

# Richardson decamps

## Departing city manager sounds off on council members, local media

By Ben Hitchcock

editor@c-ville.com

**“W**hat’s been the hardest part of this job?” is, to outgoing Charlottesville City Manager Dr. Tarron Richardson, “a loaded question.”

The city’s top executive tendered his resignation on September 11, and will finish his time at City Hall on September 30, after 16 months at the helm. (For reference, the three city managers before Richardson stayed in the role for an average of 16 years.) City Attorney John Blair will take over as interim.

On his way out, Richardson says he was hampered by city officials who didn’t respect where their authority ended and his began, and that the media portrayed him unfairly.

“The primary job of a city manager is to make sure the budget is done correctly,” Richardson says.

“My role as city manager, in this form of government, I run the day-to-day operations, but City Council puts the policy in place. You never heard me, in a City Council meeting, try to influence a policy one way or another,” he says.

It’s true that Richardson rarely spoke up at council meetings—he spent most of his time on the dais expressionless, silently watching city business unfold around him.

He attributes this reserved public demeanor to a desire, as a new member of the community, to listen first and act second. But he also concedes that communicating his budget philosophy—“having people see that we look at the budget from a holistic standpoint and not just one department”—was the biggest challenge during his tenure.

“It’s never a good topic of discussion when you’re talking about the budget,” says the man who spent the last 16 months crafting the city budget.

Richardson rejects a suggestion that he had a bad relationship with City Council.

“I worked well with Wes Bellamy, Kathy Galvin, Mike Signer. I worked well with Sena Magill, I worked well with Lloyd Snook, and I worked well with Michael Payne.”

If you’re keeping track, that list includes every city councilor Richardson has overlapped with except Heather Hill and Mayor Nikuyah Walker.

Friction welled up between Richardson and those council members because “a lot of people were expecting me to come in and say yes to everything, rubber stamp it,” Richardson says. “But I’ve been doing this for a long time... So when you’re someone who says no to things that have been traditionally said yes to, you have issues.”

Hill declined to comment for this story, and Walker did not respond to a request for comment.

At Monday’s City Council meeting, Richardson’s last as city manager, Walker addressed his previous suggestions that she



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Outgoing City Manager Tarron Richardson (third from left) rarely spoke up at City Council meetings, saying his approach was to listen first and act second.

had micromanaged him. “The topics that I might have dug a little deeper with you are related to procuring supplies for the pandemic,” the mayor said, “making sure people had utilities during the pandemic, making sure we keep people employed during the pandemic.”

“In terms of micromanaging, if that means I strongly suggested that we take care of people in this community, then yes I did push a little harder,” she continued.

Two other notable city employees clashed with Richardson in the last year. Deputy City Manager Mike Murphy resigned suddenly last October, and penned a mysterious memo alleging mismanagement that has yet to see the light of day, according to reporting from The Daily Progress.

After a dispute over the timeline for the acquisition of new firefighters, Andrew Baxter, who had served as the city’s fire chief for

four years, resigned in June. Baxter wrote in an email to a colleague that Richardson was a “transactional, unfocused, disengaged, dismissive bully,” and that his resignation was a direct result of Richardson’s management style.

The Baxter emails were first publicized by The Daily Progress, in an article co-authored by the Progress’ City Hall reporter Nolan Stout. Stout has repeatedly pulled back the curtain at City Hall by publishing employees’ verbatim email transcripts, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.

**“A lot of people were expecting me to come in and say yes to everything, rubber stamp it.”**

TARRON RICHARDSON

Richardson has some choice words for Stout: “He doesn’t report the entire story. He reports bits and pieces of it. And for the most part it always portrayed me in a negative light, no matter what I did. All the positive things I’ve done have never been reported.”

When asked why he thinks that is, Richardson implies that his race has played a factor.

“If you look at history of The Daily Progress, has it always shown people of color in a positive light?” Richardson asks.

The Progress drew criticism for a 2017 piece about then-council candidate Walker, though the reporter who wrote the story left the paper in 2018.

Daily Progress Managing Editor Aaron Richardson says: “I stand behind Nolan’s coverage of and reporting on the city.”

The media made his job “very hard,” Richardson says. “What was said impacted me from a community standpoint.”

At his final appearance before the community at Monday's council meeting, Richardson did not address any community matters but did take one last opportunity to reaffirm that he felt the Progress' coverage had been unfair, specifically regarding the dispute between himself and the fire fighters.

Looking back, Richardson says he feels he did make positive changes during his time, listing a handful of bureaucratic reforms:

"What really went well was the reorganization of the various departments. Streamlining processes. And this was primarily to get departments that were similar within one portfolio," he says. "We got our triple-A bond rating reaffirmed. We didn't increase the tax rate... We had a lot of good hires. CAT, human resources, we just hired a new public works director. Overall we've been moving in the right direction."

Richardson also points to his work in public housing communities as a successful element of his tenure.

And he does leave with some admirers in town. "You were out there feeding people when no other members of council were out there," said local activist Tanesha Hudson to Richardson at Monday's council meeting.

The resignation announcement didn't come as a total surprise: City Council held

an 11-hour closed session in June to discuss Richardson's job performance, a meeting long enough to suggest that council members weren't just heaping praise on their chief executive.

Richardson will walk off with a lump-sum payment equivalent to a year's salary—\$205,000. Hefty severance packages are not unheard of in the city. When Murphy resigned in December 2019, he took home almost a full year's worth of his \$158,000 salary.

Richardson says there wasn't a specific incident that drove him out, nor a single moment when he knew he was finished.

"I ended up resigning for the simple fact that I was working a lot of hours. Day in and day out. And it just became a little too much for me... it just got to the point where I said okay, I've done my best, I've made a significant number of changes, and it's time for me to move on."

Asked if he has any hobbies that have been put on the back burner while he's been working, Richardson says, "No, not actually. One thing I haven't had a chance to do here is get a rest."

Does Richardson have any advice for someone considering stepping in to this job? He takes a long pause before answering. "I would say really understand what you're getting into," he says. ☺



Tarron Richardson's final day as city manager is September 30.

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# Party lines

**A close look at the controversial gerrymandering amendment that could define a decade of Virginia politics**

By Ben Hitchcock  
[editor@c-ville.com](mailto:editor@c-ville.com)

“As early as the middle of the seventeenth century, the government of Virginia was a government of the tobacco planters, by the tobacco planters, and for the tobacco planters. Restrictions on the suffrage and distribution of representative seats secured their political dominance,” writes historian Brent Tarter in his 2019 book *Gerrymanders*.

Four hundred years later, manipulating the “distribution of representative seats,” a process now called gerrymandering, remains a central tool with which Virginia’s ruling parties consolidate their own power. And gerrymandering has influenced the makeup of the state’s legislative bodies to an alarming degree in the last decade.

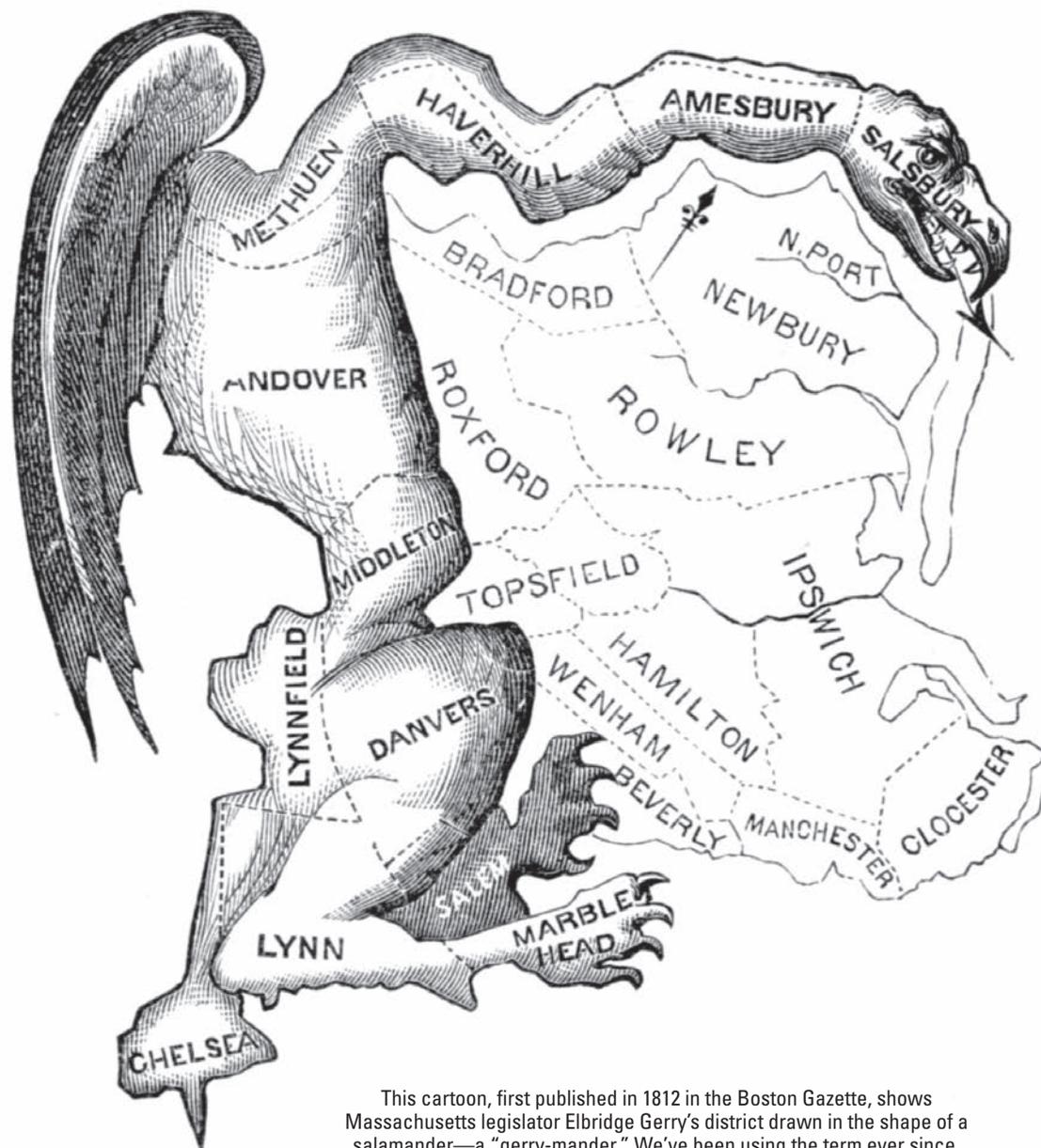
In 2011, Republicans controlled the Virginia House of Delegates and Republican Bob McDonnell sat in the governor’s mansion, so Republicans took charge of the redistricting process following the 2010 census. The maps they drew have produced some wildly disproportionate election results.

In 2012, for example, Democrats running for Congress in the commonwealth earned 48.2 percent of all votes cast. With that outcome, you’d expect them to take control of roughly half of the available seats—yet they won just three of 11 seats, a 27.3 percent yield. Later, in the 2017 House of Delegates election, the same thing happened: Democrats across the state beat Republicans by 9 percentage points, but the two parties each won 50 House seats. And in 2018, Charlottesville-Albemarle, a metro area with more than 150,000 people, voted for the Democratic congressional candidate by a 70.4 to 29.6 margin, but wound up, yet again, with a Republican representative.

Gerrymandering takes many forms. Isolated urban areas like Charlottesville can be buried in districts with hundreds of miles of rural countryside. Voters of similar demographics can be lumped into one district, concentrating their votes in a single seat and limiting their influence in a larger region. That practice is known as racial gerrymandering, and has historically been used to disenfranchise Black voters in the commonwealth.

With the 2020 census underway, our electoral districts will soon be redrawn once again. Ever since the days of the tobacco planters, the party in power has held the authority to draw the district lines. Both Republicans and Democrats have taken advantage of that power over the years, using their influence over the maps to secure electoral victory against the odds. That pattern, however, could soon change.

This fall’s ballot offers voters a chance to weigh in on an amendment to the Virginia constitution that would create a bipartisan redistricting commission, comprised of legislators and citizens, and bestowed with the power to sign off on the maps.



This cartoon, first published in 1812 in the Boston Gazette, shows Massachusetts legislator Elbridge Gerry’s district drawn in the shape of a salamander—a “gerry-mander.” We’ve been using the term ever since.

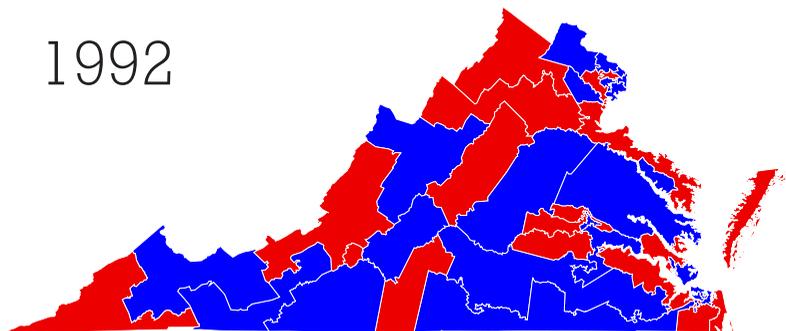
The amendment’s journey to the ballot has been dramatic, with supporters and opponents crossing traditional party lines to push it through. For most voters, the amendment won’t seem nearly as compelling as the names at the top of the ballot—but it will quite literally shape the politics of Charlottesville and Virginia for at least the next decade.

## Divided Democrats

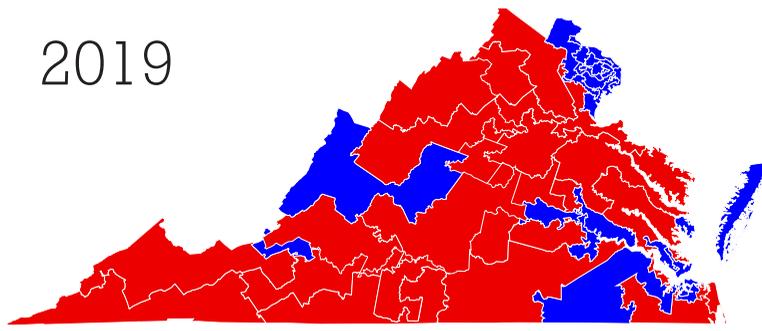
“The strength of this amendment is that it ends partisan gerrymandering,” says Brian Cannon, former executive director of OneVirginia2021 and current head of FairMapsVa. Cannon

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

1992



2019



These maps show how dramatically Virginia’s state Senate districts have changed in the last 30 years. The map on the left was drawn by Democrats in the wake of the 1990 census. The map on the right was approved by a Republican-controlled legislature in 2011. The large squiggly blue district in the middle of the state is home of state Senator Creigh Deeds.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

and these organizations have spent more than five years working full-time to bring this amendment to life. “It makes racial gerrymandering illegal under our state constitution for the first time in 401 years, and it ensures a transparent process for redistricting, so we can all be involved and be watchdogs,” he says.

It wasn't easy for the amendment's proponents to reach this point. In Virginia, all new constitutional amendments must originate in the legislature—so it's rare to pass amendments in which the majority party loses power. But 2019 was a “perfect storm,” says Cannon. “The Republicans were still in charge but saw the writing on the wall that they were likely to lose, and the Democrats were not in charge yet. So we got a pretty significant step forward on redistricting through the General Assembly.”

The amendment passed the Senate 40 to 0 and the House 83 to 15. One passage isn't enough, however. To amend the Virginia constitution, the same bill must pass in two separate legislative sessions, and then be voted into law by the public.

When Democrats took control of the legislature ahead of the 2020 session, Cannon says, “My reform friends in blue states, some of them texted me, and they said, ‘Your job just got harder.’”

Newly empowered, Democrats took a longer look at the amendment they had overwhelmingly passed just 12 months prior.

“In 2019, when that redistricting amendment came before us, it was the best we could do at that time. But it still isn't what we need,” Delegate Jennifer Carroll Foy told C-VILLE in an interview earlier this summer. Carroll Foy is a member of the House Legislative Black Caucus, which led the charge against the amendment.

Carroll Foy gets at the heart of an important point: In a perfect world, redistricting would be nonpartisan. Instead, this amendment proposes a commission that's bipartisan, with four legislators from each party working with eight citizens appointed by the legislature. If the commission is deadlocked, which seems likely to happen at some point, ties would be broken by the Virginia Supreme Court—currently composed of judges appointed by Republicans.

Members of the Black Caucus have expressed concerns that the amendment doesn't do enough to prevent racial gerrymandering. The last round of Republican maps included illegal racial gerrymanders in the Richmond area, which were struck down in a 2019 case that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The official Democratic Party of Virginia has come out against the amendment, as have the Arlington Democrats and the NAACP of Virginia.

“I have always stood for a third-party, non-partisan commission being responsible for drawing our maps,” Carroll Foy says. “I can see that that's something that's not going to happen.”

“The thing that swayed me was the words of Delegate Jeion Ward,” she says. “She stood up and said, ‘many people who support this redistricting amendment, they'll get up and tell you that it's not good, that it's good enough, that it's the best we can do right now.’ When you have something like the Virginia constitution—our most sacred document, our foundational document—do you really put standard amendments in the constitution? Because once you put it in, it's almost impossible to get it out.”

Carroll Foy, a public defender and relative newcomer to the House, announced her 2021 campaign for governor earlier this year. The other state legislator who has announced a gubernatorial run, Senator Jennifer McClellan, falls on the other side of the party on the redistricting issue.

McClellan, a longtime state politician with a reputation for legislative savvy, calls the amendment “a good example of where you have to be a little more pragmatic. There were a lot of people over the past two years who said they wanted a bipartisan commission to draw the lines, and not 140 legislators. To me that was the only way to get it done for 2021.”

She calls the bipartisan commission “better than the status quo,” and points to a bill amending the criteria by which new lines are drawn as an important step forward on eliminating gerrymandering. That bill will take effect independent of the proposed amendment.

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Cannon says Democrats will be able to prevent racial gerrymandering by appointing diverse members to the commission, that “the dynamics ensure diversity.”

Ultimately, the amendment passed its second vote 38 to 2 in the Senate and 54 to 46 in the House—nine Democrats joined all 45 Republicans to get the amendment on November’s ballot.

This fall’s vote is the final step on the amendment’s journey to the constitution. Objections from the Democrats have eroded some support for the measure, but haven’t flipped the script completely. In January, a poll from Mason-Dixon found 72 percent of voters supported the amendment and 17 percent opposed. This month, a poll from Christopher Newport University’s public policy center showed a 48-28 split.

## Walking the line

Delegate Sally Hudson of Charlottesville was one of the nine House democrats who broke with their party to support the amendment this year. Hudson describes herself as an Elizabeth Warren democrat—she says she’s “a person who likes plans”—and in this case, she’s comfortable playing the long game.

“Count me among the many people who want us to get to an independent commission,” she says. Hudson feels that passing this half measure will make passing a better amendment easier down the road. Getting this through, with some Democrats on the record saying it’s not good enough, “is the leverage we’re going to need to bring Democrats back to the table and finish the job,” she says.

If the amendment’s opponents had presented a concrete alternative plan that featured a fully independent commission, Hudson might have been willing to scratch this one. But neither chamber ever held a vote on an independent commission, and “that’s where I really started to get queasy about all this,” she says.

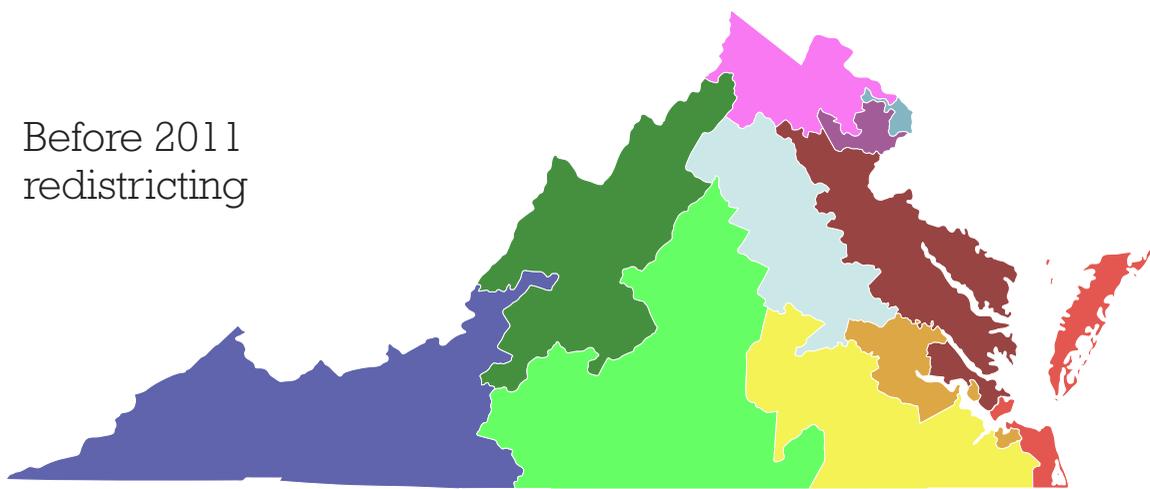
And Hudson disagrees with Carroll Foy’s reverence for the Virginia constitution. “The constitution is a constant work in progress,” she says. “It has always been a practical document that represents the best [the legislature] could get done. It’s always been loaded with frustrating compromise. That lowers the stakes a little and helps us think strategically.”

Hudson’s been in the house for less than a year, but that didn’t deter her from crossing party lines on a major vote. “I had mentors who were like, ‘You ran because you care about fairness and corruption. These are the kind of votes you got here to take,’” she says. “Some votes you take so you can look yourself in the eye.”

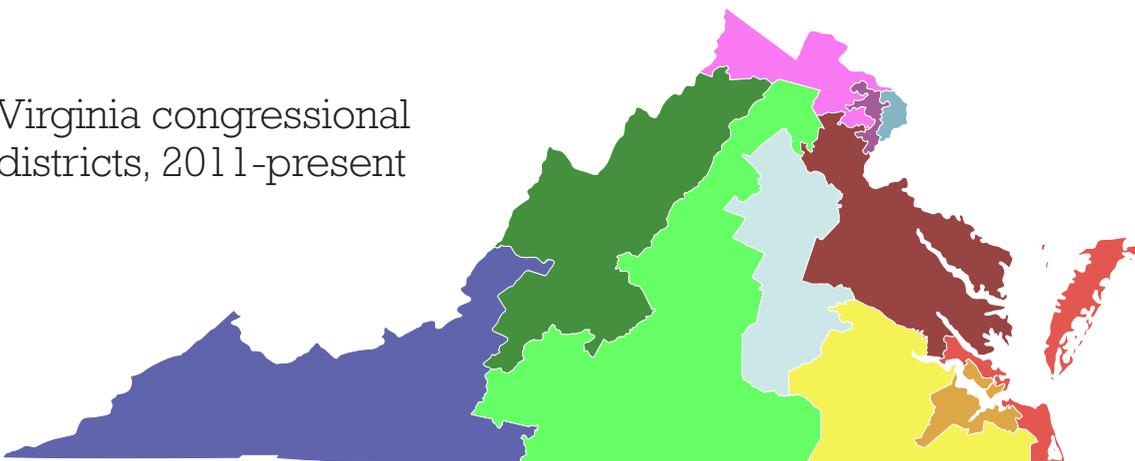
## Charlottesville’s future

For 18 of the last 20 years, Charlottesville has been represented by a Republican in Congress. Chalk that up to the shape of Virginia’s 5th Congressional District, which contains vast swaths of rural southern and central Virginia, stops just short of Roanoke in the west, doesn’t quite enter the greater Richmond area in the east, and reaches north to grab a handful of Republican-leaning counties on the outskirts of northern Virginia. It’s been carefully composed to encompass as many contiguous rural communities as possible without including any other urban areas.

Before 2011 redistricting



Virginia congressional districts, 2011-present



The two maps above show the change in Virginia’s congressional districts after the 2011 redistricting cycle, when a Republican-controlled Virginia legislature redrew the commonwealth’s lines. The current 5th District (light green) extends north of Charlottesville, into rural counties between here and northern Virginia. If the proposed amendment passes, a bipartisan redistricting commission could remove those counties from the district, reverting the 5th back to roughly its old shape and creating a more competitive district.

J. Miles Coleman, a political map specialist and associate editor at the UVA Center for Politics, says he doesn’t think a bipartisan commission would dramatically alter the 5th District, but that some changes could be in the works.

“If you look at what happened to the 5th District in the last round of redistricting, they added that northern part—Greene County, Fauquier, Rappahannock—I could see maybe that being taken,” Coleman says.

Even shaving off a few Republican-leaning counties from the northern part of the district could make a big difference in future elections. In 2018, the four counties north of Albemarle, which were all added to the district by Republicans, cast 7,742 more votes for Republican Denver Riggleman than for Democrat Leslie Cockburn.

This year, Democrat Cameron Webb and Republican Bob Good are polling neck and neck for the 5th. If subsequent 5th District elections are as competitive as this year’s, the outcome could certainly be swung by less than 7,000 votes. If this amendment passes, and the bipartisan commission

removes those counties from the 5th, the district becomes significantly more competitive in 2022 and beyond.

And other local seats could also change if the amendment passes. “At the state legislature, one of the districts I’m fascinated by is the state senate district that’s held by [Democrat] Creigh Deeds,” Coleman says. “It basically starts out in Albemarle county and it runs to the West Virginia border... If you’re taking a truly nonpartisan approach, that’s one of those seats where I doubt it really stands.”

Should the amendment fail, Democrats will be able to sketch new maps with impunity. Democrats could move Charlottesville out of the 5th District and into the 7th, just to the east. That move would concede the 5th to Republicans, but lock in a strong majority for sitting representative Abigail Spanberger, who narrowly unseated a Republican incumbent in 2018.

In the House of Delegates, Coleman says, Democrats who hope to gerrymander themselves into a huge majority would be able to make some gains, but wouldn’t be able to completely take over.

“The Democrats could squeeze maybe 60 seats out of a good map,” Coleman says. “We’re a blue state, but we’re not like a New York or a Massachusetts. The Republicans are going to have a starting floor around 40 seats.”

Coleman also notes that rapid population growth in northern Virginia and the Richmond area will make life hard for Republicans moving forward. “Even with a fair map,” Coleman says, “I think the geography of the state would still lend itself to the Democrats.”

Whether or not the amendment passes, new maps will be drawn as soon as new census data becomes available. Ideally, the 2021 House of Delegates elections would take place under redrawn districts, but the coronavirus pandemic has delayed the census, meaning new lines—whether created by the legislature or the bipartisan commission—could go into effect in the 2022 congressional cycle.

Whatever the result this fall, a new chapter of Virginia politics is about to begin. ©



Jennifer Carroll Foy



Jennifer McClellan



Sally Hudson

SUPPLIED PHOTOS

# True believer

## Congressman Riggleman's smutty Bigfoot book is light on insight

By Ben Hitchcock  
*editor@c-ville.com*

Congressman Denver Riggleman's new book, *Bigfoot...It's Complicated*, begins with a chapter called "A Discussion on Simian Genitalia." In other words, Riggleman, who was accused of enjoying "Bigfoot erotica" during his 2018 congressional campaign, is leaning in.

Riggleman defeated Democrat Leslie Cockburn in 2018 despite the Bigfoot story, but will leave Washington having served just one term in Congress. This summer, he lost a COVID-altered drive-through Republican nominating convention to Bob Good, a bible-thumping challenger from the right who jumped in the race because Riggleman officiated a gay wedding between two staffers.

Since his loss, Riggleman has been on an impressive press tour, branding himself as a free-thinking critic of the current Republican Party. He's one of a handful of Republicans to publicly acknowledge that Joe Biden won the election, and he's toyed with running for governor as an independent. The Washington Post recently ran a profile of the soon-to-be-former lawmaker, emphasizing Riggleman's libertarian bent as he sipped bourbon at his distillery in Afton.

Riggleman has also found time to publish *Bigfoot...It's Complicated*, a 150-page narrative describing two Bigfoot finding expeditions he took in the 2000s. Led by an unscrupulous expedition leader and accompanied by a handful of true believers, Riggleman forked over a few grand for the privilege of camping out in the woods of Washington and West Virginia to search for the monster.

In the prologue, Riggleman says he'll deliver "a book about those who believe and what those beliefs encompass;" the book's subtitle promises an examination of "the politics of true believers—Bigfoot and otherwise." This is a legitimately intriguing premise. In an era when conspiracy theories are so prominent and so dangerous, it seems possible that real lessons could be gleaned from those devoted to one of America's most well-known fables.

Before we dive in to whether or not Riggleman manages to teach us anything, I have to note that this book is absolutely jam-packed with Bigfoot sex. I mean it is just so, so horny. Riggleman says he's not a fan of Bigfoot erotica—"I do not dabble in monster porn, although my wife does call me her silverback," he writes, a line that might give pause to patrons of the couple's Silverback Distillery—but throughout the story he misses no opportunity to get lascivious.

"How could someone kink-shame those gentle souls who take delight in the soulful, passionate moan of Sasquatch?" he wonders, half-joking. Once he's out in the wilderness,

searching for the monsters alongside a handful of Bigfoot devotees, he regularly points out his compatriots' interest in Bigfoot's "massive pecker." When a Bigfoot believer tells Riggleman that human singing lures the creatures—yes, creatures, plural—Riggleman speculates that, should the lead singer of Journey appear and deliver a solo, "we'd have to fight off scores of salivating Bigfoot Mamas peeking from behind trees ready to mate, probably rubbing their grotesquely ridged nipples against tree bark." Thank you for that image, Congressman.

Though he clearly finds Bigfoot, shall we say, compelling, Riggleman isn't interested in laying out a case for the creature's existence. He writes that "it would be cool if Bigfoot existed," but he spends most of the story positioning himself above the fray. The group of Bigfoot devotees who make up the rest of the expedition party are foolish and hopeless, Riggleman believes—he calls them "excellent fodder for my upcoming book" and says he "couldn't care less about their opinions or suggestions."

For a man who claims to find the unknown so captivating, Riggleman is remarkably incurious when it comes to his companions. What made these people first believe in Bigfoot? Can they ever shake that belief? These questions largely go unasked, and unanswered.

Instead, he lionizes his friend and fellow expedition-goer Spinner, a state trooper, for his "brutal and often spot-on observations about Bigfoot sightings, falsification of evidence, and financial shenanigans," which "infuriated believers and organizers alike" on the trip. (Conspiracy theories are, of course, famously susceptible to clear logic and spot-on observations.)

To be sure, the Bigfoot believers Riggleman encounters are off their rockers—some say Bigfoot is a benevolent extraterrestrial,



Riggleman's book is jam-packed with Bigfoot sex.



Congressman Denver Riggleman promised his book would examine "the politics of true believers—Bigfoot and otherwise." Alas, it does not.

others think scores of prehistoric Bigfoot roam the earth, most agree Bigfoot smells like fish. But the congressman, even out there in the woods with nothing else to do, doesn't push any further. Maybe these Bigfoot believers are really nuts, but maybe they know something we don't about how beliefs come to be—either way, Riggleman isn't interested in finding out.

The most galling part of the story, though, is that Riggleman doesn't see the irony at its center.

This man, who spends most of the book punching down at conspiracy believers, spent two years working for Trump's Republican Party, a misinformation machine that has managed to convince a large chunk of America that the last presidential election was fraudulent, global warming is no big deal, and coronavirus is nothing to worry about.

In October, Riggleman co-sponsored a House resolution condemning QAnon, an unfounded conspiracy theory that claims a group of deep-state pedophiles is organizing a coup against Trump. (The theory has been endorsed by a handful of newly elected Republican representatives.) But though he's criticized Republicans in recent weeks, Riggleman was no maverick during his time in Washington. Yes, he officiated a gay wedding, but he also voted with Trump 93 percent of the time, per FiveThirtyEight; about a third of Republicans disagreed with the president more often than Riggleman did. Riggleman voted against offshore drilling regulations, against raising the minimum wage, against creating a path to citizenship for children of undocumented immigrants, and against impeachment. During his re-election campaign, he gladly accepted Trump's endorsement. He

doesn't date from a saner, pre-Trump era—he threw his hat in the ring in 2018, after Trump had been the party's standard-bearer for two years. Don't get me wrong: It is important for Republicans to loudly disavow misinformation like QAnon. But it's also wrong to pretend that Trump acolytes like Riggleman weren't complicit in its rise.

So why do people believe in Bigfoot, or QAnon, or election fraud, or the idea that COVID isn't real? "I think people fool themselves into thinking they see things just to fit in with others," Riggleman concludes near the end of the tale. A member of the expedition party who claims to have seen the creature "might be lying," Riggleman says, "But I think she wants to be included in the Bigfoot inner circle."

There's some truth in that analysis, but plenty of people managed to get that far without having to squat in the woods with night vision goggles on. And it's pretty rich to hear that message coming from this messenger.

Over the weekend, Riggleman's replacement, Bob Good, appeared at a Trump rally in northern Virginia. "It's so good to see your faces," Good said to the maskless crowd in front of him. "This looks like a group of people that gets that this is a phony pandemic."

It is not, of course, a phony pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of people and counting have died. More are dying each day. Why do people swallow this misinformation? What can we do to change their minds? How can we stop the next Bob Good?

These are among the defining questions of our political moment, and perhaps Bigfoot could've helped us answer them. But when Denver Riggleman went looking, the monster slipped into the forest yet again. 🐾

"I do not dabble in monster porn, although my wife does call me her silverback." DENVER RIGGLEMAN