

Richmond Times-Dispatch

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VCU HEALTH

How the \$350M deal ground to a halt

City: Developer knew of delay but claimed project was on track

ERIC KOLENICH
Richmond Times-Dispatch

In late 2021, the three-way deal between the city of Richmond, a real estate developer and Virginia Commonwealth University Health

was on the verge of collapse. The developer, Capital City Partners, was supposed to redesign a full block of downtown Richmond with a 20-story office building and two other smaller buildings at the intersection of North Ninth and East Clay streets. VCU Health would serve as the primary tenant.

But there were roadblocks — VCU Health did not need as much

office space as initially anticipated, and there were problems with the foundation under the existing building.

It was not until two months later that the city was formally told of those problems. According to a city official, Capital City Partners admitted there were problems with the deal in November 2021, but told the city in December the project was on track.

By the spring, it became clear the project was not on track. The deal fell apart, the city reclaimed the land and, earlier this year, VCU Health chose to pay \$73 million to get out of the agreement.

Letters between the city and the developer obtained by the Richmond Times-Dispatch in a Freedom of Information Act request provide a glimpse at how the \$350 million deal fell apart.

They show how the city felt it was being misled about the lack of progress, how VCU Health felt it could not afford to move forward and how the developer felt blindsided by issues with the parcel's foundation.

Many questions remain unanswered, such as why VCU Health entered into such a bad deal in the

Please see **VCU**, Page A3

INFRASTRUCTURE



DEAN HOFFMEYER, TIMES-DISPATCH

The Mayo Bridge, which opened in 1913, is shown. Of Virginia's 14,042 bridges, 501 are considered structurally deficient, according to a national database.

Va. bridges not in bad shape

Six in metro area are structurally deficient

SEAN MCGOEY
Richmond Times-Dispatch

There are more than 230 million licensed drivers in the U.S. who cross nearly 620,000 bridges on a regular basis. That is a lot of wear and tear.

Data compiled by the Federal

Highway Administration and analyzed by a trade association for transportation builders shows that just under 7% of the nation's bridges are considered "structurally deficient."

So it's no surprise that infrastructure is often cited as one of the major areas of concern facing the country. Nearly three-quarters of Americans told the Pew Research Center

in 2021 that the condition of America's roads and bridges was a "very big" or "moderately big" problem.

In light of that, President Joe Biden signed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act into law in November 2021, setting aside \$110 billion to repair and replace bridges and roadways. The funds included nearly \$540 million for Virginia projects over a five-year

span, \$18 million of which is allocated toward replacing the bridge that carries Arthur Ashe

Please see **BRIDGES**, Page A9

MORE ONLINE: Take a video tour of the bridges mentioned in this story. Aim your smartphone camera at this code and tap the link. **NEWSVU**

18TH DISTRICT

Senate primary will be a fight

Race between Lucas, Spruill heating up

DAVE RESS
Richmond Times-Dispatch

PORTSMOUTH — For what has become a trademark campaign ad, state Sen. Louise Lucas, D-Portsmouth, donned bright red boxing gloves to make her pitch for votes in the only Senate primary battle to feature two incumbents — Lucas and state Sen. Lionell Spruill Sr., D-Chesapeake.

Lucas reprised her fighting stance, sparking friendly laughter from a group of business people in her Portsmouth stronghold, to make her key argument: that, as president pro tempore of the Senate and with what she says would be a lock on the chair of the powerful Senate Finance Committee, she can deliver for Hampton Roads.

"Vote for me because of what I have done, vote for me for what I can do in the future," she told the chamber group.

Spruill, speaking a week later to a business group in his Chesapeake bastion, says he has already delivered — and with a different style than Lucas has,

Please see **SENATE**, Page A4



Lucas



Spruill

City weighs shift to limit mayoral power

EM HOLTER
Richmond Times-Dispatch

The city of Richmond could soon see some monumental changes as it considers a potential shift in who controls the levers of power and who will

oversee the responsibilities of government.

Over the course of this year, the Charter Review Commission — a nine-member, citizen-led board — has labored over the city's 55-page charter, which

outlines terms for council members and elected mayors, and details whether council salaries are determined by the state as well

as who should be in charge of the budget.

Please see **SHIFT**, Page A3

■ **READ:** Take a look back at Richmond's history of debate over its system of government **PAGE A3**

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President Biden and House Speaker McCarthy meet as debt limit showdown continues PAGE A6

Weather
Hazy sunshine
High 82
Low 56
FORECAST • A5

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Remembering

OBITUARIES, DEATH NOTICES and IN MEMORIAM

METRO

RANDOLPH, Jabari A., 46, of Henrico.
ROBINSON, George E. Jr., 41, of Goochland.

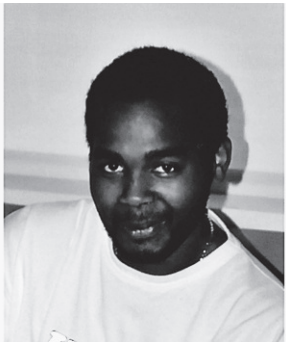
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RANDOLPH, Jabari A., of Henrico, died May 18, 2023. Remains rest at **Scott's Funeral Home**, 115 E. Brookland Park Blvd. Funeral notice later.



ROBINSON, George E. Jr., was called home on May 15, 2023 at Henrico Doctors' Hospital. To honor his memory, a viewing will be held at 12 p.m., and then a memorial service to follow at 1 p.m. on Friday, May 26, 2023 at Antioch Baptist Church, 4712 River Rd. W., Goochland, Va. 23063.

IN MEMORIAM



Easter Duckenfield
 In memory of a wonderful wife, mother and grandmother. It's been five years since you left us. We miss you dearly.

JOHNSON - Henry Matthew



June 7, 1923 - May 22, 2002
 Love's greatest gift is our cherished memories of you. In our hearts you are missed and loved forever.

Wife, Gloria;
 daughter, Denita Kim; grands; Sid Jr. & Anthony

IN MEMORIAM



ROBERT BRENT TREDWAY
 10 years in Heaven. You have always been so special in all the things you said and did. We are so very proud of you simply because you are our son. We miss you & love you. Wish you were here. Pop, Mama, Family & Friends.

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Richmond.com/Obituaries



Ari Augenbaum is executive chef and co-owner of Shockoe Bottom's JewFro restaurant, which is just a few blocks from where Broad Street crosses over Interstate 95. **EVA RUSSO, TIMES-DISPATCH**

Bridges

From A1

Boulevard over railroad tracks near The Diamond.

Overall, the commonwealth's bridges are in relatively good condition.

Of Virginia's 14,042 bridges, 501 are considered structurally deficient, a 3.6% rate that is one of the 10 lowest among the 50 states and District of Columbia. Moreover, conditions are improving; there were nearly 150 more bridges graded as deficient in 2018 than in 2022.

But that does not mean that every bridge is in brand-new condition. Of the 20 most traveled structurally deficient bridges in Virginia, six are in the Richmond area:

Interstate 95, crossing over Route 608/Reymet Road (Chesterfield County)

Year built: 1958
Crossings per day (2020): 98,000

Interstate 195, crossing over Route 197/Westwood Avenue and CSX rail tracks (Henrico County)

Year built: 1974
Crossings per day (2020): 61,400

Interstate 64, crossing over Stony Run (Henrico)

Year built: 1965
Crossings per day (2020): 56,700

East Broad Street, crossing over I-95 (Richmond)

Year built: 1958
Crossings per day (2020): 28,100

East Broad Street, crossing over abandoned CSX spur line (Richmond)

Year built: 1909
Crossings per day (2020): 28,100

Ramp from I-64 to Fifth Street and I-95 South, crossing over I-95 (Richmond)

Year built: 1958
Crossings per day (2020): 23,600

What does that mean for everyday drivers in the Richmond area?

The Richmond Times-Dispatch spoke to the Virginia Department of Transportation engineer who oversees bridges in the Richmond district to find out.

Inspections every two years

Calling a bridge structurally deficient does not mean that it is unsafe for daily driving, VDOT engineer Craig Ponte said.

VDOT conducts "hands-on inspections" of bridges every 24 months, with a focus on three major components: the deck, which is the surface that cars drive on; the superstructure, made up of the horizontal beams and other elements that bear the weight placed on the deck; and the substructure, which includes foundational elements like columns and abutments that connect a bridge to the ground below.

Those components are rated on a scale from zero to nine at each inspection. If any of a bridge's major components are rated four or below, the bridge is deemed to be in poor condition, which automatically flags that bridge for inspection every 12 months and places it on a priority list for repair or replacement, according to Ponte.

But only ratings of three or below indicate a risk of component failure, according to VDOT's grading standards, and a component must be rated a two before the guidelines suggest closing a bridge.

The most recent available FHWA data, gathered in 2021, shows that just five of the 14,042 bridges in Virginia were rated two or worse for any of the three key components, and only one of those was in the Richmond area: the St. Andrews Street Bridge in Petersburg, which reopened in November after being closed for 15 years.

That is part of the reason VDOT is phasing out the "structurally deficient" terminology in favor of simply calling bridges poor, Ponte said. The term "structurally deficient" connotes a risk of imminent collapse that, in many cases, just is not there.

Ponte told The Times-Dispatch that, when concerns arise about the amount of weight a bridge can support, VDOT lowers the top allowable weight on that bridge — preventing the heaviest trucks from crossing — before taking measures that could affect everyday drivers.

What is on the docket?

Bridges built under old design standards typically last about 30 years before they start to need repairs, Ponte said. Much of the deterioration in that interval is caused by water and salts used to de-ice roads seeping into bridge components through the joints — gaps where the ends of bridges meet ground level, which exist to accommodate thermal expansion or contraction of bridge materials.

But VDOT is using new jointless design methods for all new construction, and even some current repair projects, that will more than double the lifespan of Virginia's bridges.

"The design life for new bridges is 75 years," Ponte said. "It's pretty cool."

The heavier the traffic on the bridge, the higher priority the bridge is given for repairs. Ponte said VDOT aims for a maximum window of six years before a bridge gets the repairs it needs — a figure that varies based on the level of funding available to the agency — but that, at the top, things "can move pretty quickly, with (as little as) a couple of years before repairs are complete."

Some of the poorly rated bridges in the Richmond area are already being worked on.

The I-95 bridge over Reymet Road, which was built in 1958 and reconstructed in 1990, is currently under construction, according to VDOT. The superstructure is being replaced, and the project will also add a few inches to the vertical clearance under the bridge to account for taller vehicles.

A "megaproject" to rehabilitate several bridges over I-95 in downtown Richmond is underway as well, and Ponte said plans to rehabilitate the Cary Street and Grove Avenue bridges over I-95 are currently in the design phase.

'Easier to weather'

The state of bridges impacts more than daily commutes, family drives and

road trips. It has a direct impact on the economy and businesses.

Ari Augenbaum, executive chef and co-owner of JewFro, a Jewish-African fusion restaurant in Shockoe Bottom just a few blocks from where Broad Street crosses over Interstate 95, has spent plenty of time thinking about local construction and development projects. But he is not particularly worried about a future bridge construction project having major negative effects on the restaurant.

"We're more of a destination restaurant," Augenbaum said. "So people are seeking us out, which makes it easier to weather things like that."

However, that feeling does not necessarily extend to the other restaurants he co-owns, like the North Second Street location of Soul Taco, which transitioned into Sear Burger in late 2022.

It was "exponentially more difficult" to keep business strong through construction in Jackson Ward, Augenbaum said, and that location also faced significant obstacles from the ongoing saga surrounding the redevelopment of the Richmond Coliseum area.

But Augenbaum said that was a natural risk of committing to a location based on the expectation that one of the city's signature development plans was going to move forward quickly — a risk that has impacted JewFro as well. Coffee and happy hour concepts designed around a planned expansion of Richmond-to-Washington commuter rail transit out of Main Street Station have yet to get off the ground at the eatery.

Other organizations near poorly rated bridges say there could be some impact if there were to be significant construction projects in the vicinity, but they also believe that such projects would not cause a major hit to day-to-day operations.

PARK365, an inclusive park off Westwood Avenue near the I-195 crossing, accommodates many patrons with disabilities or sensory issues who might be adversely affected by the commotion of a major construction project. Andrea Siebentritt, communications and public relations manager for the park's nonprofit parent organization, SOAR365, said the group would have to consider creative ways to mitigate noise pollution and other negative effects, but that construction on the bridge would not cut off access to the park.

Ponte said VDOT generally replaces bridges in stages in order to keep traffic patterns as unaffected as possible. But concerns that local business owners have about the impact of construction projects are something that VDOT thinks about on a broader scale, rather than considering the effect on individual businesses.

"That's kind of outside of my area of expertise," he said. "But when we're setting up these design projects, we do want to keep traffic (moving) through the area."

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