s congressional races, they seem to be on the road to doing it again. A poignant example is the 5th Congressional District. This weird looking district runs from the North Carolina border to Fauquier County. In a bizarre firehouse primary that catered to the party’s most conservative activists, they displaced a sitting congressman and devout conservative, Denver Riggleman. Now this red district is in play.

As for their U.S. Senate nominee, Daniel Gade, a hard-core devotee of President Donald Trump, his chances of becoming a senator are on par with my chances of winning the Mega Millions Lottery. God bless him for trying. Besides, I regularly play the lottery.



DAVID KERR

The prospects of Trump winning Virginia’s 13 electoral votes are next to nil. Though unlikely, he may win reelection nationally, but in Virginia his numbers remain stuck at around 40%. He could also prove a serious drag on GOP congressional candidates.

Republicans are also unlikely to take back any of the Democratic congressional gains from 2018. Rep. Abigail Spanberger, D-7th, and Rep. Elaine Luria, D-2nd, each of whom represents a normally red district, will probably be Democratic holds. Their GOP opponents just aren’t strong enough.

As for Rep. Jennifer Wexton, D-10th, another 2018 pickup, she is a shoe-in. If these assumptions hold, and the Democrats pick up that now open 5th District seat, while a bit of a reach, that would leave the GOP with the smallest representation in Virginia’s congressional delegation in over 45 years.

So what happens next? Will Virginia’s GOP finally have, as my grandmother used to say, “a come to Jesus moment”?

They need one. Surely, they don’t like losing year in and year out. In 2021, we’ll be electing a new governor, lieutenant governor and attorney general. This is where the power is in Virginia. If the Re-

publicans don’t break out of their mold of selecting unelectable right-wing fringe candidates, then it’s “game over.”

They need candidates who can break the Democratic Party’s hold on Northern Virginia. That’s the great mass of suburban voters who have given Democrats victories year after year. However, they aren’t as liberal as some people think. It’s just that their choices have been between perceived extreme right-wing Republicans and Democrats who have managed to portray a moderate image by focusing on suburban issues like schools and roads.

There are some sound conservative candidates who could present a friendlier, more acceptable version of the GOP to Virginia’s suburban voters. I call these the “good governance” candidates.

Virginia needs a two-party system. With the Republicans being hammered so badly, the Virginia GOP could be on the verge of becoming irrelevant. The party needs to find that conservative to moderate-conservative tack that worked well in years past.

David Kerr is an adjunct professor of political science at VCU and has worked on Capitol Hill and for various federal agencies for many years.

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MEMBER:



Stop the hinting, governor; just give us the news

April 24.
May 8.
May 15.
May 29. Maybe.

Since Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam ordered all non-essential businesses in the state closed on March 24 to stem the spread of the coronavirus, those are the dates that owners of those businesses have circled on their calendars as targets for reopening.

Whether they own a gym, a hair salon or a restaurant, they have been eagerly preparing to accommodate customers again. They have spent money to install dividers and buy masks, have rearranged their businesses to keep customers 6 feet apart, and have trained staff on new cleaning regimens.

But as every one of those potential reopening dates has approached, Northam has pushed it back.

The most recent delay for Northern Virginia came Tuesday, when after six days – six days! -- of hinting, Northam finally announced that the region would not enter “Phase One” of reopening with the rest of the state on Friday. That decision covers Prince William County, Manassas and Manassas Park, but not adjacent Fauquier and Stafford counties, where some non-essential businesses will be allowed to reopen Friday morning.

Northam said our region would not enter Phase One until at least May 29; furthermore, during an appearance on Washington Post Live, he said Northern Virginia would remain shut down “as long as it takes.”

Reasonable people can argue whether the restrictions were necessary in the first place or weren’t strict enough, just as we can debate whether we should blame the pandemic on the federal government or some bat-crazy researcher in Wuhan.

Regardless, the pandemic is real, and restrictions of some

form will be a part of our lives for many months. We get that. But now more than ever, our leaders must communicate clearly, precisely and with conviction, must explain targets and make the data publicly available, and must work with all parties, not just their own.

We applaud Northam for basing his decisions on facts and science. We appreciate his caution. As a physician, he understands his first responsibility is to “do no harm.” But as a physician, he should also understand that his patients – in this case, Northern Virginia’s small-business owners – need to know his diagnosis. They need it up front and they need it with clarity.

That’s because even in times of uncertainty, businesses need certainty. They need time to plan, to rehire staff, to stock up on food and other supplies in order to reopen. Start too early and they will waste time and money. Wait too late and they will miss an opportunity.

Unfortunately, over the past three weeks, Northam’s statements about reopening have done nothing but confuse and frustrate those business owners, especially in Northern Virginia. He has hinted and teased at potential reopening dates. He didn’t provide specifics about what businesses would be included in Phase One until a week before it was scheduled to begin. And after saying he wouldn’t allow some regions of the state to open before others, he is now doing just that.

So to Gov. Northam and Northern Virginia leaders, the time for posturing is over. The businesses that drive this region’s economy need certainty and specificity. Whether the reopening is two weeks, two months or two years from now, they need to know. No one can hit a moving target. Stop the teasing and the hinting and, as Robert Palmer sang, “Doctor Doctor, gimme the news.”

GUEST COLUMN | DAVID KERR

Saying our last goodbyes to the Greatest Generation

Even in the 21st century, it’s an announcement that makes the listener take pause. “We interrupt this broadcast for a special news bulletin.” Whether it’s TV, radio or a big red banner in large letters on a website, it makes us take a deep breath. Usually, it’s bad news. The way radio and TV were interrupted when 9/11 was announced. Other times, not as often as we would like, it’s news that brings relief, a smile and hope.

That’s the way most Americans felt on May 7, 1945 — when the networks started breaking the news that the Germans had surrendered and that the war in Europe, then in its 6th year, was over. That was almost exactly 75 years ago.

However, this column isn’t so much about the end of World War II, now three-quarters of a century ago, but rather it’s about our fellow Americans, many of whom have now passed on, who fought it. Their memory, who they were, how they saved our world, and how they shaped the modern one, will always have a special place in defining our nation and indeed the world they helped make.

The numbers of Americans in uniform during the war is staggering — 16 million Americans, out of what was then a nation of 150 million, served in our armed forces. Tens of millions more worked in the war industries. There has never been a national mobilization like that before or since.



DAVID KERR

Of course, on VE Day, Victory in Europe Day, the Allies weren’t by any means done.

As my father said, and he served in the Pacific, put it, “we still had this dust-up in the Pacific to deal with.”

Imperial Japan wouldn’t be defeated until late in the summer and that would take an atomic

bomb.

It’s a history most of us know pretty well, but what really deserves remembering are the men and women who fought this long and bloody conflict. And that’s why this particular anniversary is so important. There aren’t many left. Having grown up surrounded by World War II veterans, my dad, my uncle, our neighbors, many of my teachers — my elementary school principal had been a Woman Marine – not to mention people I worked with early in my career. It’s sobering to realize that their time with us is almost gone. I used to know a lot of World War II veterans, now I can’t think of one who is still with us.

According to the Veterans Administration out of those 16 million, some 389,000 remain, and 10,000 or so live in the Commonwealth. A person joining in 1945, the last year of the war, say at 17, would be 92. Most are far older than that. My dad, for example, would be 101.

Some, like my father, readily shared their experiences. Others, not so much. But they are, as Ted Koppel dubbed them in his book, “the Greatest Generation.”

Their experience of the war, its end now 75 years in the past, shaped so much of our history, then, and in the decades to follow. Six of our presidents since 1952 served in World War II.

At one time or another as much as 50% or more of the U.S. Congress had been in some kind of uniformed service during the war. These are the same Americans who laid the groundwork for our modern society. Whether it was social reform, the Civil Rights Act, or going to the Moon, it was this generation that made it happen. Also, with the memory of one war just past, it was this generation that held the line during the Cold War.

As one of my most beloved high school teachers told me, he didn’t consider himself all that special. Even though he was a wounded and decorated veteran. He told me he thought he was lucky. He lived through it. He had a point. Many hundreds of thousands of Americans didn’t make it home. They’re still in cemeteries here in the U.S., in the Pacific and all over Europe. He would say they’re the ones we should be thanking.

He’s right, but on this 75th VE Day, to borrow from a long song of the World War II era, “God Bless them all, the long and the short and the tall...” To all our World War II vets, living and having passed, thanks for everything. You saved the world and we won’t forget you.

David Kerr is an adjunct professor of political science at VCU and has worked on Capitol Hill and for various federal agencies for many years.

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MEMBER:



Memo to county: It's belt-tightening time

From Belmont Bay to the battlefield, those sounds you hear are belts being tightened. As the economic ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic become clear, businesses are closing, workers are being laid off, and families are quickly reducing their spending.

During the three weeks from March 15 until April 4, over 17,000 Prince William County residents filed for state unemployment benefits. By comparison, exactly 90 filed for benefits the week before that. The county's unemployment rate is going to soar into double-digits.

None of this, unfortunately, is likely to change any time soon. Gov. Ralph Northam's stay-at-home order does not expire until June 10. He announced Wednesday that non-essential businesses must remain closed at least through May 8.

Even when businesses do start reopening, it will be a gradual process. Consumers are going to be hesitant to spend freely and to gather in large public places. Many restaurants and travel and tourism businesses will never recover. And absent a vaccine, there are likely to be new outbreaks of the virus through summer and fall, resulting in additional restrictions.

Enter the Prince William Board of County Supervisors, which is in the midst of considering the county's \$1 billion-plus budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1. The board initially advertised a tax rate increase of 4 cents per \$100 of assessed value on residential properties. Because assessments also increased about 4%, that means that the average homeowner would be facing an 8% tax increase. That's an additional \$320 in county taxes on a \$400,000 house.

In good times, we're all for the county investing in needed road and school improvements, making sure its first-responders and teachers are paid competitively, and upgrading amenities like libraries and parks.

But these, sadly, are not good times.

In that regard, we thank Chair Ann Wheeler, who leads the Democratic majority on the board, for announcing Monday that she has instructed County Executive Christopher Martino to develop a budget with no tax rate increase on residential real estate. We emphasize the word "rate" because the average homeowner would still see a tax increase due to the rise in assessments.

But we do not believe that goes far enough. Prince William County and the public school system (which is guaranteed 57% of general tax revenues) need to tighten their belts further.

The county has 738 employees (as of last year) who earn more than \$100,000 – that doesn't include the school system. Every position and every program should be evaluated to see whether it needs to continue at the current level of funding in the current environment. The county should focus on funding its core services – things that must be done, such as providing police, fire, rescue and, now more than ever, the health department. Things it might want to do can wait for another day.

Every business and every resident in Prince William is going through this exercise right now. It's not fun. It's not easy. No one likes to lay off employees or reduce hours or pay. No one likes to eliminate programs and cancel vacations. But we do what we must to survive. It's time for county government and the school system to do the same.

TO THE EDITOR

BUSINESSES NEED TAX RELIEF, TOO

Earlier this week, Prince William Board of County Supervisors Chair Ann Wheeler, under intense public pressure, backed off from the 8% real estate tax increase proposed earlier this year.

Then, unlike other area state/local officials and governments, she immediately proposed an 8% increase on businesses. To avoid county budget cuts, she is "recommending increasing the [county's] programmable computer equipment and peripherals tax rate from \$1.25 per \$100 to \$1.35 (applies to trades, businesses and data centers)" and increasing personal property license fees.

Raising taxes on businesses – rather than temporarily cutting them -- at a time when they face grave danger is perverse and self-defeating for everyone.

If the Board of Supervisors' Democratic majority further weakens or hollows out the already-very small and fragile commercial part of the county tax base (traditionally only about 15%, with the other 85% paid by homeowners) and a large number of businesses and taxpayers fail or leave for lower-tax climes (capital flight and human capital flight), then how will the board majority fund their ever-expanding government programs from an ever-shrinking tax base?

The board majority implies that all programs in the county budget help people in a cost-effective way and are sacred cows. Prove it. Where are the data that clearly and unequivocally show

that? Is there any empire-building in the budget that primarily benefits county politicians and their cronies, for example residential developers? Why should county government be exempt from intense budget scrutiny, especially when almost everyone outside government is suffering?

The result of good government is the greatest good for the greatest number and protection of minority rights. Other purposes produce only mischief, wasted resources, corruption, misery, and endless tribal/factional struggle.

*Ralph & Kathy Stephenson
Prince William Citizens for Balanced Growth*

The following comments are in response to "Governor signs new election laws expanding access," published online April 13:

This allows more access to all voters. Having a holiday allows some folks who may have to work normally the ability to vote. Read the legislation.

As a veteran, having additional exceptions allowed for absentee voting. This law allows people in a variety of career fields and situations an opportunity to vote.

If you are truly concerned with voter fraud, then you would be supportive of laws that allow more access. You can also volunteer to work the polls and be election judges.

If you are truly concerned, tell me how you have worked to ensure African Americans, young people, poor and disenfranchised Americans.

True democracy happens in the light.
— *Nichole Campbell*

No voter photo ID - let's be honest, governor, this really isn't about any hardship people may have. You all have never honestly cared about that, but more about their votes and the ability for the political interests to play the system. You know and we all know that this situation opens up a dam of opportunity of fraudulent voting. Not from the people you are "helping," but opportunists within politics that are waiting to jump in.

— *Sharon Fleshman Camarca*

Everyone does realize that the requirement to have a photo ID was only enacted in 2013. Prior to that a utility bill or such stating address could be used. It was enacted by a Republican governor and a Republican controlled General Assembly. Supposedly to prevent voter fraud that no one actually showed was occurring. It is a means to limit the vote of poor and under represented. Until someone can prove there is widespread voter fraud with actual hard data to back it up, be honest with yourselves and truly understand the real rationale for the hurdles placed in front of voters.

— *Tim Keenan*