

INSIDENOVA

PRINCE WILLIAM

Prince William Today

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MEMBER:



Missed interview – and missed opportunity

I had planned to interview Amber McMahon, a close family friend, for a long time. My wife and I often shared a cup of coffee with her. At 93, Amber was showing the usual signs of age, but her mind was sharp as a tack.



AL ALBORN

As the wife of a U.S. Marine, Amber moved around a lot and saw quite a bit. We had long conversations about politics, social issues, wars past and present and history. Amber passed away Feb. 15 on her own terms after enjoying lunch with friends the day before. We shall miss her deeply.

What went with Amber's passing is history. She talked about Prince William County and the changes she has observed since moving to Quantico in 1971 and to her last home in Lake Ridge in 1975. That's over 50 years of priceless knowledge about our community.

Amber was born in 1928. As a service spouse, she lived in several places and experienced things others may only imagine. A lot of valuable experience about how other places do things was lost with Amber's passing.

George Bernard Shaw once wrote that, "Youth is the most precious thing in life;

it is too bad it has to be wasted on young folks." Perhaps the knowledge possessed by old folks is a more precious commodity.

It occurred to me that the government, particularly local government, should take advantage of the knowledge that the seniors among us have to inform decisions regarding the Comprehensive Plan, the strategic plan, budgets and policy. It is no surprise that many of the issues faced by those who govern us are just the latest versions of problems that have occurred many times over the past 50 years.

Perhaps seniors should always be given a place at the table where these plans and public policy are discussed. While I appreciate youth and talent, with time these evolve into age and wisdom. The best solutions result from a mix of both youth and experience. Seniors can tell us what was gained from past decisions – and what was lost.

This isn't a suggestion that gets better with age. Every time a senior passes the things they saw, the lessons they learned, the advice they might offer passes with them. We could prevent history from repeating itself if we listen to those who

lived it.

Ironically, today's youth will be tomorrow's seniors. When that time comes, we can use what they learned. If they pay attention to those who have lived it, their knowledge will have more depth and value.

Government doesn't have to start from scratch every time a policy challenge presents itself. Perhaps capturing the knowledge of those who lived history in Prince William would help us avoid past mistakes.

Amber was laid to rest with her husband, Major Bernard (Mac) McMahon, USMC (retired), at Quantico National Cemetery. She was surrounded by family and friends. While there, I actually "shopped" the cemetery for some personal real estate. I like the idea of my wife and I being among old friends and in Amber and Mac's company when taps finally sounds for us.

Maybe I'll get my chance to finally interview Amber and other old friends in whatever comes after this life. I hope whatever comes next has a newspaper.

Al Alborn is an award-winning columnist and member of the Virginia Press Association. His column appears every other week. You can learn more about Al on LinkedIn.

READERS REACT

GATEWAY PLAN INCLUDES HUGE INFRASTRUCTURE COSTS

I am very concerned with huge "hidden" infrastructure costs by approving the Comprehensive Plan amendment for the PW Digital Gateway. The amendment puts 92 data centers on 3 1/2 square miles of rural agricultural land between Manassas National Battlefield Park and Conway-Robinson State Forest in Gainesville.

The Dec. 16 traffic addendum shows "hidden" infrastructure costs may be as high as \$1.5 billion for the following:

- Upgrading 26-plus miles of roads around Gainesville to support increased traffic (estimate \$750 million cost)
- Upgrading Route 234 between Gainesville and Dumfries to support increased through traffic (estimate \$333 million cost)
- Upgrading public utility services (estimate many tens of millions of dollars)

An independent study found that the amendment overestimates the possible tax revenue by 165%, and the county Finance Office found an overestimation by 80%. This estimation does not include depreciation and leasing rates, which would further reduce estimated tax revenues.

Interest payments on debt to pay for infrastructure upgrades will exceed the anticipated tax revenues for the first three to six years of the project and take beyond 2040 to fully repay. The result is a decrease in the county's available net revenue, decreasing money available for schools and producing no additional revenue until after 2040.

Unfortunately, the county planning staff does not appear to be evaluating the infrastructure upgrades. The citizens of Prince William will not know if this amendment is financially responsible for several months. This is not an open process.

– *John Lyver*
Gainesville

GAS PRICE RISE DEMONSTRATES SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

I am writing in response to the article "Average gas prices reach record high in Virginia; no relief in sight," published online on March 8. The article talks about this price jump being negative, but I also want to focus on its positive aspects.

The article states this is a record, surpassing one set in 2008

during the Great Recession. The doubling of gas prices is directly a consequence of Russia's decision to invade Ukraine.

Russia is one of the biggest oil suppliers for the United States, and the U.S. has banned all oil imports from Russia in order to separate Russia from the global economy. This is also demonstrated through businesses like Starbucks and McDonalds shutting down in Russia.

Americans may consider this a sacrifice as it negatively affects our economy; however, it demonstrates our support for Ukraine as the conflict continues.

– *Chloe Lewis*
Fairfax

DATA CENTERS WILL HARM THE ENVIRONMENT

I do not envy our Prince William Board of County Supervisors. They have a tough job: Coming up with the money to service all the needs of our county. However, I am against establishing data centers outside the already-designated Overlay District as a source of revenue.

If data centers are approved for areas outside the Overlay District, they will then be developed all over the county (from areas near Manassas National Battlefield Park to the Prince William Forest and beyond).

Why am I against this? The environment! Research tells us that data centers are detrimental when built near residential areas, parks, forests and other protected green spaces. Their carbon footprint is equivalent to that of the aviation industry. They severely interfere with forest habitats and significantly affect our water supply.

We owe it to future generations to protect the environment; this is how we care for our children, grandchildren and generations to come. The environmental crisis is an existential threat to our planet. We must mitigate it instead of adding to it. This is why we need to have a comprehensive plan regarding future development in Prince William. Before any commercial or residential development is approved for our county, an in-depth environmental impact study should be done.

– *Dr. Lorraine Schooner*
Gainesville

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MEMBER:



Nothing less than county's future at stake

There may never be a more important time in Prince William County's history than the next few months.

Our Board of County Supervisors is preparing to make a series of decisions that will affect the way this county develops, what kinds of businesses it attracts, and how it will look for decades to come. These decisions will have far more impact on the daily lives of Prince William residents than anything happening in Congress right now (or possibly ever), and it's your one opportunity to affect those decisions.

On the board's agenda, starting this week, are:

- Rezoning requests for additional large data center projects.
- A proposal to change the county's Comprehensive Plan to designate over 2,100 acres along Pageland Road for data centers (aka, the PW Digital Gateway).
- A revision of the county's Comprehensive Plan that will guide growth through the year 2040, including what kind of development will be allowed in the so-called "Rural Crescent."

Are you worried about the long-term effect of tens of millions of square feet of additional data centers in our community? Or do you think the benefits in terms of new tax revenue will outweigh the costs?

If more data centers are approved, what mitigation strategies do you want to see? Where should they be located? What should be done to reduce their impacts on the environment and surrounding communities? How should they be made

quieter and less of an eyesore?

If you don't think data centers are an appropriate use for the 2,100 acres along Pageland Lane, then what would be appropriate? Would new housing developments be worse? And how can we ensure more affordable housing in the county as a whole?

As we urged in our July 28 editorial ("Picture this for Prince William"), we believe those are just a few of the questions the board should ask about the growth of data centers in our community and the Digital Gateway project.

Your opportunity to ask those questions and press for answers is now.

A year from now, when you wonder why Pageland Lane is being widened and trees are being cut down, is too late. Two years from now, when you wonder why you see all those cranes from your bedroom window, is too late. Three years from now, when you wonder why those huge concrete walls are being erected, is too late.

Now is your time to express your opinion, to offer your thoughts, to let your supervisor – and the entire board – know your position on these issues. You have a right to be heard; take advantage of that right. If you can't attend one of the public hearings, write an email to your supervisor.

And if you don't like how your supervisor votes on these big issues over the next few weeks, remember this: 2023 is an election year. But by then the future of Prince William may already be determined.

AROUND PRINCE WILLIAM | AL ALBORN

A modest proposal to reduce our taxes

Here's a way to increase revenue for Prince William County's government and school system without raising taxes on businesses and our property and requiring no changes to the strategic or comprehensive plan.

This does not involve creating new "economic opportunities," such as data centers, shopping centers, new homes or other things that significantly change the character of the county (not that there's anything wrong with that). Further, it creates this revenue by monetizing county assets taxpayers paid for in a new and creative way.

I suggest the Prince William government start selling naming rights and advertising, too, on the assets it owns.

Our economic development strategy is designed to attract businesses to Prince William to increase our tax revenue base. This idea attracts the names of businesses, too, and those already within Prince William to accomplish the same goal. While I'm not discouraging the former, I'm guessing we would actually generate more revenue for less energy by focusing on the latter. Money spent on advertising is a business expense and is tax-deductible.

If Jiffy Lube Live can do it, why can't we? Why not sell naming rights to public buildings for a year at a time (with options to renew) to commercial entities?

Why not sell advertising on public property? Billboards outside; wall displays inside.

Why not allow companies to sponsor events? "This board meeting is brought to you by 'sparky cola,' the drink that refreshes!"

Dale Boulevard might become Verizon Boulevard. Verizon would happily pay to make sure it always looks nice since it has their name on it – reducing our costs even further. Why not sell blazers to our Board of County Supervisors members with advertising like race car drivers wear? OK, that might be over the top (or is it?).

The history of government is one long never-ending scheme to figure out how to think of new ways to generate revenue from everyone and everything within its domain in as many ways as possible. Maybe generating revenue using the assets the government owns is what's next.

Government sucks money out of our pockets that would have been spent at our discretion at local small businesses, charities, restaurants, shops, grocery stores and the like. If Prince William government were to sell naming rights and advertising to local and national businesses, money that would otherwise have gone to taxes and fees would remain in our pockets and the local economy. It would be ours to spend as we chose.

If you enjoy paying taxes and look forward to paying more of them, you shouldn't support this idea. On the other hand, if you would like businesses to help pay for the Prince William government and its school system, at least think about



AL ALBORN



"If Jiffy Lube Live can do it, why can't we?"

naming rights.

See what the market is for selling the name of what we now call the McCoart Administration Center, the Development Services Building, the Sean Connaughton Plaza, the Kathleen Seefeldt Parkway. We can work those old names into the new "brand." Try selling signs on the back of county vehicles. Sell rolling advertising on the flat screen TVs at government buildings between events.

Some will dismiss this; some will laugh; some will ignore it. All we need is one person who thinks letting businesses pay for the government instead of "us" is a good idea.

I think I'll bid on naming the board meeting room. I like the ring of "Al's Place." I would specify a reserved seat with my name on it in the front row as part of the deal. For the right price, Prince William County should welcome my money.

Al Alborn is an award-winning columnist and member of the Virginia Press Association. His column appears every other week. You can learn more about Al on LinkedIn.

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MEMBER:



Breakfast at IHOP reflects our community

I like the senior breakfast menu at IHOP – their “Rise and Shine” is my favorite. I stopped there for breakfast one Saturday not long ago. As I waited for my order, I reflected on my last column, about Manassas Mayor Michelle Davis-Younger.

The first time I ever discussed segregation with someone who actually experienced it was during my interview with Davis-Younger. She freely shared incredibly personal details too numerous to mention in my column. My emotional responses ranged from being stunned and having goosebumps to resisting tears.

Davis-Younger shared the details without bitterness. She recognized that the world had changed and focused on making the world even a better place than she found it.

As I sat in IHOP, I couldn’t help but reflect on the world Davis-Younger described and the way things are now. I sat among people of every flavor and color engaged in the most fundamental of human actions – sharing a meal. A symphony of languages filled the air. From my amateur ability at guessing languages, I surmised Hispanic families sat on my left and right. I picked up some European languages, a Middle Eastern conversation and perhaps an African dialog.

IHOP was busy. Everyone signed up on the same list to be seated and waited their turn. No one was turned away. The only privilege I saw was immediate seating given to first responders in uniform. No one objected. The wait staff reflected the community.

As I enjoyed my breakfast, I realized that IHOP offers a pretty good example of what it means to be a majority-minority community. Some accept the new reality of being a statistical minority better than others.

Prince William County is luckier than most. Mark Twain’s

famous quote offers part of the reason: “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts.”

Our diverse community has a high percentage of active duty service members and military veterans, diplomatic corps from the United States and other countries, contractors with experience overseas and immigrants from every part of the world. My 12 years overseas in the Army broadened my perspective. The tolerance for hate goes down as one’s experience in the world expands.

Hate still exists. You can never really get inside someone’s head and make it go away. It is difficult to change what someone has been groomed by their family, their religion or their cultural environment to believe; however, you can change their behavior through public policy and peer pressure.

I wish more members of minority communities who suffered discrimination would share their stories like Davis-Younger shared hers with me. Hearing firsthand accounts about the world a person grew up in is very different from reading anecdotal tales.

This unscientific sample of Prince William’s population at IHOP gave me a sense we are doing something right. Hate might still exist; however, it isn’t tolerated in our community.

And if you are one of those folks itching to post a hateful comment about this column, how about meeting me for coffee to discuss instead? My “office” is Grounds Central Station in Old Town Manassas. I’d love to understand how you learned to hate.

Al Alborn is an award-winning columnist and member of the Virginia Press Association. His column appears every other week. You can learn more about Al at alborn.net.



AL ALBORN

GUEST COLUMN | DAVID S. KERR

Rudolph, Charlie Brown and Zu Zu’s petals

I remember the first year it aired. At the time, I didn’t know it was the show’s premiere, or that it was the start of a national holiday tradition. I was a little boy, and I just knew that I wanted to see it.

My parents, who were going out that Saturday just before Christmas in 1964, told my babysitter to make sure I saw the show. It was the NBC version of “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” which premiered on the General Electric “Fantasy Hour.”

The show, done in what’s called a stop-motion format, was the familiar story about a reindeer whose nose was so bright that it could serve as a headlight for Santa’s sleigh.

The story, by the way, was written in 1939 as a Christmas promotion for Montgomery Ward, a national department store chain from times past. But that didn’t matter. It was about Rudolph, and the story was perfect for a 6-year-old who was totally enamored with Christmas.

Since that first airing, NBC has shown “Rudolph” annually for 58 years, joined by many other TV and movie Christmas treasures on other networks.

In fact, no holiday prompts as many TV specials, special-themed episodes of popular shows or movies as Christmas. No sitcom can run long without a Christmas episode, and all those TV specials

done way back when, just like “Rudolph,” keep running year after year.

“A Charlie Brown Christmas” debuted in 1965 and, like “Rudolph,” is still shown without fail each year. It’s a wonderful production. The same is true for “Frosty the Snowman,” complete with the voices of Jimmy Durante and Fred Astaire.

When it comes to movies, Christmas has been a theme no producer seems able to resist. Alas, some are distinctly forgettable. Thing is, they’re so good you can’t.

For instance, does anyone out there remember “Santa Claus Conquers the Martians”? It came out at Christmastime. I do and must admit that in 1965 I went to see it.

Fortunately, though, most films have done better. Perhaps my favorite is Jimmy Stewart’s 1946 classic, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Sure, it’s happy and melodramatic – with Mr. Potter, Zu Zu and her petals and, of course, the angel-to-be, Clarence. But it’s still one of my favorites.

It was also, according to the star of the movie, one of his favorite films, too. The movie wasn’t popular at first – perhaps the public was still a bit too dazed by World War II – but it’s now rated by the American Film Institute as among the top 100 American films.

And it seems everyone, in every me-

dium, does their version of “A Christmas Carol.” The Charles Dickens classic about Scrooge and his three ghosts was perhaps the first modern Christmas story.

In the early to mid-19th century, Christmas had fallen out of favor, but Dickens’ story, first published in newspapers in 1843, has been given credit for turning the holiday into the modern-day celebration we know so well.

“A Christmas Carol” has prompted numerous motion pictures, several stage plays and a host of TV specials. And, in some strange twists that can happen only on television, even cartoon characters such as Donald Duck, Mr. Magoo and Fred Flintstone have all taken on the role of Ebenezer Scrooge.

You might think that with the hundreds of TV episodes, the specials that come back year after year and the long list of movies, perhaps Christmas as a theme for modern media is nearly exhausted. But thank goodness, I don’t see any indication of that so far, and that suits me just fine. Hollywood seems to enjoy Christmas as much as I do.

My only request is that they keep showing “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” Christmas isn’t complete without it.

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



DAVID KERR