

Editorial: There are better ways forward than 'book bans'

At the end of April, Gov. Glenn Youngkin and a bipartisan group of state lawmakers gathered at the Library of Virginia to sign one of the most consequential pieces of legislation in the 2022 session.

The [Virginia Literacy Act](#) aims to strengthen [reading resources](#) and student performance in grades K-3, through more specialists, programs and other services.

“The most important thing we can do, as parents, as educators, and as a community, is ensure our children learn to read, so that they can read to learn,” Youngkin said [in a statement](#).

While lawmakers in Richmond agreed on *why* children need to read, localities across the commonwealth have endured divides over *what* kinds of books should be in students’ hands, especially as they mature. Months-long fights over [titles to censor](#) are a poor use of time. There are better ways forward than “book bans.”

In early May, The Times-Dispatch published a data-driven piece, finding [23 Virginia school divisions](#) had removed books over a two-year period. The most challenged book was Maia Kobabe’s “Gender Queer: A Memoir,” an “autobiographical graphic novel by a nonbinary and asexual author,” the RTD analysis found.

Within weeks of that story being published, objections to “Gender Queer” accelerated in Virginia Beach, in both public and private capacities. The book was removed from [area school libraries](#). Del. Tim Anderson and former U.S. congressional candidate Tommy Altman, [also filed a](#)

[lawsuit](#) to halt sales of “Gender Queer” and Sarah J. Maas’ “A Court of Mist and Fury” to kids at bookstores, without parental consent.

“A minor can’t walk into an R-rated movie in a movie theater without their parent’s consent, [and] kids shouldn’t have access to extremely sexual material without their parent’s consent,” Anderson contended in a [WVEC-TV report](#). He added the lawsuit’s objective is “not about banning books,” but rather a stand for parental choice.

Reason magazine [countered](#) in its recent “Banned Books Issue,” calling the lawsuit a “bizarre extension of the school library book ban into the private sector, one that was clearly unconstitutional, politically motivated, and ultimately pointless.”

“The books have very little in common other than the fact that both deal with sex,” the piece argued. “But as anyone who has ever stood agog in the romance aisle of a Barnes & Noble knows, they are hardly the only two books to do so.”

On [Aug. 30](#), a Virginia Beach Circuit Court will determine if a dated, obscure segment of the [Code of Virginia](#) applies in the Virginia Beach suit. As the [American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia](#) explained in late June:

“Under the statute, the court has the authority to temporarily block all sale and distribution of the books anywhere in Virginia upon a mere finding of ‘probable obscenity.’ And, if the court ultimately determines that the books are indeed obscene, anyone who sells or even lends the books in Virginia could face criminal prosecution, regardless of whether they had prior knowledge of the obscenity proceedings. This would impact all independent bookstores and other distributors in the state of Virginia, even if they

have no knowledge that a book has been so much as challenged.”

There are better ways forward. Steps from the State Capitol, the Richmond Public Library links patrons with [“The Bookologist”](#): a service where staff members connect readers of all ages with new favorites.

Families can fill out a form identifying their children’s ages, authors and books they already love, and their “perfect book” in 3-5 words. The Bookologist uses that feedback to compile choices, and kids then pick up the books at their local library.

“Whether you’re stuck in a reading rut, looking to read outside your comfort zone, or just looking for great suggestions, The Bookologist can help,” said a flyer at RPL’s main branch.

No matter where you live in the commonwealth, the [Virginia Readers’ Choice Program](#) also is an invaluable resource for book lists that build a love of reading.

For more than 40 years, thousands of students attending hundreds of different schools have come together annually to vote for their favorites. The program is a partnership involving the Virginia State Literacy Association, the Virginia Association of School Librarians, the Virginia Library Association and the Library of Virginia Youth Services.

The criteria for books are simple. A title must be “recognized as noteworthy in the field of children’s/young adult literature,” “published within three years prior to the ballot on which it appears” and “appropriate for the level for which they are nominated.”

The participation terms are straightforward. Students have to be “exposed to at least four nominated books at each level in

their entirety,” either through independent reading or reading aloud with help from others. They can vote through a public library, school library or classroom, and a “responsible adult” supervises the process.

The purpose, as outlined by the VSLA, is crystal clear: “To encourage young readers to become better acquainted with contemporary books with outstanding literary appeal, to broaden students’ awareness of literature as a life-long pleasure, to encourage reading aloud in classrooms as a means of introducing reading for pleasure, and to honor favorite books and their authors.”

Virginians should respect the views of their neighbors who decide a certain book is not right for their children to read. But rather than lean on a dated, obscure law that builds more barriers than bridges, let’s elevate resources that guide students toward a love for reading, in ways that preserve their own choices.

Editorial: Stoney, Smith owe Richmonders a real explanation on alleged Dogwood Dell plot

On Tuesday evening, Mayor Levar Stoney [stood before the community](#) at Mt. Olivet Church in Richmond’s East End to celebrate [National Night Out](#). The annual campaign promotes relationships between police and the community, and seeks to build trust at the local level.

The mayor was joined by Police Chief Gerald Smith at the event. For Stoney and Smith, it was a chance to reinforce how important public safety is to the health of the city.

It’s unfortunate that less than 24 hours later, the entire premise of National Night Out fell apart in a courtroom down the road. Stoney and Smith owe Richmonders a real

explanation about a regrettable month of confusion — a series of moments that have fueled doubts about administration and department credibility.

The public component of this case began on July 6, when the mayor and police chief announced that a mass shooting targeting the area's [Fourth of July celebration at Dogwood Dell](#) was foiled. A flurry of press releases and public statements credited a "hero citizen" who overheard a conversation and alerted police to the issue on July 1.

[The Times-Dispatch reported](#) officers visited a home in South Richmond that day to do a "knock and talk," seizing two semi-automatic rifles, a handgun and 200 rounds of ammunition. Julio Alvarado-Dubon was arrested and charged with gun possession by a non-U.S. citizen. Rolman Balcarcel later was arrested in Charlottesville on July 5 by Virginia State Police and charged with the same crime.

"They were planning to actually shoot up our Fourth of July celebration," [Smith said at a July 6 news conference](#). "Okay? We know what their intent is, but we don't have a motive."

"There is no telling how many lives this hero citizen saved from one phone call," he added. "It is the responsibility of law enforcement that if we hear something, that we do something, and that is the message I would like to get out there — that 'see something, say something' works."

Smith's media appearances included an interview with [CNN's "Erin Burnett Out Front."](#) But within days, new details affected the initial narrative put forth by the chief and mayor.

A [court affidavit filed July 7](#) made no mention of a specific location. By July 11, there still was no motive as both men were charged in court. But [Richmond police](#)

[officers](#) and [Fourth of July celebration organizers](#) told CBS6 and NBC12 they were not notified of the potential Dogwood Dell plot.

“What remains to be seen is whether there will be additional charges that are consistent with the, I’d have to say, very dire press release and press statements that were made at the time,” said Steven Benjamin, a legal analyst for NBC12.

“This is obviously a matter of tremendous public interest, and so if it turns out to have been as serious as it sounded, then that’s something that the public needs to know,” he added. “If it turns out not to have been as serious as we feared, then that’s something we need to know as well.”

In Richmond District Court on Wednesday, a critical exchange took place. As [The Times-Dispatch reported](#), Judge David Hicks asked Clint Seal, a prosecutor in the Richmond Commonwealth’s Attorney’s Office, if there was any knowledge that Alvarado-Dubon or Balcarcel were implicated in a shooting plot on Dogwood Dell.

Hicks posed the question because he had children who attended the Fourth of July gathering, which would have been grounds for recusal. Seal responded, “No.”

Seal did tell Hicks he thought “there is evidence to support the potential for a shooting,” the RTD reported. The case now will move to federal court, where criminal complaints show charges have been modified to illegal possession of weapons for [Alvarado-Dubon](#) and entering the country illegally for [Balcarcel](#).

In a Wednesday statement, Smith [stood by his department’s “investigative work”](#): “Following up on a tip from a concerned individual who heard a plot of a mass shooting planned for

July 4th, the Richmond Police Department began an exhaustive investigation to determine its validity. Based on the initial information and subsequent investigation, investigators recovered firearms and several hundred rounds of ammunition from the suspect's residence."

There is no disputing the presence of these weapons, or the work of these officers. But the exchange between Hicks and Seal puts the spotlight back on Stoney and Smith. Why did they deliver not just local press conferences, but national television interviews, that heightened Dogwood Dell as the plot's central location?

These media appearances came right as the country grappled with the Fourth of July mass shooting in Highland Park, Ill., where [seven were killed and dozens were injured](#). For Richmonders fearing for their public safety, the narrative from Stoney and Smith was too close for comfort.

After Wednesday's court proceedings, at an [afternoon press conference](#), Smith doubled down on the target location.

"If it's Richmond, a Fourth of July celebration, it's at the Dogwood Dell," he said alongside Stoney.

"I do understand now that the case will reside at the federal level, and all the evidence, that great investigative work that has been done, will be handed over to the federal government, and the process will play itself out from there," the mayor added.

Fair enough. But why did the mayor and police chief not let the process play out to begin with?

To truly restore trust in government, all details must come to the fore of this situation. Media organizations including The Times-Dispatch are pursuing [Freedom of Information Act](#)

[requests](#) for emails, text messages and notes related to the alleged mass shooting plot.

The mayor's office [decided to apply](#) a Virginia Freedom of Information Act "working papers" exemption, which allows officials to withhold such documents for "personal or deliberative use."

We're unmoved by that choice. As Benjamin said, this is a matter of public interest, and Richmonders deserve to know what happened. Moreover, as a [recent RTD news report highlighted](#), the FOIA exemption is "permissive, not mandatory."

Such records "may be disclosed by the custodian in his discretion, except where such disclosure is prohibited by law," [the Code of Virginia reads](#).

Legal language aside, the cardinal rule for public safety still is, as Smith put it: If you see something, say something. We see a problem here.

Smith and Stoney have had weeks to provide clarity. They need to say — and show — more than what they have to date. Richmonders deserve a real explanation from city leadership — one that far exceeds the current state of confusion.

Opinion: Blaming localities for the housing crisis is misguided

Housing advocates are cheering Gov. Glenn Youngkin's recent comments that his administration will prioritize increasing the state's dwindling stock of affordable housing.

The lack of available inventory is reaching a crisis point that is already having a devastating impact on those at the lower

end of the income scale, leading to increasing rents and demand for apartments, spiking evictions and homelessness, particularly in the Richmond region.

It's also hurting middle-class families and, especially, millennials looking to put down roots and buy their first homes. Meanwhile, the rising cost of senior housing has increased the affordability gap for older, single-family homeowners seeking to downscale and move into lower-maintenance and assisted living facilities, which limits the availability of starter homes for first-time buyers. It's a vicious cycle.

The governor has said recently that additional state subsidies and loan programs to reduce housing costs aren't the answer. In prepared remarks before a joint meeting of the state Senate and House finance committees, he pinned the blame on local governments.

"We must tackle root causes behind the supply and demand mismatch behind places to live: unnecessary regulation, over burdensome and inefficient local governments, restrictive zoning policies and an ideology of fighting tooth and nail against any new development," he said.

He reiterated the point last month in a speech at the Virginia Governor's Housing Conference in Arlington: "We have to have more development friendly local regulations and processes, and we also have to respect the rights of landowners."

But targeting local governments, and their often cumbersome zoning ordinances, as unnecessarily impeding residential developers is a Pandora's box. There's a good reason localities pass zoning ordinances that restrict new development: Housing, on its own, doesn't come close to

producing enough tax revenue to pay for the required public services that come with all those new residents moving in. Things like schools, roads, police, firefighters and public libraries.

It's the reason why localities like Chesterfield County, home to Central Virginia's fastest-growing suburbs, has long sought to rein in the pace of residential development. Unlike neighboring Henrico County, which is bisected by interstates 64 and 295 and has a much larger commercial tax base — Chesterfield is in essence the region's bedroom community. It can ill afford to open the floodgates and let developers plop down thousands of new homes and apartments unabated.

"Fundamentally, I agree with the governor that we need more housing stock in Virginia," Chris Winslow, the Republican chairman of the Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors, said in an interview earlier this week. But there's a caveat: "We have to have the ability to support more housing stock."

The biggest thing the state can do to help offset the cost of development, he says, is "streamline transportation improvements, fund maintenance of roads and those transportation enhancements — and help localities build schools."

Yes, most localities could do a better job of detangling zoning policy and making the process of applying for, and building, new housing less cost-restrictive. Higher-density development like condominiums, townhouses and apartments, something Chesterfield's Planning Department has increasingly prioritized over the last decade, allow for more efficient delivery of public services, and more streamlined infrastructure improvements. Finding a way to

align already existing development goals in places like Chesterfield, Henrico and Richmond — all of which are working to create more dense, tax-efficient housing — with state policy that incentivizes increasing the stock of workforce housing is desperately needed.

However, it can't be done responsibly without state subsidies and increased funding for the services that new housing requires. Pushing local governments to ease zoning restrictions and allowing developers an express run to construction will only shift the burden of funding those services to local taxpayers.

Overloading localities with housing that it cannot afford is akin to a business responding to pent-up demand by simply manufacturing more widgets. It must also account for the requisite increase in overhead and delivery costs, customer service costs, accounting and administrative expenses.

Getting at the root causes of the affordable housing crisis, as Youngkin has promised, is laudable. But simply lifting restrictive zoning policies and passing the burden of paying for new housing to localities, and local taxpayers, isn't the solution.