

INSIDENOVA

PRINCE WILLIAM

Prince William Today

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MEMBER:



# County budget is anything but lucky

Lucky Sevens.

Double-0 7.

The Seven-Per-Cent Solution.

Generally speaking, seven is seen as a good number. But county taxpayers may not think so when it comes to the budget being considered by the Prince William Board of County Supervisors for the fiscal year that begins July 1.

As proposed by County Executive Chris Martino, the budget would impose an average 7% tax increase on county homeowners. No, the tax rate is not increasing, but because residential real estate assessments have risen, thanks to the strong housing market, if the board doesn't lower the tax rate, then taxes will go up next year.

For a homeowner with a \$400,000 house – pretty average in these parts – that amounts to paying an extra \$315 in real estate taxes.

We think 7% is a big increase even in normal times. But these times are, sadly, anything but normal. Over the past year, Prince William County residents have filed 75,001 initial claims for unemployment benefits. Businesses have closed. Only state and federal government assistance and moratoriums have kept thousands of county residents from being evicted.

And the county government wants to raise taxes. Let that sink in. They. Want. To. Raise. Your. Taxes.

By the way, even if you rent rather than owning a home

in the county, you'll still feel the effect of the tax increase.

Landlords will simply pass it on to their tenants.

We recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic has added costs to running the government and the school system, but the CARES Act and additional funding that is likely to come from the latest stimulus package being considered by Congress should offset many of those extra expenses.

And while we appreciate that Martino's budget includes a 3% performance increase for county employees, at last count, over 730 of those employees already make more than \$100,000 a year – and that doesn't include the school system.

We'd like a 3% pay increase, too, but when 75,000 people have filed for unemployment, we're happy just to have a job.

As we urged last year (and the year before), with a budget of over \$1.3 billion, there have to be opportunities for the county government and the school system to reduce expenses. But they aren't likely to go looking for them of their own volition. It's time for the Board of County Supervisors to step up and say that now is not the time to raise taxes. Instruct Martino and his counterparts at the school system's Kelly Leadership Center to find some items to cut in order to fund new initiatives.

We're OK with two of the proposed tax increases – a tax on cigarette purchases and increasing the property tax on data centers – but we urge the board to reject the 7% tax increase on homeowners. It's anything but lucky.

GUEST COLUMN | DAVID KERR

# Following orders: Ending military segregation

Until 1948 America's armed forces, no exceptions, were segregated, and it was carefully embedded in the rules and culture of the organization.

The Army had "Colored" divisions and "White" divisions. In the Navy, Blacks could serve only in units that loaded and unloaded cargo or work as cooks. There had been breakthroughs. The Air Force, which only the year before became a separate branch of the military, had African-American pilots who were officers. They started as the famous Tuskegee Airmen.

It had been this way for generations. Even in the Civil War, when African-Americans made up a tenth of the Union's fighting forces, they functioned in segregated units.

The segregation included the formal kind and certainly the social kind. Blacks in America's military were second-class citizens. Opportunities for advanced technical training and promotion to the officer ranks were scarce.

That didn't all change in one single day, but the tide most certainly turned when President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948, formally integrating the nation's armed forces. That's one of the remarkable things about the military. Orders are given and orders are followed. Thanks to the feisty president from Missouri nothing would ever be the same again.

Of course, in the America of the late 1940s, there was resistance. Southern congressmen were adamantly opposed to the idea. There were hearings and hand-wringing, but Truman didn't back down. He even fired his secretary of the Army,

Kenneth Royall, for not moving fast enough with an integration plan.

By the time we entered the Korean War, our armed services were almost entirely integrated. The sudden, almost overnight need for combat soldiers did away with much of the resistance to mixing the races.

An old friend of mine was a sergeant in an Army aviation company that was ordered to integrate in 1948. My friend had served in World War II, worked with Black soldiers, and was pleased the Army was finally integrating his ranks. However, that wasn't true for a number of his fellow white non-commissioned officers (NCOs). During their first week as an integrated unit, the company commander suggested that during mealtimes the white NCOs needed to sit with their African-American counterparts. "Let them get to know you."

Several of the men said they weren't sure they could do that.

The captain, probably expecting this, said he understood. They didn't have to do it if they didn't want to, but then assuming a firmness they knew all too well, "be advised, gentleman, if you don't do this, and don't help me in integrating this unit, you'll be out of the Army before the sun comes up tomorrow."

It worked, and the company integrated with relatively little difficulty. The methods the military use to obtain cooperation sometimes aren't subtle, but they do work.

Integration of the armed forces preceded integration in civilian America by almost two decades. That's another aspect of military life many civilians don't

appreciate. Social change in a structured, orders-based society can happen quickly and far faster than it can in the civilian world.

However, while military bases might have been integrated, many of their adjacent communities, particularly in the South, were decidedly segregated. Black and white soldiers and their families could socialize on base, use the same pools in the summertime, and go to the same churches, but when they left their base, it was a world of harsh and rigidly enforced segregation. This was and, some would argue still is, a source of continuing tension.

Racism, extremism in the ranks and a scarcity of African-Americans in senior leadership are still problems in the 21st century. While the military can set its own rules and force change in a way no other American institution can, it is still a microcosm of our society – complete with all its foibles and failings.

Still, there is still something delightfully satisfying in the fight against racism to recall President Truman's declaration ordering this evil business to stop. Truman's order came six years before Brown v. Board of Education, which began the process of desegregating schools, and 16 years before the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

Truman never backed down, and nor did the thousands of African-Americans who, thanks to his order, were the first of their race in so many military jobs and positions of leadership in the years to follow.

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



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MEMBER:



# Board's divisiveness is disappointing

As regular readers know, we weren't big fans of former Prince William Board of County Supervisors Chair Corey Stewart. He always had his eye on higher office, and his Trump-like style and anti-immigrant rhetoric brought only unwanted attention to our community.

When Democrat Ann Wheeler took over as board chair after the 2019 elections, we hoped for a calmer style of leadership. And while anything is calmer than Corey, the divisiveness on the board is worse than ever. And that's disappointing.

The matter came to a head last week when Supervisor Pete Candland, one of three Republicans in the board minority, proposed a resolution that would have prevented the board from voting on significant matters – the budget, land-use issues and the like – after midnight. Seems reasonable enough. Critical votes about the future of our community shouldn't take place in the wee hours of early morning, when most folks have stopped watching and, for those who are still awake, minds aren't at their sharpest.

(Yes, we know Congress has plenty of late-night votes, but emulating Congress is generally not a good thing.)

Discussion over Candland's proposal devolved into a debate over Wheeler's leadership, and – predictably – the idea was defeated on a party-line 5-3 vote. That's pretty much the way everything seems to be decided on the board these days. If it's not unanimous, then the vote is 5-3, with Wheeler and her four fellow Democrats on one side and the three Republi-

cans on the other.

(Yes, we know Congress has plenty of straight party-line votes, but... see above...)

We recognize there are issues upon which Republicans and Democrats will disagree. We also recognize that elections have consequences, and Democrats won control of the board in 2019, fair and square.

But many local issues, such as land-use decisions and where to build roads, should not be about party politics. They should be about what's good for the community as a whole and should reflect the needs and desires of the residents most affected by them. Just for once we'd like to see a Democrat vote with the Republicans – or a Republican vote with the Democrats – on a significant issue.

The problem with the divisiveness is that it feeds on itself. Since the Republicans know they can't prevail on any significant issue, they are left to lob grenades from the sideline, which serves only to score political points with their base and perhaps generate headlines they can use on campaign flyers in 2023. Meanwhile, Democrats know they have the majority and therefore will eventually get their way, regardless of whether they work with Republicans.

(Yes, we know... Congress...)

So we have a suggestion for the board: Leave the crass partisanship to our friends across the Potomac. It doesn't matter who's to blame – just figure out how to work together. That's what true leaders do.

GUEST COLUMN | DAVID S. KERR

# Some post-pandemic advice: Take it slow

Just like those 17-year cicadas I wrote about two weeks ago, we in Northern Virginia are starting to emerge from our own year of semi-hibernation.

Cicadas do it naturally. They like living 18 inches or so below ground before emerging into the daylight after almost two decades.

We humans don't do things that way. It's not our nature. We're what anthropologists call "social animals," and becoming suddenly homebound, fearful of spreading or getting COVID-19, and having our lives turned upside down has been traumatic. So, here are some questions and a little advice.

I teach at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. I know online classes were becoming the wave of the future in education before the pandemic, but after a year of teaching online, I miss my students. I think they may even miss me.

Zoom – the teaching and meeting application – is amazing, but it's like trying to conduct class over two-way radio at sea. Only with pictures. Yes, there is a degree of camaraderie and it does work, but it's difficult to tell who is listening, and it's clear the students haven't dressed up to go anywhere in weeks. The guys all seem to have beards, too. Very 1970s.

Our conversational skills have probably suffered, too, and we may find that out when we go back to work or school. Again, I think of my students. They socialize a bit but, but generally don't see other people that much. And asking a girl for a date is often awkward enough to start with. Rusty social skills aren't going to make that any easier.



DAVID KERR

Then there are public schools. For most students, the pandemic has been an unwelcome and unpleasant pause in their academic and social development.

However, I know one young man who didn't get along that well at high school and had

fair to poor grades. Since the pandemic started, he's become an A student, and he seems happier. It was almost like turning on a light bulb. There is clearly a lesson there. Maybe one style of delivering a secondary education doesn't fit all.

The media is enamored with the notion of "no more office." To which, one expert on the workplace said, "don't get carried away."

Yes, it's nice to work at home, but work is about relationships. It's about chats over coffee and informal interaction. If someone needs help, going over to their desk creates a bond that texting can't.

Also, there is the dark side of remote work – something I notice people don't want to talk about. We build bonds with our employers and employees. If an employer has to let someone go, the person they see regularly, and relate to cordially, will have an edge in that decision.

Now here is a question: Has anyone missed their commute? OK, I see a few hands. Carpools, the Virginia Railway Express, Omniride, and even Metro (though that's kind of a stretch), are fun for some people. I loved riding the VRE. Commuters have time to decompress on the way home and make friends. A few adorable romances have even blossomed on VRE.

So, like powering up an old ship with

dozens of systems – some in good shape, some not, and most you're switching on with your fingers crossed – we're emerging.

It's not going to be easy. Why? Because we are used to being at home. We would like to return to the way things were, but we're scared of a sudden return to normal. Besides, what does normal look like? And there are a lot of questions. What was the name of the vanpool contact? Will my boss still let me work two or three days at home? What's it like to sit down with other office workers and students and have lunch? Have my social skills suffered? Will it be awkward?

A common suggestion, which I support, is to realize we aren't cicadas. This wasn't normal. The last year has been depressing, upsetting and traumatic. Re-emerge slowly if you can. Don't expect an in-depth personal discussion the first time you see a friend after 14 months. Say you're glad to see them, ask gentle questions, and reestablish your common ground.

So much has changed. Our routines have been disrupted. And who knows what the future holds. How much have we changed? Will we want to be closer to family and friends? I hope so. Will we go to malls, restaurants and movie theaters like we did before COVID? Will we travel like we used to? What is the long-term future of how we provide education to our children?

Good questions – and don't expect quick or immediate answers. Rather, "take it slow," and we'll find out together.

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

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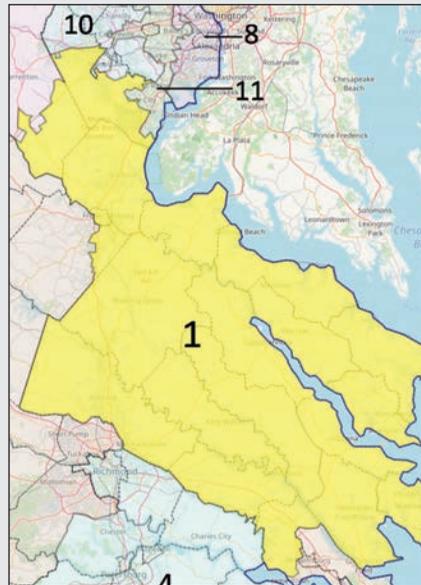
# Don't slice and dice Prince William

Elbridge Gerry would be proud of Virginia's 1st Congressional District.

The gerrymandered district begins literally where our country did – in Jamestown – and covers an incredible expanse of rural eastern Virginia and the scenic Northern Neck. It then heads northward along the congested Interstate 95 corridor, picking up Fredericksburg and Stafford County before winding west along Route 234 in Prince William County all the way to Bristow, Nokesville and Brentsville.

The 19 counties in the sprawling district include King William, which may sound like it has something in common with Prince William, but don't let the name fool you – it doesn't. Neither does King and Queen County or King George County, also both part of the 1st.

We raise this issue because Virginia's Redistricting Commission has begun redrawing election district lines after the 2020 Census – and we were delighted to learn last month that the commission will start from scratch, rather than using the current districts as a starting point. In addition, while the commission will consider where current office-holders live, one of its priorities will be to keep cities and counties together whenever possible.



Prince William is divided among three congressional districts, including the 1st, which stretches all the way to Jamestown.

These moves have to be a net plus, especially for Prince William. You see, Prince William (including the cities of Manassas and Manassas Park) is currently divided among three congressional districts: the afore-mentioned 1st, the 10th and the 11th.

According to the 2020 Census, our three localities combined have enough people (540,000) to make up about 70% of one congressional district. Yet based on 2020 vote totals, we make

up no more than about a fifth of any of the three districts. This means that although three congressional representatives have to pay attention to the county, its residents and its issues, none has to listen too closely. Their districts are centered elsewhere. The political base of the 1st – a highly conservative district – lies in more rural communities and the Richmond suburb of Hanover County. The 10th is dominated by Loudoun and Fairfax counties and the 11th by Fairfax.

With over half a million residents, Prince William deserves better. We deserve a congressional representative who is from our community and can speak up for it knowledgeably. There are plenty of immediately surrounding areas in Stafford, Fairfax and Loudoun with similar interests that can make up the other 30% of a Prince William-based district without requiring a four-hour drive from one end of the district to the other.

Now is the time for the Prince William Board of County Supervisors and the county's lobbyists to make their case to the redistricting commission. This seems like something the often-squabbling board could agree on. Prince William should do its part to help put Elbridge Gerry back in his grave.

AL ALBORN | AROUND PRINCE WILLIAM

## Topless waitresses and midget bartenders

It's Sunday morning. I'm looking at photos on the front page of the Washington Post of the 13 soldiers who died at the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan. Every time I read about the death of a U.S. service member, the same thought crosses my mind: "topless waitresses and midget bartenders."

I know this idea is politically incorrect in 2021, however, it was OK in 1968. I had just arrived on Okinawa to replace Tony, a specialist supporting a logistical operation devoted to keeping the troops in Vietnam well supplied. Tony was a "short-timer" counting the days until he got out of the Army. All he talked about was his dream: opening a bar in Philadelphia that would specialize in topless waitresses and midget bartenders. In the context of the times, it sounded like a good idea.

George was another short-timer. His dream was to buy a Pontiac TransAm and open it up on Ohio's interstate.

Every soldier, sailor, airman and Marine has a dream of what their life will be like when they get out. When we send our youth to fight wars, those dreams are often interrupted on a far away battlefield.

Some of us were lucky. We served in jobs that kept us out of harm's way. We could keep dreaming until the day we were discharged and maybe even fulfill those dreams. Tony, George and I were among the lucky ones. A lot of other folks shared their dreams at the NCO club on Okinawa. They were just passing through. As I listened to their stories, I started to wonder whether they would have the chance to live their dreams.

Every morning and evening, I walked by the mortuary. Military-issue steel coffins were always stacked outside. Some days there were none, other days a few, and other days huge stacks

gleaming in the sun.

I would then sit at my desk with a cup of coffee reading the Stars and Stripes and reviewing the day's message traffic. One of my jobs was to read every message sent in the Far East to look for intelligence. I started to connect the meaningless numbers of casualties to those stacks of coffins, and wondered how many people I might have shared a beer with at the club who might be heading home in them. I walked by those coffins every day for three years and kept reading those messages.

Every now and then, a message was a recommendation for a Bronze Star for valor or a Silver Star or something higher for bravery in battle. Most were posthumous. Once in a while, a familiar name would appear. I started quietly saluting those boxes as I walked by, wondering whether I was saluting a friend.

It feels like I'm back on Okinawa. I'm sitting at my desk with a cup of coffee reading about the 13 who died at the airport in Kabul. I wonder what their dreams were? I wonder how the people who shared those dreams are doing? I wonder how the future changed because they were sent to Kabul for that dangerous mission? I think the same thing every time I read about another service member's death.

The faces of those who passed through my life so many years ago haunt me. The stories of those who die for their country bring back those memories. One of the prices we pay in war is interrupting dreams. Perhaps we should think carefully before we interrupt those dreams in the future.

Al Alborn is a political and social activist in Prince William County. His column appears every other week. You can learn more about Al at www.alborn.net and LinkedIn.



AL ALBORN