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GOVERNMENT + POLITICS

## COMMENTARY


# Again, Virginia looks to land major pro sports, but at what cost?

It's not that Virginia can't have nice things. It's a question of who pays for them and who owns what after it's all done.

| BOB LEWIS

DECEMBER 21, 2023 9:35 AM



 An illustration of the proposed entertainment district in the City of Alexandria. (Courtesy of JBG SMITH)

If Virginia is ever to make good on its long, fruitless quest to host a major professional sports franchise, I suppose the latest proposed deal to land a two-fer is as likely as any.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin and billionaire Ted Leonsis earlier this month [announced a nonbinding handshake deal](#) to move two sibling franchises – the National Hockey League's Washington Capitals and

the National Basketball Association's Washington Wizards – from downtown D.C. to Alexandria.

## Virginia announces plan to bring two pro sports teams to Alexandria



ALEXANDRIA — The Washington Wizards and Washington Capitals could be headed to Virginia. State officials and Monumental Sports and Entertainment, which owns the basketball and hockey franchises, on Wednesday unveiled plans to create a \$2 billion entertainment district in Alexandria

that would include a sports arena, a practice facility for the Wizards, a performing arts ... Continue reading

 Virginia Mercury

In a deal reportedly valued at \$2.2 billion, Virginia and local governments would contribute about \$1.35 billion in bonded debt if the project, envisioned for completion in 2028, comes to fruition.

Leonsis is managing partner of Monumental Sports & Entertainment, the teams' ownership group, which would put up \$403 million to kick-start construction of a sports-entertainment complex replete with a concert venue, hotels, apartments, offices and parking on 12 acres in Potomac Yards in northern Alexandria near the Potomac River and Reagan National Airport.

According to a [Dec. 15 report](#) in the Washington Post, it would constitute the largest public subsidy ever for an arena project.

Youngkin, in an interview with the Post, spun it as a “pretty darn unique” arrangement. The Post quoted him as saying that two bonds, issued by a legislatively created sports and entertainment authority, would be defrayed mostly by revenue to be collected within the footprint of the project. It would be, he said, “the quintessential public-private partnership” that uses revenues that otherwise would not exist to support the project.

If the Caps and Wizards move, it would leave baseball's Washington Nationals as the lone major sports franchise that plays its games in

the district. Washington's woebegone pro football franchise, presently known as the Commanders, has tried for years to ditch the cavernous, exurban and impersonal confines of 26-year-old FedEx Field in Landover, Maryland, for a nicer, perhaps more welcoming venue. The team's efforts have included [several failed flirtations with Virginia](#). The stadium is about 35 miles from the football team's training facility and headquarters in Loudoun County, Virginia.

I enjoy sports as much as the next dude. I can – and do, just ask my wife! – squander long hours on autumn Saturdays watching fast, hulking college kids collide with devastating force, all in furtherance of the amateur scholar-athlete ideal. (Full disclosure: I benefited from it myself many years ago on a football scholarship at Ole Miss.)

## Violence benights another shared treasure of our communities: Friday night's lights



Remember the thrill of getting ready for Friday night's football game against your archrival? The pep rallies. A bonfire. Players wear their jerseys to school on game day. Storefronts in small towns are festooned in school colors. Occasionally, even a parade! Then it's almost game time. As the setting

sun bathes the field in a ... [Continue reading](#)



Virginia Mercury

Yet I have never been comfortable with the notion of obligating public money to build lavish sports/entertainment playpens for billionaire owners of privately held teams.

Fans are passionate about their teams, but it's strictly business to the plutocratic owners who aren't the least bit bashful about threatening to move a team across the country (or across the Potomac River) unless the incumbent city coughs up hundreds of millions of dollars in tax-backed money for better arenas and other goodies.

Capital One Center opened 26 years ago, which puts it among pro basketball's older venues. It's positively youthful, however, compared with the legendary likes of Madison Square Garden, home to the New York Knicks, now 55 years old. Last week, Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser offered half a billion dollars in improvements to Capital One Center as the city's ["best and final offer"](#) for the teams to stay put.

Assuming the Virginia deal goes through, who's to say that two or three decades down the line, the commonwealth and Alexandria might not find themselves in the same straits Bowser and D.C. are in now, when the teams deliver a familiar ultimatum: "pay up or *adios*."



There isn't a strong secondary market for ice rinks and indoor basketball venues.

*– Author and former chief of staff to Govs. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine*

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Bill Leighty had been a linchpin in more state transactions than even he can enumerate during decades of state government service in widely varying, high-level roles before he became chief of staff to Govs. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine during the first decade of the 21st century. Much of it is chronicled in his memoir, ["Capitol Secrets: Leadership Wisdom from a Lifetime of Public Service,"](#) published earlier this year.

He's skeptical of the Youngkin-Leonsis deal for practical and political reasons. For instance, who is liable for overruns in the event that the project's costs exceed their funded expectations – or if the project fails?

"There isn't a strong secondary market for ice rinks and indoor basketball venues," he said.

What happens if the teams decamp before the bonds are paid off? That happened in St. Louis in 2015 when the NFL's Rams left that city's domed stadium and returned to Los Angeles, the city they had departed for St. Louis 21 years earlier.

The project faces politically driven scrutiny in an uncertain sojourn through the General Assembly, which would have to create the

special sports and entertainment taxing authority the plan envisions.

But perhaps more perilous, Leighty notes, are the local politics of Alexandria, where the project would be subject to local zoning battles unless it is built entirely by a state government entity.

Youngkin's zeal to get in front of the Caps/Wizards deal landed his administration squarely in the midst of a regional budget dispute, Leighty noted.

He's not the first governor to get too far over his skis in advancing a Northern Virginia arena project. Gov. Douglas Wilder, in 1992, [announced a deal](#) for a new Washington Redskins stadium – in Potomac Yards, no less! – before it wound up in Landover. “I spent enough time trying to navigate building state facilities in NoVa [Northern Virginia] to know that you can't succeed unless it was their idea,” Leighty added. “Just how long do rookie governors get to make rookie mistakes?”

Pro sports teams are not huge economic drivers. A [2017 study](#) by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis showed that economists overwhelmingly disapproved of public subsidies for sports venues as a way to foster growth within communities. One economist in the study, Michael Leeds, wrote that if all of Chicago's vaunted pro franchises – baseball's Cubs and White Sox, hockey's Blackhawks, the Bulls in basketball and football's Bears – disappeared, the dent to Chicago's economy would be a fraction of one percent.

Big league sports are an emotional investment. They're undeniably a rallying point – even an essential part of the identity – of a city or region.

Who would know *anything* about, much less visit, Green Bay, Wisconsin, in the winter if not for the Packers? And who can forget the night baseball resumed in Yankee Stadium after the incalculable trauma New York suffered on 9/11? There were goosebumps, lumps in throats and teary eyes from sea to shining sea as President George W. Bush – bulked up with concealed bulletproofing – delivered the ceremonial first pitch.

Youngkin, a scholarship Rice University [basketball player](#), understands the pull of sports. He knows that Virginia has been on the outside looking in except for about a half-dozen seasons in the 1970s when the Virginia Squires of the short-lived American Basketball Association rotated home games in Norfolk, Richmond

and Roanoke before folding in 1976. His intention is well placed and sincere.

It's not that Virginia can't have nice things. It's a question of who pays for them and who owns what after it's all done.



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## COMMENTARY

# In Virginia, people suffering mental health crises too often become felons when police intervene

The law must distinguish deliberate, malicious acts from involuntary ones arising from disabilities. The former must be punished; the latter must be treated.

| BOB LEWIS

FEBRUARY 9, 2023 12:05 AM



(Stock photo via Getty Images)

Life has never been easy for Johnny, but each May and June are an ordeal. It was in June two years ago when Johnny spiraled into a mental health crisis, this one requiring police intervention.

Violence isn't Johnny's nature in spite of abuse he allegedly suffered at the hands of his birth parents before he was removed from them at age 8 and put into foster care. Though there was every expectation that he would be hardened, bitter and mean, he's a sweet, gentle and self-deprecating young man of 20 with a childlike view of the world, say Kim and Jim Spencer, who adopted Johnny at age 11.

So much hardship, however, isn't without a sometimes painful legacy.

"Every year since we first met him, we knew that he had ups and downs. We knew that he had a mental illness and he's been given a million different diagnoses. It's been really difficult to get people to understand how his mind works. You can look at the brain of someone who has been through trauma and their brain has changed," Kim said.

She would know. Kim is a career mental health professional and co-owner of a Richmond-based firm that provides community-based support services for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

On that night in late June of 2021, the dark forces that torment Johnny near the start of each summer were exacerbated by a home renovation project that disturbed his sense of a familiar "safe space" and he went into a full-blown crisis, Kim and Jim said.

Unable to calm him and or find a mental health crisis intervention number, Kim did the only thing left to her: she called the Hanover County 911 emergency response number. Johnny had knocked the phone from her hand and crushed it, she said. In the melee, Jim suffered a cut above his eye that required two stitches to close.

When police arrived, Jim said, "It looked like a SWAT squad. We have a long driveway and there were five or six of them running up the driveway," he said. "The head officer stopped and talked to us a minute and Kim kept telling them our son was having a mental health crisis and that they needed to approach carefully, [to] try to calm him down."

In her own work with people with mental health issues, Kim learned the perils of not approaching individuals in crisis the correct way.



“I’ve gotten my glasses knocked off my head, I’ve been punched, I’ve been kicked because, I now know, I approached that person in a way I shouldn’t,” she said.

What the Spencers described was a takedown. Officers tried to talk to Johnny whose words were incoherent. They surrounded him. Then they rushed him and tackled him.

“That didn’t go well at all,” Jim said.

From the ensuing struggle, Johnny was charged with several counts of assaulting the officers, charges that have yet to be adjudicated at trial.

Johnny has no memory of the incident. And that’s common for people in the grips of a psychotic episode they didn’t cause and couldn’t control. That encounter and a revocation of his bond because he was found in possession of a knife resulted in Johnny spending most of his time since then either in custody or in Central State Hospital.

That’s just one incident – one family known to this writer – yet it presents two distinct public policy issues to unpack.

First, there’s Virginia’s longstanding failure to adequately address mental health needs. Historically, the state’s infrastructure for dealing with residents with intellectual disabilities has been shamefully underfunded and its [institutions understaffed](#).

This manifests in sad but quiet ways such as the increasing number of [homeless people](#), especially in Virginia’s urban centers. Encounters such as Johnny’s leave individuals and their families scarred for years, but it largely escapes society’s notice.

Occasionally, however, it bursts forth in horrifying headlines: a delusional, angry student whose violent fantasies presaged the massacre of 32 people one April morning in 2007 at Virginia Tech; a state senator who was nearly killed in a knife attack by his son who was in the grips of a suicidal mental health crisis in 2014; a biology teacher who had removed his clothes in a crisis moment was shot dead as he charged toward police officers along a busy Richmond freeway in 2018.

Each of those heartbreaking, news-making instances resulted in changes to Virginia law. Rarely do encounters such as Johnny’s.

Second, we place an enormous burden on police officers who encounter mentally ill people at risk to themselves or others. Officers enter their dangerous and low-paid profession to enforce the law and keep the peace in an increasingly lawless and violent world. They're not mental health counselors and they often respond to standoffs with the mentally ill the only way they know how – much as they would a cornered criminal.

Virginia's General Assembly made efforts to help police deal with people having mental health emergencies after the encounter that left the teacher, Marcus David Peters, dead. Del. Jeff Bourne, D-Richmond, in whose district the tragedy occurred, won passage in 2020 of [a law named for Peters](#). It provides for a mental health response to behavioral health emergencies like Peters's – and Johnny's.

Three years later, according to the Department of Criminal Justice Services and the [Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services](#), the Marcus Alert System is operational in five regions: Virginia Beach, Richmond, Bristol and surrounding Washington County, Prince William County and in the region including Madison and Fauquier counties and the cities of Warrenton and Culpeper. Broader deployment was blocked with subsequent legislation that exempted localities of fewer than 40,000 residents.

This year, Bourne introduced a bill to “de-felonize” violence that police sometimes encounter from people having mental health crises. His legislation never got a committee hearing in the Republican-controlled House. Similar bills have [also perished](#) before legislative committees controlled by both parties.

Presently, anyone convicted of attacking a police officer in Virginia is guilty of a Class Six felony, punishable by up to six months in jail. It doesn't matter the circumstances, whether perpetrators are aware of or in control of their actions, or even whether the officer was injured.

That's where legislating gets tricky. Understandably, no lawmaker is eager to cast a vote that would essentially make it open season on officers by people who could later try to escape accountability by claiming mental incapacity.

But Bourne's bill had safeguards against such loopholes. The legislation would have required validating a genuine mental health crisis claim to set aside a felony charge, including medical evidence

and expert testimony under oath in court. Now past Tuesday's deadline for House bills to win House passage and with no comparable Senate legislation, the measure is effectively done for this year.

That's brutal for people like Johnny. The bad hand life and disability dealt him long ago becomes immeasurably tougher if he must also bear a felony conviction over a regrettable act outside his conscious control, that he can't even remember, and that caused no significant or lasting injury or damage.

The law must distinguish deliberate, malicious acts from involuntary ones arising from disabilities. The former must be punished; the latter must be treated. That happens only if a compassionate Virginia demands it.



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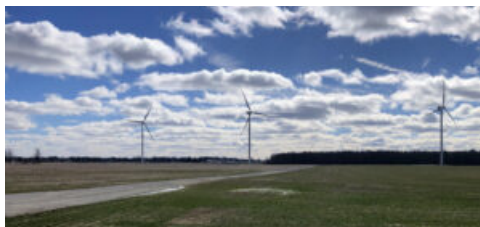
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ELECTION 2023

## COMMENTARY

# The quiet resolve of election eve: a remembrance

Tonight, savor the quiet resolve of Americans – Virginians, your neighbors – about to choose their government in our fragile annual exercise of the peaceful delegation of power.

| BOB LEWIS

NOVEMBER 6, 2023 12:49 AM



📷 (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

This time tomorrow, Virginia voters will be busy electing a new General Assembly in another of the elections we hold every

November. Here, we never take a year off.

This evening, before the polls open, take a stroll if you can through your neighborhood. Maybe even drive around your community – roll the window down, weather permitting. Look around. Listen. Feel. Breathe in the cool fall air.

Election eve long ago became perhaps my most special night on each year's calendar. It was because of the resolute, almost reverential calm that pervaded the darkened streets and neighborhoods.

For the overwhelming balance of my adult life, elections were my business. I *lived* them as a newsman and political correspondent.

Before the weekends preceding each election, I had studied published polls and campaign finance data and traveled extensively across Virginia. I had made countless phone calls to local party leaders, candidates, campaign professionals, registrars and “real people” I had met in my reporting. Rarely did any election night result surprise me.

Reporters and editors spent Mondays before elections polishing the background and contextual material at the bottom of stories that would be transmitted the next day to publications and broadcasters across Virginia and beyond. That material would remain unchanged but the tops of the stories were revised many times Tuesday night into Wednesday's wee hours with fresh tallies and trends until, eventually, The Associated Press declared a winner and announced it with a bulletin, the next-highest priority level for wire-service reports behind a flash.

Such was the caffeine- and adrenaline-fueled work within the pressure cooker that was election night in AP's state control bureaus as vote totals flooded in.

But the night before, when I would invariably leave work late, I'd often take the long way home, sometimes varying my route through different parts of town.

The streets were conspicuously empty and quiet except maybe for falling leaves rustling in the breeze. Bars and eateries, where autumn Monday nights normally meant lively pro football crowds, seemed sparse and subdued. Some households had displayed their support for certain candidates with yard signs that, by then, had largely exhausted any expectation of influencing the undecided.

After all the biting rhetoric and the acidic ads, after all the claims and counterclaims and liberties taken with the truth, after all the debates and breathless campaign reporting, after all the final rallies had ended, now the voters would have their say – the only say that matters.

The anticipation felt palpable: the people's pent-up will was about to be made manifest in the seminal triumph of representative democracy. It seemed an almost sacred moment, and it always inspired me. It probably will tonight, too.

This evening, let yourself *believe* in our collective wisdom; that we as voters get it right more often than not. Even if the candidate (or candidates) of your choice fall short, trust that it's better than unaccountable and unelected power imposing its will upon us.

Trust that your votes are being fairly and faithfully collected and counted by honorable people just like you who are doing their best, *because they are*.

Another edifying aspect of my years of daily political reporting was Election Day visits to urban, rural and suburban polling places where I met citizens who gave earnestly of their time and worked long, tiring hours at local precincts to ensure that their neighbors' votes mattered. The same goes for dutiful, skilled career election professionals, regardless of the party in power, who kept the processes clean and transparent.



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Government of, by and for the people took root here 247 years ago. Over that time, suffrage was justly expanded to populations once disenfranchised – women and the descendants of enslaved people chief among them. There is still work yet to do. However, there is no guarantee that our constitutional democracy will make it to 250 years, as malignant forces hell-bent on authoritarian rule seek power by any means, up to and including [seditious violence](#).

One generation cannot bequeath the blessings of freedom to the next. It must be earned and defended anew through informed vigilance, intentional electoral participation and the courage to

stand against those who prosper from dividing Americans and turning one against the other.

So tonight, take it all in. Savor the quiet resolve of Americans – Virginians, your neighbors – about to choose their government in our fragile annual exercise of the peaceful delegation of power.

Tomorrow, cast your vote and then watch the machinery of democracy and the rule of law run their righteous course.

Remember and cherish it. We risk its loss sooner than we dare imagine.

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