



# INSIDENOVA

## PRINCE WILLIAM



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# Sticker Shock

### VALUES ON THE RISE

Prince William County collects personal property taxes on about 161,000 vehicles made since 2007. Of those, about 93% will see an increase in value of more than \$500, resulting in tax increases ranging from \$19 to as much as \$740. Here's a breakdown by the range of increase in value:

Range of Increase	Number of Vehicles	Tax Increase
Less than \$500	11,864	Up to \$19
\$501-\$2,500	88,998	\$19-\$93
\$2,501-\$5,000	45,722	\$93-\$185
\$5,001-\$10,000	13,995	\$185-\$370
\$10,001-\$15,000	738	\$370-\$555
\$15,001-\$20,000	126	\$555-\$740

Source: Prince William County Finance Department



## 'Unprecedented' rise in vehicle values will have residents paying higher tax bills

» BY NOLAN STOUT  
nstout@insidenova.com

The recent rise in the value of used vehicles appears likely to lead to an unusual increase in most personal property tax bills for Prince William County residents, a levy that historically shrinks over time.

A computer chip shortage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has made new vehicles harder to come by, driving up assessments on used ones.

"Right now, if you own a used car, you can sell it and probably make more than you bought it for," Michelle Atreed, Prince William's finance director, told the Board of

### YOUR THOUGHTS?

» Want to express your opinion on the county's budget and taxes for fiscal 2023? The final budget public hearing will be Tuesday, April 12, at 7:30 p.m. at the county government complex. For details, visit [pwcva.gov/budget](http://pwcva.gov/budget).

County Supervisors last month.

In Virginia, which levies a personal property tax on vehicles, this could mean a higher tax bill in the fiscal year 2023, which starts July 1. Typically, personal property tax

bills decrease over time because as a car gets older its assessed value drops.

However, Prince William County officials are projecting assessment increases for virtually all of the roughly 161,000 vehicles registered locally and made since 2007. Because of that, tax bills will rise without a reduction in the personal property tax rate, which is \$3.70 per \$100 of assessed value. That means the owner of a vehicle assessed at \$10,000 owes \$370 in personal property taxes.

Atreed said that the rising vehicle assessments are

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## Five Tips for Transitioning Into Retirement

Retirement marks the end of a chapter in your career and the start of a new lifestyle. This unique transition can bring a myriad of emotions, most commonly ones of excitement and apprehension. If you're pondering retiring in the next year or so, here are five tips to help you transition smoothly.

- 1. Know the transition could take weeks – or months.** You likely spent decades forming a routine around your work schedule. Establishing your new normal of volunteer work, an encore career or helping family will take time.
- 2. Communicate your retirement plans with family members.** Your parents, kids or other family members will likely be interested in how you intend to spend your retirement days. Will you be visiting the grandkids more often? Continuing to host family get-togethers? Do you plan to purchase a retirement home?
- 3. Maintain healthy habits.** Staying diligent with the activities that help you feel your best is important as you shift into retirement. Prioritize eating healthy, sleeping well, staying fit and maintaining friendships in your new routine.
- 4. Evaluate your finances.** Prior to retirement, you likely outlined how you will manage your cash flow. (If not, today is the day to put a plan in place.) As you enter retirement, review your expenses to ensure they're aligned with your plan. Consult a financial advisor for guidance.
- 5. Reset your attitude.** Retirement is not the ultimate finish line. Experiencing a lot of emotions is common but try to focus on what you're excited about in this next chapter. And, remember you're not alone. Talk to friends, family and professionals in your life for support along the way.



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# Concerns continue over Possum Point plans

» BY JARED FORETEK  
jforetek@insidenova.com

Prince William residents raised concerns over contamination, earthquake safety, truck traffic and more at a public information session on Dominion Energy's plan to construct a new coal ash landfill at its Possum Point Power Station.

The utility company is seeking approval for a new on-site landfill to contain the roughly 4 million cubic yards of coal ash currently sitting in Pond D at Possum Point. The double-lined, 190-foot landfill would be "above and beyond" state regulations, with lining that should last for over 400 years, according to Dominion representatives.

But nearby residents say they're concerned about the plan, which will ultimately need county and state clearance. At an information session Monday night hosted by Potomac Supervisor Andrea Bailey, speakers worried about issues like the durability of the landfill in the event of an earthquake, as well as the volume and speed of truck traffic needed to haul in soil to cover the coal ash.

"How can you build a ... coal ash landfill on a site where there's already groundwater contamination underneath it, and exceedances for groundwater contamination, knowing that you're stirring up that contaminated groundwater?" one resident asked.

Spencer Adkins, a projects director at Dominion Energy, said the proposed setup would be much more secure for containing and separating the coal ash from any groundwater than the current Pond D. Previously, Dominion operated as many as five different ash ponds at Possum Point, but the company consolidated them into Pond D after the power plant stopped burning coal in 2003.

"It's going to be a brand new ... containerized system that will hold everything in. It will have a detection system ... that we'll be monitoring, having it inspected," Adkins said. "So we'll continue to monitor all those things, basically that's the main difference."

As for earthquakes, Adkins and another Dominion representative said the power station has already had to meet several standards related to seismic activity and that the new landfill would have to do the same. If constructed at the western corner of Dominion's Possum Point property, as the company is proposing, the landfill would sit about 1,000 feet from the nearest homes at the southern end of Potomac Shores.

Dominion says it has three options for what to do with the coal ash sitting in Pond D since former Gov. Ralph Northam signed a state law requiring the disposal of coal ash to protect groundwater. Of the three options – depositing the ash into an onsite landfill, shipping it to an offsite landfill, or transporting it away to have half of it recycled – Dominion says the onsite option would be the most cost-efficient, fastest and least disruptive to nearby residents.

Moving the ash to have it recycled or stored in a different landfill would require over 100 trucks per day or 200 railcars per week and range in cost from \$703 million to \$1.19 billion. The onsite

landfill, the company says, would cost just \$347 million, and any cost could ultimately be passed on to the state's energy consumers as allowed in the 2019 legislation.

But residents said the transportation breakdown Dominion was showing the public was not comprehensive. The company has provided estimates only for how many trucks it would require to ship the coal ash away from Possum Point if it went with one of the offsite options. It has provided no such estimate for the number of trucks required to bring soil into Possum Point with the onsite option. Residents also said that trucks moving in and out of Possum Point frequently sped through nearby neighborhoods during previous projects.

"You show zero trucks on the onsite landfill but you haven't done a cut-and-fill analysis, but you're able to come with these numbers," a member of Bailey's resident task force for the proposal said Monday night. "I mean, you're talking about a tremendous amount of dirt."

Dominion will have to undertake a similar process at three other ash sites in Virginia, as well. Originally, Adkins said, the utility planned to drain Pond D and cover it with a synthetic cap and topsoil. But the existing pond's single liner wouldn't meet the new state requirements, which were passed to prevent carcinogenic heavy metals in the ash from seeping into the groundwater.

Ultimately, the company says an onsite landfill could be planted over, and some have suggested that if the county grants Dominion the right to build the landfill at Possum Point, it could secure some of the property for redevelopment once the power plant shuts down for good.

Because of separate legislation passed in 2020, Dominion will be required to produce all of its energy in Virginia from fully renewable resources by 2045, meaning that it's likely to shut down many of its existing plants. Similar sites have been turned into parks in places like Arlington and Alexandria.

"I think it's highly unlikely that there's going to be a power station there in 15 years," Sen. Scott Surovell, D-36th, told InsideNoVa in January. "That property's going to need to be repurposed, the vast vast majority of it. And I think the Possum Point power station is probably one of the most valuable redevelopment opportunities in all of Northern Virginia."

But some nearby residents are sure to fight the landfill plan when it finally goes before the Board of County Supervisors for approval.

"I'm hearing a lot of valid questions, and I'm also hearing a lot of 'I don't have that until we start,'" one resident told Adkins Monday night. "I guarantee you we're going to need the studies, we're going to need the full finished plan, we're going to need the names of the trucking company that's being contracted to move it so that they can be held responsible from the very beginning. So before any approval goes through for this, I'd like to see these questions answered."

## VEHICLE TAX » FROM PAGE 1

"unprecedented."

The majority of the local vehicles, 88,998, will see their value grow between \$501 and \$2,500, leading to an increase in bills of \$19 to \$93.

The second most-common projection is an increase between \$2,501 and \$5,000 for 45,722 vehicles. Those vehicles will see their bills rise between \$93 and \$185.

Only 11,864 vehicles had an increase in value less than \$500, leading to up to \$19 tacked onto their tax bill.

The other three brackets of assessment increases county staff estimated are:

- 13,995 vehicles increasing between \$5,001 and \$10,000, with a tax bill increase of \$185 to \$370
- 738 vehicles increasing \$10,001 to \$15,000, with a tax bill increase of \$370 to \$555
- 126 vehicles increasing between \$15,001 and \$20,000, with a tax bill increase of \$555 to \$740

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor

Statistics, the average price of used cars and trucks rose 40.5% from January 2021 to January 2022.

In Prince William, every automobile from model year 2007 to 2020 on average grew in value by more than 20%, with 2018 models increasing more than 40%. The 2021 model year grew an average of about 15%.

Every truck model year from 2007 to 2021 increased by more than 15%, with 2018 rising more than 30%.

Heavy trucks manufactured from 2007 to 2020 also increased in value by more than 20%, peaking at more than 45% for the 2015 model year. The 2021 heavy trucks grew in value about 5%.

The county projects that the personal property tax levy will generate \$168 million in total revenue toward the fiscal 2023 budget.

The increased assessments come as county residents deal with skyrocketing inflation, soaring gas prices and a potential increase in their residential real estate tax bills.

The county's proposed budget for fiscal 2023 proposes a decrease in the residential real estate tax rate from \$1.115 per \$100 of assessed value to \$1.05. While the rate is dropping, however, rising property values will result in an effective tax increase. The average residential tax bill would increase \$233, or 4.9%, on a home valued at \$466,739.

The county also plans to adopt a new 4% tax on prepared meals, such as those served at restaurants, which would generate \$24.5 million. Of that, \$14 million would go to the school division and \$10.5 million to the county's general fund.

Attreed said county staff plans to present proposals to the Board of Supervisors later this month to potentially mitigate the impact of the vehicle assessments.

"We believe this is a temporary blip," Attreed said. "It's something that everybody in Virginia is wrestling with and everybody in the country is wrestling with."



# Progress slow for Racial Justice Commission

## Infighting, bylaw discussions have dominated meetings

BY NOLAN STOUT  
nstout@insidenova.com

Prince William County's Racial and Social Justice Commission has yet to fully delve back into its work over the past five months, with meetings occasionally featuring familiar bickering and infighting.

The commission has almost exclusively discussed revisions to its bylaws in its three full meetings since presenting its initial report to the Board of Supervisors in February, wrapping up the changes at its July 21 meeting.

A fourth meeting was only used to elect officers, while another was adjourned with no action over uncertainty if it was properly noticed to the public.

The panel was tasked with delivering a report that examines "the state of racial and social justice for people of color" in the county and making recommendations to the county government.

Its initial focus was on policing, the "provision of government services" and public education.

Its report, submitted late last year, broadly applauds county practices while acknowledging areas of needed growth and further study.

The Board of Supervisors agreed to allow the commission to return with a request for more time to study racial and social justice after consulting with its members. The additional work will include an examination of the causes for disparities and recommendations to address them.

Two of the group's full meetings were marred by many of the same type of arguments and disagreements that have become familiar over the past year.

The commission has altered how it will approach its work by abandoning subcommittees and conducting all lines of inquiry with the entire panel.

The commission also wants to hire a professional parliamentarian to help members avoid lengthy disagreements over procedure that were a mainstay of its first year.

InsideNoVa sought comment on the commission multiple times from voting members of the panel, which include Police Chief Peter Newsham, School Board member Loree Williams and Human Rights Commission Chair Curtis Porter. Those who responded were Chair Shantell Rock, Coles Commissioner Mac Haddow and Gainesville Commissioner Erica Tredinnick.

At its April meeting, the commission unanimously selected Neabsco Commissioner Christopher Frederick Sr. as vice chair. Rock and Haddow were nominated to serve as chair, with Rock prevailing with seven votes to Haddow's three.

Rock said her top goal for the start of the year was a review of the bylaws to avoid the "disorganization" of the commission's first year to allow meetings to "move faster without as much contention."

Rock said the bylaw changes were essential before the commission could continue its work. She has told county staff to create a spreadsheet of all the recommendations made in the initial report and determine how much time each will need.

Tredinnick said bluntly, "We haven't gotten any work done in six months." She criticized Rock for missing two meetings, saying, "I don't know why anybody would commit to [being] chair if they can't come to the meetings."

"I would hope that we would get some sort of work done," she said.

Similarly, Haddow said "by any objective standard," the commission has not addressed "any issue" that was promised to the Board of Supervisors.

"Instead, the RSJC has suffered from a clear lack of leadership in addressing issues, scheduling meetings and balancing the discussions on process with the critical need to address issues impacting minority communities in Prince William County," Haddow wrote in an email.

One amendment sets a 10 p.m. deadline for meetings to end, although they could be extended by a vote.

Williams was concerned the hard deadline would hinder presentations. "We could all do better about how we spend our time here before the commission," she said last month. "I'm just nervous about if we set a hard stop, we're in the middle of something ... we're effectively pushing that topic down the road and I already feel like we're wasting time as it is."

Tredinnick didn't think the 10 p.m. deadline would help the commission run more efficiently. She said it would just lead to issues introduced by Haddow getting ignored at the end of the night.

The commission agreed to put any items not reached by deadline at the top of its next agenda.

Haddow said he requested that the commission study the impact of the controversial PW Digital Gateway proposal on areas where historically Black graveyards may be located. Haddow attempted to discuss his request and a review of the school resource officer program at the commission's June 16 meeting. He did so well before 10 p.m., but his motion to suspend discussion of the bylaws to cover other issues was defeated.

Williams later moved that the meeting continue past 10 p.m. to discuss Haddow's requests, but it was denied.

Haddow voted against Williams' motion, saying it was disingenuous and "was a cynical ploy that ignored the fact the public would have believed the entire meeting was going to be consumed with bylaw amendments and procedural discussions."

Rock said she needed clarity on Haddow's request related to the digital gateway, but supported protecting cemeteries in the proposed development area.

Looking forward, Rock wants to examine gun violence in the county. She said many of the local shootings involve youth, particularly those from Freedom and Potomac high schools.

Tredinnick, who was one of the com-

missioners who voted in favor of dissolving the panel in December, said the appointees of Republican supervisors "don't have much say" in the commission.

"I still firmly believe that there is zero systemic racism," she said. "I don't agree with continuing the hunt for it."

To address personal and political attacks, which were rampant in the commission's first year, Newsham in June introduced an amendment to the bylaws to allow censure of commissioners. It would have also allowed the commission to request that the Board of Supervisors remove one of its members.

"The best way to change human behavior is to have defined consequences," he said.

Haddow adamantly opposed Newsham's proposal, saying it would "suppress the First Amendment right" of commissioners.

"I think it strips members of this commission from their First Amendment right to disagree with the chief or members of the commission," he said. "I see this as very targeted."

Williams supported the measure, saying, "You still have your First Amendment rights, but there's consequences to it."

"I think it's reasonable. I don't think it's far-reaching," she said. "It's still the individual's choice to act how they would like to act. There's just consequences to those actions."

Frederick said the commission has been unsuccessfully trying to address decorum since its inception.

"If the shoe doesn't fit and it doesn't pertain to you, don't worry about it," he said. "We keep beating the same horse, and I don't understand why."

Brentsville Commissioner London Stevenson said the proposal would essentially allow anyone who "gets his feelings hurt" to have a "safe space" and a "blanket."

Newsham said the proposal didn't suppress First Amendment rights.

"There's a clear distinction between disagreement and disrespect," he said. "I do think that we do need to adopt consequences against folks who think it's going to be OK to be disrespectful against people in this room."

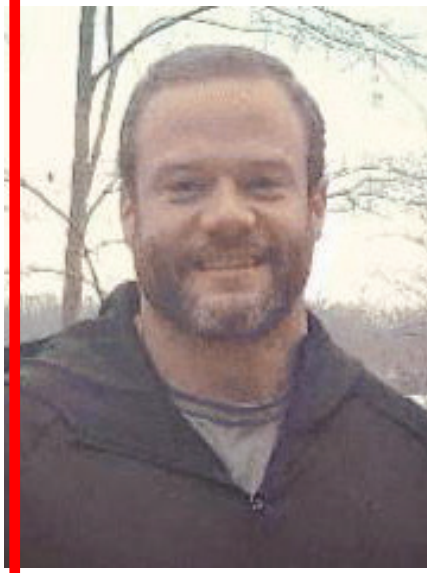
The commission eventually approved a measure to promote respect among its members on a 9-3 vote.

Unlike its previous two gatherings, the July 21 meeting was markedly civil and concise.

After finishing revisions to the bylaws, Haddow made a motion to review school security and the school-resource officer program. His motion failed, with other commissioners saying school security didn't fall under the panel's purview.

Haddow later led a discussion focusing on the effect of the proposed PW Digital Gateway on Black cemeteries or unmarked graves in the area.

Some commissioners felt the panel should examine the county's policies regarding cemeteries and land use rather than fixating on a particular proposal. After some discussion, the commission agreed to bring forward county officials to outline regulations for cemeteries at its next meeting.



**ANDREW THOMAS AINSWORTH**

Andrew Thomas Ainsworth, 32, of 2 Swanee Court, Ashland, VA died suddenly on July 15, 2022 at his parents home in Locust Grove, VA.

He worked as a help desk supervisor at Infinity Computers of Fredericksburg, VA. He graduated from Woodbridge Senior High School in 2008, and attended Old Dominion University.

Andrew was a loving husband to his wife Julie, and a proud papa to his fur baby Pippa. He had a passion for music, both listening and making, and was dedicated to personal health and fitness. Andrew had just competed in his first formal bodybuilding competition, where he placed second in the True Novice division. Andrew always wanted everyone around him to be happy.

Andrew is survived by his wife, Julie Evans, his mother Theresa Ainsworth, his father Thomas Ainsworth, his brothers Jason Combest and Daniel Ainsworth, and his sister Kimberly Cooper.

A memorial is scheduled for July 21 at 2:30 PM at the Miller Funeral Home at 3200 Golansky Blvd in Woodbridge, VA.

The family will receive visitors from noon until 2:30 PM before the memorial service.

Andrew cared deeply about access to addiction and health care services for those most in need. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made in his name to Health Brigade of Richmond, VA. The site for donations is [www.healthbrigade.org/donate](http://www.healthbrigade.org/donate).

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# Cutting through the noise: County to review code

## Move comes amid spike in data center complaints

» BY NOLAN STOUT  
nstout@insidenova.com

Prince William County is reviewing its noise ordinance after recent outcry about the sound generated by data centers.

Board of County Supervisors Chair Ann Wheeler, D-At Large, has directed county staff to review the ordinance.

Wheeler said her directive, formally made in July, was spurred by residents' concern about noise "from various sources, including data centers."

Prince William appears on track to overtake Loudoun County as the data center capital of the world as the industry has exploded recently with dozens of projects

approved and more coming in on a regular basis.

The existing ordinance was adopted in 1989, long before data centers started growing across the county.

Last month, Supervisor Jeanine Lawson, R-Brentsville, asked for the work to be expedited if possible.

County Attorney Michelle Robl said county staff understands it's "an important priority issue," but it will "take some time" for outreach and legal analysis.

"We know that there are probably some unintended consequences and we



Dale Browne, president of the Great Oak Homeowners Association, speaks during a protest about the noise from data centers outside Amazon's under-construction data center near Manassas on Monday. NOLAN STOUT | INSIDENOVA

NOISE » PAGE 7

### BACK IN ACTION



The 2022 high school football season got underway last week, and a full slate of games is on the docket this Friday night. Here, the referee tosses the coin prior to the start of the Colgan and Osbourn Park matchup on Aug. 26. Colgan bested Osbourn Park 42-12. DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

MORE HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL COVERAGE: PAGES 15-17

# Board mulls changes to public comment

## Supervisor: Long meetings becoming 'a clear issue'

» BY NOLAN STOUT  
nstout@insidenova.com

Prince William County officials are considering changing public comment procedures at Board of Supervisors meetings.

Board Chair Ann Wheeler recently voiced concerns about the structure of public input as residents this year have frequently stretched the length of public meetings.

Public comment was more limited in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but gradually became more robust throughout 2021. In the past year, it has primarily been driven by those supporting or opposing the PW Digital Gateway.

The project, which proposes 27.6 million square feet of data centers on 2,100 acres along Pageland Lane, has quickly become the most controversial and contentious



ANN WHEELER

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# MightyMeals lands new HQ in Gainesville

MightyMeals, a healthy meal delivery service, has acquired a new corporate headquarters in Gainesville with plans to expand its service along the East Coast.

The Northern Virginia company recently announced the purchase of the \$7 million, 16,000-square-foot facility at 7669 Limestone Drive.

Formerly occupied by NCS Technologies, MightyMeals' new headquarters will be more than seven times the size of the company's current cooking prep warehouse in Burke and will allow the brand to accelerate growth and double its staff within two years, according to company officials. It will include kitchen and manufacturing space.

Founded by fitness professionals Dan

Graziano and Alex Lebonitte and executive chef Stefano Marzano, MightyMeals launched in Fairfax County in 2011 and delivered 76 meals in its first week of operations with only six items on the menu.

Today, the company has 100 employees and distributes thousands of meals a week, offering more than 100 chef-prepared, made-to-order healthy meals that change weekly.

MightyMeals has also partnered with gyms, wellness centers, fitness outlets, vitamin shops and athletic stores throughout the region. The company is the official meal prep company of DC United, the Old Glory DC rugby team and the University of Maryland in Baltimore County.

MightyMeals has broadened its business model to more of an e-commerce, product-to-service company with food made to order fresh at its facility and delivered fresh with eco-friendly packaging technology, according to a news release. It currently operates more than 20 delivery trucks that serve the region.

"The decision to increase availability and raise visibility along the East Coast was a logical step in our business growth strategy," Marzano said in a prepared statement. "With the new company headquarters and a top-of-the-line manufacturing facility, we have the opportunity to further expand staffing, increase our customer support department as well as increase our ability to

better service current and future markets."

The renovation plan calls for converting the adaptive reuse office space into a multifaceted manufacturing facility. It will include 12 designated kitchen stations, a 1,050-square-foot commercial kitchen, three large cold rooms, a 1,440-square-foot receiving area, a test kitchen and a 5,000-square-foot walk-in refrigerator compound with two separate entrances.

In addition, the project will include six private offices and a conference room for executive staff.

Chris Saa of Divaris Real Estate Inc. represented MightyMeals in the purchase. The project is slated to be completed by the end of the year.

## BOARD » FROM PAGE 1

local land-use proposal in decades.

Opponents and proponents have launched personal attacks against each other, and it has spawned recall efforts against Gainesville Supervisor Pete Candland and Wheeler and a federal lawsuit against Candland.

State law does not require local governments to hold public comment sessions, although legislators have periodically tried unsuccessfully to change the law.

The Board of County Supervisors meetings are typically broken into two parts at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., with public comment allowed at both sections. Speakers are allowed three minutes each and can sign up for both sessions.

### LONG-RUNNING MEETINGS ON THE RISE

A review of board meetings by InsideNoVa found that in the past 20 months, the board has held 76 public comment sessions. They ranged from four minutes each on Oct. 5 and Oct. 12, 2021, to a long of 3 hours and 13 minutes on July 20, 2021.

In 2021, public comment was held 48 times with an average length of 43 minutes. Of those, 18 public comment sessions took less than 30 minutes and 37 lasted less than an hour. Eleven sessions lasted more than an hour, and only three were more than two hours.

However, so far in 2022, 28 sessions have been held, and only one public comment period was less than 30 minutes and only six were less than an hour. Twenty-two lasted more than an hour and four were more than two hours.

The average in 2022 so far is 1 hour and 25 minutes per public comment session, with the quickest being 25 minutes in the evening on Jan. 18.

The longest this year was in an afternoon meeting on Aug. 2: 2 hours and 46 minutes. The board had only an afternoon session planned that day so members could participate in National Night Out activities, but supervisors missed the event partly because of the length of public comment.

Combining afternoon and evening sessions since January 2021, aggregate public comment has exceeded two hours on 15 oc-

casions, with 11 of those in 2022.

Supervisor Kenny Boddye, D-Occoquan, said public comment is "an important fixture" in board meetings, and he supports "allowing it in many forms to be as accessible as possible."

While Boddye believes that "every resident who wants to have a voice in shaping our community should have that opportunity," he's "not sure that our current public comment procedures achieve this goal."

"Are we best serving the public when meetings regularly stretch late into the night?" he said. "I'm open to procedural changes that maintain the public's direct line to the Board of Supervisors while also enabling us to conduct the people's business in a more efficient manner, and also shows respect for the time of folks participating in public hearings."

Supervisor Victor Angry, D-Neabsco, said the length of public comment over the past year has placed a burden on those who have specific business before the board.

Particularly on land-use cases, Angry said if meetings stretch late into the night, it could require developers or business owners to spend more to pay for their legal representation.

Angry said public comment sessions should be capped at two hours. He also plans to conduct his own public comment sessions on Mondays prior to board meetings.

"There is a clear issue with what is currently happening at board meetings," he said. "Citizens are upset if we move those conducting county business before them, and those conducting business often are waiting past midnight to conduct their business."

Supervisors rarely provide any sort of direct response during public comment and frequently have to endure personal attacks in silence.

Supervisor Yesli Vega, R-Coles, noted she has been one of the more frequent targets of partisan attacks. "I've clearly been on the receiving end of the most vitriolic hatred that any board member has had thrown at them by left-wing activists."

However, Vega doesn't support any proposal "to limit public comment time in any way."

"The answer isn't to limit speech and the First Amendment opportunities of our residents," she said. "If the Chair doesn't want super long meetings, perhaps she should put a pause on pursuing her personal and political agenda, which has proven to be very divisive – hence the reason why our residents feel like they have to come out every week to petition their government."

Vega doesn't believe the length of public comment places a burden on those with business before the board because they "eventually get heard."

"[O]ur taxpayers are the ultimate group with business before the board," she said. "The solution isn't to place them in line behind the special interests."

### WHAT DO OTHER LOCALITIES DO?

Prince William is the only Northern Virginia county without limits on either the number of speakers at public comment or a cap on total time for public comment. The county's rules only prevent speakers from discussing something already scheduled for a public hearing that day and prohibit "the use of obscenity or other speech tending to create a breach of the peace."

In comparison, Fairfax County limits its public comment to 10 speakers per session, and residents can speak only once per six-month period. Speakers are barred from discussing "issues under litigation; issues that have been scheduled for public hearing before the Board; and personnel matters or comments regarding individuals."

Loudoun County's rules vary depending on the time of the month. At its first Tuesday meeting, public input is allowed at 6 p.m. and capped at 90 minutes. At its meeting on the third Tuesday, it allows eight speakers limited to 2½ minutes each at 5 p.m. Then, at 6 p.m., public comment is open but capped at 90 minutes.

Arlington County has some of the most stringent rules in Northern Virginia. It holds public comment at 8:30 a.m. during Saturday meetings and limits speakers to two minutes. The county board allows only one speaker on "each topic, but opposing views on the same topic will be considered two different topics."

At the Aug. 2 meeting, Wheeler mentioned Arlington's procedures and said she plans to discuss changes to public comment heading into the fall. She floated the idea of a dedicated day for public comment, saying the county had received nearly 800 public comment speaking requests in the past six months.

"Coming back in the fall, because we are trying to get the business of the county done ... I'm going to talk to my colleagues about trying to make some changes about how we handle public comment time," she said.

At a meeting on Feb. 9, 2021, speaking before the evening portion of the meeting started 35 minutes behind schedule, Wheeler laid some of the blame on the board itself.

"It's only the fault of our own board that we take so long in these meetings," she said. "I'm just putting us on record that perhaps it shouldn't have taken so long to get through some of the things that we got through today and I think we need to be cognizant of the fact that we do have an evening session when we're going through and hearing things in the afternoon."

One area supervisors might look on the agenda to save time is the time it takes to clear the consent agenda, which comes before public comment in the afternoon sessions.

That part of the meetings, however, only averages 26 minutes to clear and was less than 10 minutes on six occasions. The longest time supervisors have taken to clear the consent agenda was an hour and 12 minutes on March 2, 2021.

Another area on the agenda the board could consider is supervisors' time, which gives each supervisor five minutes to discuss topics in their districts, highlight events they have attended or suggest actions not otherwise on the agenda.

With eight supervisors, that section of the agenda should last about 40 minutes, but averages only 37 minutes. The quickest supervisors' time was 12 minutes on April 12, and the longest was 1 hour and 38 minutes on June 15, 2021.

Wheeler and supervisors Margaret Franklin, Jeanine Lawson, Pete Candland and Andrea Bailey did not return multiple requests for comment.