

<https://www.henricocitizen.com/articles/how-henrico-officials-slashed-99-million-from-their-proposed-budget/>

How Henrico officials slashed \$99 million from their proposed budget



By Tom Lappas, May 11, 2020

Having already slashed about \$86 million from the proposed \$1.4-billion Fiscal Year 2021 budget they had just completed weeks earlier after months of work, Henrico County officials April 14 asked citizens for ideas about how to close the remaining \$12.8 million gap they had identified. They also delayed the budget process by two weeks in part to give them time to do so.

The public did not disappoint.

More than 150 suggestions – totaling more than 90 pages – came by email from county employees and citizens, offering advice about how to reduce costs to balance a budget whose projected revenues suddenly were expected to fall by as much as \$99 million as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and its crushing impact on county businesses.

Some ideas were in-depth (such as citizen Suzie Willard’s 12-point plan, which urged officials to create an early retirement option for employees, close libraries on a rotating basis and eliminate or reduce out-of-area training trips or general travel).

Some (like citizen Max Maizels’s) were not: “Eliminate membership in Virginia Association of Counties and save \$70,014,” he wrote.

Some were thoughtful, such as one from Henrico employee Jim Burns, who wrote “I for one, and I am sure many others, would be willing to a pay reduction to save the job of a fellow Henrico County employee.”

Dozens were based upon an inaccurate Facebook post that suggested the county might specifically cut the pay of its public safety officials. (Though officials did briefly weigh a number of cost-saving options – including across-the-board pay cuts, according to Deputy Finance Director Meghan Coates – Henrico’s unified pay plan ensures that any pay raise or pay cut would apply to all eligible employees, not just a select group.)

In total, a 40-member group of government and school system officials considered each suggestion, deemed 18 to be “reasonable” enough to warrant discussion – and then selected at least one for implementation: an early retirement option mentioned by Willard and a number of others.

Budget revision ‘a Herculean effort’

On Tuesday, the county’s Board of Supervisors intends to conclude what Henrico County Manager John Withoulkas has called “the longest public hearing in county history” and adopt what county officials are terming the “framework” of a revised \$1.3-billion annual budget for the coming fiscal year, which begins July 1. The term fits, because supervisors will allocate funds only in quarterly increments, while finance officials monitor changes in the economy on a monthly basis and bring revisions or amendments back to the board as needed.

Supervisors originally were scheduled to adopt a budget April 28 but delayed that vote to allow officials more time to make adjustments and the public more time to make suggestions.

“It’s been a herculean effort,” Withoulkas said of the rapid overhaul of his original budget proposal – which essentially was scrapped in late March, just as supervisors were hosting in-depth budget reviews with the directors of each county department.

Withoulkas praised supervisors and Henrico School Board members, saying their frequent discussions in recent weeks helped establish the guidelines necessary for county finance officials to devise the new budget.

“Those are the pillars this plan was built on,” he said.

Chief among them: no layoffs, furloughs or pay cuts for any of the county’s 11,000 employees. Other objectives focused on helping Henrico businesses survive (by increasing to \$500,000 the threshold of annual gross revenues beneath which businesses don’t need to pay business and professional taxes); eliminating any new burdens on citizens; and ensuring delivery of the county’s core services, Coates said.

Among the expenditures eliminated from the budget proposal:

- \$22.7 million in capital projects that were slated to get underway (including the planned indoor sports arena and convocation center at Virginia Center Commons; capital projects already underway, such as the new Tucker and Highland Springs high schools, will continue);
- \$9.2 million in operations costs across all county agencies, resulting from a required 5-percent cut;
- \$5.7 million from a hiring freeze for all vacant positions (about 300 total between general government and the school system), except for those in public safety;
- \$3 million in targeted departmental cuts;
- \$2 million in reduced general fund money for solid waste programs.

In addition, the county scrapped its planned 3-percent pay raise for all eligible employees.

The plan retains Henrico’s real estate tax rate at 87 cents per \$100 of assessed value.

Vithoulkas's new mantra to county employees is that they are serving the nearly 24,000 Henricoans who have filed for unemployment since the pandemic began.

"We work for the folks that are unemployed," he said. "We understand that, our employees are going to understand that. That's who we've been and who we intend to be coming out of this."

Officials hope to save about \$1.5 million through the citizen-driven plan to offer early retirement packages to certain employees, Coates said. About 450 general government employees are eligible for full retirement according to the standards of the Virginia Retirement System, and the county will offer each one 10 percent of their current salaries and pay their remaining sick leave (up to \$8,000 apiece), if they take the offer, she said.

Those who accept would need to retire by Sept. 1.

Finding additional cuts

The initial budget would have allocated \$962.5 million for general fund expenditures on the general government side (all county agencies except the school system) and \$542.2 million to the school system.

The new proposal would direct \$899.1 million to the general fund and \$509.9 million to the school system, whose share of the overall budget would increase from 56 percent to 57 percent, an all-time high. (The Board of Supervisors allocates a lump sum of money to the School Board, which then can spend it however it chooses.)

Closing that final \$12.8-million gap identified by officials last month required the school system to trim \$8 million from its proposed budget, which it did in part by freezing a number of vacant positions and contract stipends (about \$4.5 million in savings) and pausing plans to spend operating funds on things like travel, furniture, technology equipment replacement and innovation grants (about \$2.5 million).

The general government closed the remaining \$4.8 million in part by refunding some outstanding bonds last month and scrapping more scheduled operating costs for Recreation and Parks and the county's library system, since libraries have been closed and most county-involved sporting and recreational events have been canceled.

Initial estimates last month placed the potential revenue shortfall during the fourth quarter (April, May and June) of the current fiscal year's budget as high as \$60 million. But last week, Coates and Vithoulkas told the Citizen that number should settle closer to \$43 million, as a result of the county's hiring freeze and since its March revenue numbers weren't as bad as expected.

To address that gap, Henrico officials plan to dip into the county's \$281-million rainy day fund (surplus dollars it holds in reserve), Coates said. They already had anticipated using about \$30 million from the fund to pay for construction costs associated with a number of capital construction projects, including the new editions of Tucker and Highland Springs high schools, and now anticipate using another \$13 million. They also expect to use an additional \$3 million from the fund in Fiscal Year 2021, Coates said.

"April's really going to be the month where we can tell where we're going to go," she said, referring to revenue data that will arrive soon.

After the county's Board of Supervisors votes to adopt a budget May 12, the School Board will vote to formally adopt its budget May 14.

<https://www.henricocitizen.com/articles/henrico-supervisors-receptive-to-confederate-hills-name-change-consideration-of-citizen-review-board/>

Henrico supervisors receptive to Confederate Hills name change, consideration of citizen review board



By Tom Lappas, June 4, 2020

Henrico's five-member Board of Supervisors appears receptive to changing the name of the Confederate Hills Recreation Center in Highland Springs and to considering the establishment of a citizen review board for public safety agencies.

Varina District Supervisor Tyrone Nelson, a Democrat, proposed both ideas in a Tuesday email to the board's other four members.

"You cannot erase history. We also shouldn't have it thrown up in our face as a reminder," said Nelson, who is black, of the recreation center, which Henrico purchased from the adjacent Confederate Hills neighborhood association in 1994. "I've had citizens back as far as 2015 requesting that we change the name. I just don't see what would be the issue. That's something immediate that we should be able to see happen."

The board's three Republican members – Chairman Tommy Branin (Three Chopt), Dan Schmitt (Brookland) and Pat O'Bannon (Tuckahoe) – told the Citizen Thursday that they would defer to Nelson's wishes about the center, since it is in his district. Each also agreed that it would be appropriate to consider a review board.

The other Democrat on the board, Frank Thornton (Fairfield), also seemed to support both actions during an interview with the Citizen. Discussion about both items could come as early as Tuesday, when the board next meets.

“Mr. Nelson is a true asset to Henrico County and his district,” Branin told the Citizen. “He asked us to look at these, consider them and discuss them, and that’s what we’ll do. This board has to sit down and talk. In all that I’ve talked to, they agree with everything Tyrone wants.”

Nelson's desire for a citizen review board stems not from his distrust with Henrico Police, he said, but rather from a perspective that an additional layer of oversight would be appropriate in certain instances.

“Sometimes it’s difficult for you to hold accountable your own – I don’t care what the profession is,” Nelson told the Citizen. “I don’t want our police to think that I am an enemy of our police department. Our police department has done some really solid work. But I’ve also seen – not in Henrico, but across this country – black men killed by police. There’s something wrong with that.”

Of the review board concept, Branin said: “I think it’s a great idea. What that will look like, I can’t tell you. In Henrico, we actually sit down and listen to each other and talk about it. Everyone I’ve talked to has said, ‘Yeah that’s a great idea.’”

O’Bannon concurred.

“I totally understand where this is coming from, and I agree with a lot of what he has to say,” she said. Referencing a similar citizen-based board the county established recently to help increase racial and gender-based diversity in the division of police, she said, somewhat jokingly, “My first blush on that was, ‘Can we use that board, because they’re already there and we just had them.’”

Said Schmitt: “Tyrone is a hell of a public servant. He’s a good man, and he’s a good public servant, so when something like that’s on his mind, we’re going to discuss it. I’m not sure what [a review board] panel looks like; I would like to know if we have such a mechanism set up yet. We’re going to discuss that for sure.”

Branin said he’d also like to discuss the potential creation of a broader citizen advisory board, which could reflect upon various social issues in the county.

Of the proposed recreation center name change, Branin joked that “if Mr. Nelson wants to change it to Pink Tennis Shoe [Center]. . . it’s his district. We’re all saying ‘Heck, we don’t know why you didn’t bring it up earlier.’”

Schmitt similarly said he would trust Nelson’s decision-making in the Varina District.

“That’s in his district, I’m going to have ultimate respect for him in his district,” Schmitt said. “If that’s the will of the person representing that district. . . I don’t see why we would have a problem doing that.”

O’Bannon told the Citizen she had already toyed with some possible new names for the center, based upon the history of Highland Springs, including “Bonanza Springs Recreation Center” (in deference to one of the original springs for which the area was named).

Ultimately, though, she said her main input would be only to suggest that it not be named after a person.

But “changing the name of something like that is fine,” she said.

Streets adjacent to the recreation center are named for Confederate Civil War generals; the center itself sits on Lee Avenue, named for Robert E. Lee, and nearby streets are named for A.P. Hill, P.T.G. Beauregard and James Longstreet. Another street is named Confederate Run Court.

Thornton said Nelson’s suggestions on both topics were reasonable.

“It’s something I think the board should take a look at,” he said. “I’m definitely not against it at this moment.”

Nelson's email Tuesday also sought action on two other items:

- reducing Henrico's mutual aid police support to the city of Richmond, if Henrico officers are involved in the use of tear gas, "violent displays of aggression, and posturing;"
- a request to immediately terminate any police official who uses "unsupported maneuvers to detain human beings."

Of the latter, Nelson's colleagues generally agreed that such behavior should subject officers to punishment but that immediate termination in such a scenario would be impossible, since personnel policies provide due process for those cited for misconduct. Of the former, they tended to agree with Nelson's concern but said they trusted County Manager John Vithoukaskas and Henrico Police Chief Humberto Cardounel to act in the county's best interests.

<https://www.henricocitizen.com/articles/new-ymca-aquatic-center-named-for-fairfield-supervisor-thornton/>
New YMCA aquatic center named for Fairfield supervisor Thornton



By Tom Lappas, Sept. 9, 2020

As a college student, Fairfield District Supervisor Frank Thornton attended the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom Aug. 28, 1963. It drew a quarter-million people, who came to advocate for equality in society and in the workplace for Blacks.

It would have been a monumental event even without a speech about a dream given by a Christian minister named Martin Luther King, Jr., but in the years since, it's become known primarily for his iconic words.

Thornton wasn't able to see King's speech that day, but what he did see in the faces of those around him during the event's rally has stuck with him ever since: Hope.

"I looked at the expressions on the faces of many people marching there and noticed feelings of serenity," Thornton recalled recently. "Throngs of people, looking for something positive. People from all racial backgrounds."

Thornton, who has served on Henrico's Board of Supervisors since 1996 and was its first Black member, has carried that same outlook with him during his public service career. It's one that dates back decades before he became a supervisor, to (among other efforts) his time as president of the Henrico Civic League in the early 1970s.

Thornton is known for displaying the eloquence, decorum and mastery of vocabulary befitting a college French professor – which it just so happens he was, at Virginia Union University, until his retirement several years ago. But he’s also earned a reputation among county and community officials as a persistent champion for his district, which includes some of the poorest and most challenged neighborhoods in the county.

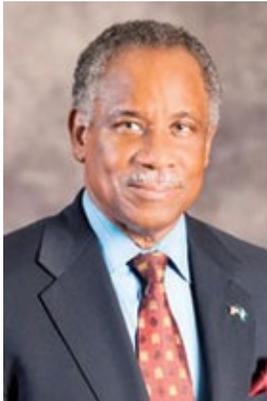
Tuesday night, that reputation was cemented – almost literally – in the history of the district and Henrico, when officials from the county and the YMCA of Greater Richmond surprised Thornton by naming the YMCA’s new aquatic center on Watts Lane after him during a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

The \$10-million, 20,000-square-foot Frank J. Thornton YMCA Aquatic Center officially will open to the public Sept. 11. Henrico paid for the center’s construction, but it was built and will be operated entirely by the YMCA. All Henrico residents will be able to swim there for free during certain hours every Saturday and Sunday. Full-time monthly memberships will range from \$20 (for teens) to \$71 (for families).

The facility, YMCA of Greater Richmond President and CEO Tim Joyce said, “is an amazing bright spot for our communities” and “an amazing beacon of light and unity for us all.”

The center will allow the Y to continue its mission of building community relationships, said Gordon W. Fruetel, the chair of the local Y’s board of directors.

“But the progress being made here today is more than just relationships, It’s about opportunity – of access, equity, learning and success that should be afforded to all,” he said.



‘A fierce, tireless advocate’

Henrico County Manager John Withoukaskas praised Thornton’s tireless work as a supervisor and his determination to oversee the construction of the county facilities that have sprouted along the “Laburnum Miracle Mile,” as Withoukaskas put it.

“He is a fierce, tireless advocate for Henrico and his district,” Withoukaskas said of Thornton, who years ago pushed for the construction of the Eastern Henrico Recreation Center after receiving a letter from a boy who asked for a place to play with his friends.

That center, with indoor and outdoor amenities, opened in 2011. It sits adjacent to the site of the new aquatic center and to the county’s eastern health department building – and just across Laburnum Avenue from the sparkling new Fairfield Area Library. It’s also just down the road from Harvie Elementary School, which opened in 2008.

In total, the county has invested about \$75 million in those facilities, Vithoukas said – and they likely wouldn't exist if not for Thornton.

“Think about it – a kid wrote a letter, a facility was built,” Vithoukas said.

Thornton had hoped that a swimming pool would be included with that facility, but when it wasn't, he didn't give up.

“This day has been, without question, a long time coming,” he said during Tuesday's ceremony. “It is evidence, though, of the powers of the two Ps – the power of persistence and the power of partnership.”

He recalled advice in the form of a metaphor from his grandmother that has stuck with him across decades. She said, “If you can't get a whole loaf of bread, then get a half.”

“This day, the aquatic center represents the other half of the loaf,” Thornton said. “I truly believe it will be transformational and life-saving.”

County officials hope that the facility, coupled with a similar one being built at Regency mall in partnership with the mall and NOVA Aquatics of Virginia, will help make Henrico “drown-proof” by providing public space to teach all second-graders – along with teens and adults – how to swim.

Said Vithoukas: “We never again want to hear the wailing of a mother who has lost a child, as every child should be able to swim.”

Thornton and other county officials also hope that for families – and children – who live nearby, the growing collection of facilities along Laburnum Avenue in the Fairfield District (which also includes a recently rebuilt fire station near Laburnum and Mechanicsville Turnpike) might serve as an equalizer for a region that needs one.

The corridor includes some of the most economically depressed neighborhoods in the county and more than its share of violence and crime. Providing children and teens in the region with positive opportunities at a young age may help reverse those trends, officials hope.

For Thornton, the center that now bears his name is another step in that process.

“For years to come, this will be a place where this community grows in body, mind and spirit,” he told the audience Tuesday. “All I can say is. . . thank you. Although my name is up there, which I am forever grateful, a lot of this belongs to each of you.”