

INSIDENOVA

PRINCE WILLIAM

Prince William Today

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MEMBER:



Mask opponents teaching the wrong lessons

It didn't take new Gov. Glenn Youngkin long to make the job of Virginia's local public schools a whole lot more difficult.

Within hours of being inaugurated Jan. 15, Youngkin signed an executive order allowing parents to opt-out of any requirement that their children wear masks in schools. That Youngkin would ease the state's COVID-19 restrictions was not a surprise – after all, elections do have consequences – but that he would do so in such a confusing manner was disappointing.

All Youngkin's order did was create yet another round of controversy that local school boards and school systems really don't need. That's because the order appears to conflict with state law passed in the 2021 General Assembly that requires school systems to follow current CDC mitigation guidelines, which currently include masking.

So, predictably, the matter is headed to the courts, with Prince William County this week joining six other school districts in challenging the order.

In the meantime, public schools – which already have enough to deal with

– have to figure out what to do with students who – mostly at the urging of their parents – refuse to wear masks. Do they send them home or otherwise punish them? Segregate them from other students? And what about teachers who might be susceptible to COVID due to other health issues? Are they expected to stay on the job, teaching in person to a classroom full of unmasked students?

Youngkin tried to provide some support for local school divisions on Jan. 21, when in a statement accompanying more details about his order he urged students and parents to follow the guidelines of their principals on masking until the courts can rule on the legality of his order. But that was six days too late. The damage had been done. Virtually every school board in the state had already either backed down from its masking requirement or reiterated that masking would be required until the courts rule otherwise.

We understand that this is a hot-button issue, with passionate arguments on both sides. We don't like wearing masks any more than anyone else does. But

local school systems and local principals must have the ability to make and enforce rules. And parents who tell their children to disobey those rules are doing their children a disservice. Outside one Loudoun County school on Monday morning, parents were giving doughnuts to students who refused to wear masks. This is not the civil rights movement; it's a pandemic.

School boards are publicly elected bodies in Virginia. The Prince William School Board will be up for election in November 2023. Parents have every ability to speak up at school board meetings and to vote out school board members with whom they don't agree. They can protest, march, wave signs and, heck, even write letters to the editor.

But you wouldn't tell your child to speed just because you don't believe in speed limits. You wouldn't tell your child not to do his or her homework because you think the teacher is too tough. And you shouldn't tell your child not to wear his or her mask at school until there is clarity on Youngkin's order.

Otherwise, you are teaching the wrong lessons.

READERS REACT

DIGITAL GATEWAY A GET-RICH-QUICK SCHEME

I have been an ardent opponent of the Prince William Digital Gateway, a get-rich-quick scheme concocted by greedy landowners and their developer henchmen to plunder western Prince William County for their personal enrichment.

I chose to retire in western Prince William only two years ago. If this proposal is passed, I will realize that choosing a future in Prince William was a mistake, and I will flee our miserable new data center alley, as will all of the residents of Pageland Lane who have disingenuously influenced the Democratic members of our Board of County Supervisors into embracing this awful idea.

But what about those who are not as fortunate as I am? They will be stuck with the ugly, ravaged landscape, damaged environment and dirty water our elected officials foisted upon them, while the landed gentry who conned them into it are living in luxury elsewhere with the fruits of our supervisors' gullibility.

And who will our government officials stick next? How many will think twice before moving to, or remaining in, Prince William after it becomes the industrial wasteland they built in child-like pursuit of their shiny new toys? Who of our residents will be able to trust that their modest dreams won't become nightmares at the sudden whim of opportunistic developers and short-sighted supervisors?

Prince William is at a crossroads, and our supervisors are now considering the path it will take. I hope they choose carefully so that future generations will be proud to call it home.

– Bill Wright
Gainesville

CITIZENS ARE BEING RAILROADED

The Prince William County Planning Department advertised its Jan. 20 and 27 meetings as a review process to gather public comments on the data center overlay district and the proposed PW Digital Gateway plan. In-person participants were limited to 300 people – and then in-person participation was canceled

for Jan. 20.

Additional people were not permitted to sign on to speak remotely. I was one of the many citizens who signed up in advance to speak remotely but was never sent a link and had to fight with the county to finally be added to the remote speakers.

If this county is truly interested in gathering public comments, the county would make it possible for all citizens who want to participate to speak. It's very clear – the purpose of these events is not to gather all public input. This is pure and unadulterated window-dressing. This is just another in the public's continuing experience of being railroaded.

Prince William now has 25 data centers. The economic development department reports that somewhere between 4.9 million square feet and 5.2 million square feet are built out.

The current data center overlay district allows for between 19 million to 37 million square feet of additional data center development. That amount of expansion, plus what is already built and approved, is more than sufficient for our county.

Only when this county stops bending over backward to give data centers incentives, taxes them appropriately and constrains them to existing industrially zoned locations within the existing overlay, will county citizens reap any benefits from these monolithic buildings – which consume obscene amounts of power and water, run transmission lines and substations through communities, introduce never-ending noise and bring threats to water, land and citizens. With 30 average employees, there is no employment benefit.

Earmarking 10,000 acres of land appropriate for data centers was a good decision. Expanding beyond this is quite simply this board breaking a promise with its constituents.

If it is the intention of this board to railroad residents out and become solely an industrial center, then get honest about that. The fraudulent process in place certainly points in that direction. I, for one, oppose industrializing what we have.

– Karen Sheehan
Haymarket

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MEMBER:



Result of 2019 election = higher taxes

Elections have consequences, and the 2019 Prince William Board of County Supervisors election has certainly had consequences for county taxpayers.

That election resulted in Democrats winning a 5-3 edge on the board, now led by Democratic Chair Ann Wheeler. And since the Democrats took over in January 2020, it seems they haven't met a tax they didn't like.

Here's some history:

- **In 2020**, during the uncertain and unprecedented first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the supervisors raised the real estate tax on the average house by \$177.

- **In 2021**, real estate taxes went up even more, this time by \$264 on the average house. The board also approved a new tax on cigarettes at 40 cents per pack and began work on a tax on plastic bags.

- **And last week**, the board approved advertising a budget that sets the real estate tax rate at a level that will result in another increase, this one of \$233, or 4.9%. Supervisors also seem likely to adopt a new tax of 4% on meals sold in restaurants.

So, for those who may not be keeping

score at home, that means that if this year's budget is approved as advertised, the average homeowner will be paying \$674 more in taxes per year than they were just three years ago. That's based on the county's average home value of about \$466,000, and is a total increase of nearly 15%.

Oh, and Prince William taxpayers will also be paying more to buy cigarettes and to eat out – and probably eventually to use a plastic bag at the grocery store.

Now if all this money was going to pay our teachers and firefighters and police officers something closer to what they are worth, we would have very few complaints. But it's not.

And we understand inflation, supply chain pressures and all that, but has your household income gone up 15% in the past two years? Probably not.

Your favorite Democratic board member will tell you that the real estate tax rate has actually gone down during this time – and they will be right. The rate has been reduced, but homeowners are paying more because their home values have gone up faster. And while rising home values definitely benefit homeowners, they only do so when it's time to sell a house. Not now.

The county's proposed budget for fiscal year 2023, which begins July 1, includes lots of nice new programs, and, yes, pay increases for county employees and teachers. But life is about making choices. As a typical homeowner, if you want to buy something new, you save for it and perhaps spend less on something else so you can afford it. Planning that fancy overseas vacation? Maybe you don't splurge on so many meals out or you cut back on the morning coffee run.

It's time for the county government – and the school system – to do the same thing. What programs were created five, 10 or 15 years ago that no longer serve a purpose? What reports are generated that once seemed important but no one reads any more? What people were hired to run those programs and write those reports? Where can functions and job duties be consolidated between departments and agencies to save money?

Those are hard questions. But they are questions that must be asked. The taxpayers of Prince William deserve answers. Otherwise, there may very well be consequences for the Democratic majority on the Board of Supervisors come election time next year.

READERS REACT

HOW MANY DATA CENTERS ARE ENOUGH?

There are 33 data centers already built within the 10,000 acres of Prince William County's existing Data Center Overlay District with room for more. The average data center parcel is between 23.3 and 39.3 acres. There are 34 additional parcels of vacant land within the existing data overlay district. There is no reason to expand the overlay district.

The Board of County Supervisors has approved another 20 data centers outside the Overlay District in the Gainesville District. Developers are erecting buildings with no assurance they will be occupied. What justification is there to take 4,000 acres from the "Rural Crescent" (2,000 each in Gainesville and Nokesville) to build more data centers?

Please express your concerns for the Rural Crescent, the Occoquan watershed and the impact on the Manassas National Battlefield Park and the history that lies buried on Pageland Lane. Tell the Board of Supervisors to vote "no" on the PW Digital Gateway comprehensive plan amendment.

– Sandra Painter
Gainesville

WASHINGTON COMMANDERS STADIUM PROPOSAL

Bills that could lead to construction of a \$3 billion Washington Commanders NFL football stadium complex in Prince William or Loudoun county cleared both houses of the Virginia General Assembly this month (see related article, Page 11). InsideNoVa readers on Facebook had a lot to say about the possibility:

"Toss [co-owner Dan] Snyder overboard, select a real owner, change name to RedHawks, build the stadium in Loudoun County and the fans will return... eventually!"

– Richard Hug

"Hopefully more restaurants and shops around or next to the stadium unlike FedEx where there is none!"

– Mike Yared

"First you should have a REAL NFL team. That will never happen as long as Dan Snyder is involved."

– Devlin Clark

HOW TO SUBMIT A LETTER

- » Letters to the editor should be 300 words or less and address an issue covered in the newspaper or online.
- » Submit letters by email to info@insidenova.com (include "Letter to the Editor" in the subject line) or by using our online form at www.insidenova.com/site/forms/online_services/letter_editor/
- » Letters must be signed and indicate where the author lives. Preference is given to letters that express original thoughts and ideas and to readers who live in our coverage area.

"Let's pay for a stadium for the guy that just bought a \$50 million home."

– Alberto R. Florez

"PWC couldn't even get Disney or Legoland built here. Oh, same with the P-Nats, too."

– Brian Olszyk

"Future season ticket holder if this happens."

– Don Jefe

"No thanks, no taxpayer money should go to Snyder with this, and Loudoun can have the traffic."

– Curtis Brown

"Depending on how the facility is financed, either citizens or businesses will pay a large part of the cost. Business entities in D.C. are still paying a ballpark tax for Nats stadium."

– Nāpualokelani Kamakele

"As there is no Metrorail in PWC, it shouldn't be an option. Traffic is already bad and we don't need more of it or our tax money paying for a billionaire's hobby."

– Aisha Robbins

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MEMBER:



Picture this for Prince William



This photo, taken from a drone in February, shows a few of the 25 million square feet of data centers that have been built in the Ashburn area of Loudoun County. **VANTAGE POINT DRONE | FOR INSIDENOVA**

If you want to see what western Prince William County might look like in 20 years, drive north on Route 28, just past Dulles International Airport. Take the Waxpool Road (Route 625) flyover exit, which goes over southbound 28 and look around you. As far as the eye can see are monolithic buildings in various shades of gray with huge air-conditioners on top.

Those two- and three-story buildings are among the 25-million-plus square feet of data centers that have been built in the Ashburn area of Loudoun County over the past 10 years. Have they contributed to the county budget, helping to keep taxes lower for residents? Yes, according to most indications. But at what cost? Has the additional tax revenue been worth the loss of trees and greenery? Has it been worth potential impacts on air and water quality that may not be known for decades? And has it been worth creating what, quite frankly, are eyesores?

Those are among the questions the Prince William Board of County Supervisors will have to ask over the next few months as it considers a proposal to change the county's comprehensive plan to target data center development on 2,100 acres along bucolic Pageland Lane, north of Interstate 66. Already two data center developers have filed large rezoning requests for portions of that land.

The PW Digital Gateway proposal has already been discussed at numerous board meetings and on these pages. That debate is only going to get more intense as the supervisors' vote nears. For not only will this decision chart the county's course for decades to come, but it also will likely be the top issue when

the entire board is up for re-election next year.

And it has created some strange bedfellows. Among those opposed to expanding the district are Democratic Del. Danica Roem and Republican Supervisor Jeanine Lawson, who are about as far apart on the political spectrum as possible.

Among those who support the plan are a group of Pageland residents who passionately (and successfully) opposed previous developments in the area, including Disney's America in the 1990s and, more recently, construction of a Bi-County Parkway.

Indeed, opponents have gone so far as to file recall petitions against two board members – one from each party. Republican Pete Candland is targeted because he lives on Pageland and is among landowners seeking the change – thus meaning he can't vote on the plan that affects his district more than any other. And Democratic Chair Ann Wheeler owned stock in several companies tied to the data center industry.

So as the debate heats up, here are a few questions we think members of the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors and, ultimately, the voters of Prince William should be asking:

- What happens to data centers when the amount of data that today requires hundreds of computer servers can fit on a device the size of a smartphone?
- What additional electric transmission lines will be necessary to accommodate more data centers?
- What roads will need to be built or widened to accommodate construction traffic?
- What long-term impacts do all those cooling units have on air quality?

- What long-term impacts do the huge impervious surfaces of data centers have on water quality?

- What consideration should board members give to the fact that the supervisor who represents the district that will be most affected can't participate in the vote?

Finally, it's worth noting that Prince William already has about 10,000 acres in its data center overlay district. That represents almost 5% of all land in the county – a higher percentage if you back out undevelopable land that is part of Marine Corps Base Quantico, the Prince William Forest Park, and the Manassas National Battlefield.

That's enough land to accommodate 33.4 million square feet of data centers, according to a report prepared for the county. That should satisfy demand through this decade and into the next and is more square feet than currently is built out in Loudoun – considered the data center capital of the world. (Indeed, Loudoun supervisors have started to push back against designating additional land for data centers.)

That means the biggest question the Prince William board should ask is this: How many data centers are enough? And will the extra tax revenue they generate add to the county's quality of life enough to offset the potential negative impacts?

We hope supervisors will consider these questions carefully, seek informed, unbiased answers and not just vote along party lines. Because this is an issue that transcends politics. It will determine what we want to be as a community. Are we in a race to be the data center capital of the world? Or are some things more important than money?