

INSIDENOVA

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**MEMBER:**



# QTS hearing schedule fuels perceptions

On Tuesday, Nov. 21, many of us will be preparing for Thanksgiving – maybe making pumpkin pies, cleaning our house or grabbing those last few cans of yams from the store.

Others will be on the road, starting their getaway for the long holiday weekend.

But if Prince William County Board Chair Ann Wheeler has her way, that day will go a long way toward determining the future of our county. Wheeler has asked county staff to schedule a public hearing that day – two days before Thanksgiving – on two rezoning proposals for QTS Realty Trust to build data centers on 876 acres along Pageland Lane. The massive project would be part of the PW Digital Gateway, for which supervisors approved a Comprehensive Plan Amendment last November.

Wheeler says her hand was forced because QTS invoked a section of Virginia law that requires a rezoning case to be heard within a year of being filed – in this case, that was last summer. At the same time, she says she pushed the hearing out a few months to give county staff as much time as possible to review the application.

Here’s why this is poor timing. For starters, this hearing will be held as most people are thinking more about drumsticks than data centers. Many residents who would want to

speak either in support or opposition of the plan may have to postpone or change their holiday plans, especially if they involve travel.

Of course, politics is at play here. Conveniently, Nov. 21 is two weeks AFTER the election when the occupants of all eight seats on the Board of County Supervisors will be decided for the next four years. That means that no sitting board member has to worry about his or her vote on the QTS rezoning being considered – one way or the other – by voters on Nov. 7.

But, also conveniently, it is about six weeks BEFORE the new board members elected on Nov. 7 actually begin their terms. Wheeler, who supports the data center expansion, knows she controls the current board’s Democrats, who have a 5-3 edge. The makeup of the new board is uncertain, and it definitely won’t include Wheeler, who lost her renomination bid in June.

Whether you think the PW Digital Gateway is an abomination or a boon for the county, the debate has been fraught with perceptions that supporters are trampling on the wishes of the community. Perception is reality, as Lee Atwater taught us. Scheduling this critical vote during the board’s “lame duck” period – and on a holiday week, nonetheless – only feeds that perception.

And the only things we should be fed on Thanksgiving are turkey and football.

GUEST COLUMN | DEAN RIDINGS

# Local news is good for business

It’s no secret that recent years have been tough on small businesses and on newspapers. A bipartisan bill, the Community News & Small Business Support Act, that has been introduced in Congress would offer relief to both newspapers and local businesses.

For too many newspapers, help can’t come soon enough. Economic challenges have resulted in too many communities seeing their local newspapers being forced to lay off staff, cut back on publication days or – worse yet – close. On average, two newspapers are closing each week. That hurts local businesses and residents in the long (and short) run. However, despite the challenges, what remains true is that local newspapers make a difference in their communities.

Don’t just take my word for it. Let’s look at the numbers and why America’s Newspapers has been pushing for the Community News & Small Business Support Act to be introduced.

A recent national study of 5,000 Americans over the age of 18, conducted by the independent research firm Coda Ventures, provides compelling evidence of the importance, relevance and vitality of today’s newspapers in the American media landscape.

Readers told us that their local newspaper makes a difference. The study shows that 79% of Americans read and use local news “to stay informed” about their cities, counties and communities. They also said they rely on their local paper to feel connected to their community, to decide where they stand on local issues, to find

news and things to do, to talk with people about things happening in the community and to be a better citizen.

And, contrary to popular belief, readers across all age groups turn to local newspapers and their digital products to stay informed about their communities. They find them informative and entertaining.

Readers also told us they need more local news from their community paper. As one survey respondent in California said, “Our newspaper keeps getting smaller. I would like to see more news items, what’s happening in town, what’s new in politics, etc. and they need to be quicker to respond to breaking news.”

All of this makes a committed, local staff – something the legislation introduced by Reps. Claudia Tenney (R-N.Y.) and Suzan DelBene (D-Wash.) will help to make happen.

So, what would this legislation mean to your community?

Local businesses with fewer than 50 employees could receive a five-year non-refundable tax credit of up to \$5,000 in the first year and up to \$2,500 in the subsequent four years based on their spending level with local newspapers and local media.

Our study showed that six out of 10 American adults use newspaper advertising to help them decide what brands, products and local services to buy. Newspaper readers also are almost twice as likely to purchase products from a number of important advertising categories than non-newspaper readers, including: automobiles, home furnishings, home improvement products, and

home services like pest control, plumbing and heating.

With this legislation, we expect to see more businesses being able to afford to advertise to consumers, which – in turn – helps communities thrive.

For local newspapers, a five-year refundable tax credit would help them hire more journalists to bring you more news. It’s a win-win for local communities. Newspapers would receive a tax credit to be used for the compensation of journalists. This tax credit would only be available to community papers with fewer than 750 employees and, if they don’t invest in their newsroom, they don’t get the credit.

The importance of local newspapers and local business is the reason Reps. Tenney and DelBene introduced the legislation. We are most grateful for their support.

We need your support, as well, to encourage legislators to enact this legislation. Please contact your congressional representatives and encourage them to add their support to this legislation. These tax credits aren’t permanent; they will sunset in five years. But these critical five years will allow the newspaper industry the time needed to address the challenges it is facing.

More local reporting means more access for hometown news that citizens like you rely on. And stronger newspapers mean stronger advertising vehicles for local businesses.

*Dean Ridings is CEO of America’s Newspapers, which is committed to explaining, defending and advancing the vital role of newspapers in democracy and civil life. InsideNoVa is a member of the organization. Ridings can be reached at dridings@newspapers.org.*



DEAN RIDINGS

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**MEMBER:**



# Primary result: A win for grassroots advocacy

If you're keeping score at home – and you should be – that's Prince William County voters 1, data centers 0.

An anti-data center grassroots movement that began on the quiet, tree-lined streets of the over-55 Heritage Hunt community spread across what's left of the Rural Crescent on Tuesday and turned Board of County Supervisors Chair Ann Wheeler into a lame duck.

Wheeler, who spearheaded the effort to push through Comprehensive Plan changes paving the way for the massive PW Digital Gateway project on Pageland Lane, just east of Heritage Hunt, saw her bid for reelection end in Tuesday's Democratic primary. She was toppled by political newcomer Deshundra Jefferson, even though she outspent Jefferson by a 5-to-1 margin, with many of Wheeler's dollars coming from data center developers, contractors and landowners.

Meanwhile, on the Republican side Tuesday, Brentsville District Supervisor Jeanine Lawson, a strident opponent of the Digital Gateway, easily turned back a challenge from Kenn Knarr, one of the homeowners who

stands to make millions of dollars selling his land for the data center development.

The message from voters Tuesday was clear: Ramrodding developments through the approval process without transparency and without paying any attention to citizen input will have consequences. But what that means for future data center development in Prince William remains to be seen.

It's possible the current Wheeler-led board could approve rezonings for the PW Digital Gateway – and other controversial projects – before their terms end in December. Or supervisors could do the right thing and punt those projects to 2024, when a new board – led by Jefferson or Lawson – will be in place.

Meanwhile, both Jefferson and Lawson have work left to do in the 20 weeks until Election Day. Lawson faces more of an uphill battle in what is clearly becoming a blue county. Over 25,000 people voted in Tuesday's Democratic primary, compared to just 13,000 on the GOP side.

In the primary, Lawson was able to dodge her opponent and avoid debates and forums. She has no such

choice in the general election. She needs to introduce herself to voters east of Route 28 who don't know her and outline exactly what she means when she says she will instill more control over how and where data centers are built. And she needs to counter arguments that she's a right-wing MAGA Republican.

Meanwhile, Jefferson needs to expand her campaign beyond just an anti-data center platform – since that's an issue she and her November opponent now agree on – and make herself better known to an even larger swath of county voters.

And both candidates need to outline a vision for the future of Prince William. They must explain how they would pay for the county's needs in its school system, police force and roads – among other priorities – without the millions of tax dollars data centers would deliver.

We look forward to hearing from Lawson and Jefferson frequently on these topics and others, in a variety of formats, between now and November. The voters of Prince William deserve no less. And they made it clear Tuesday that they will accept no less.

AL ALBORN | AROUND PRINCE WILLIAM

## Need answers to your lawn and garden questions?

What are those strange bugs on your tomatoes? Why is your tree dying? How can you get rid of the weeds in your yard?

At a couple of the local farmer's markets – among the vegetable stands, pottery displays, food vendors and entrepreneurs selling all kinds of wares – are people with the answers to those questions and many other horticultural mysteries. The folks with the answers are Virginia Cooperative Extension-Prince William (VCE-PW) Master Gardener volunteers.

Master Gardener volunteers man "Ask a Master Gardener" plant clinics at Manassas and Dale City farmers markets and the Prince William County Fair. I stopped by their Manassas clinic a couple weeks ago to pick up some free seeds and decided their story might be interesting.

To learn more, I chatted with VCE-PW's new Master Gardener coordinator, Valerie Huelsman. Master Gardener volunteers and those who have used VCE-PW resources may recognize Huelsman as the Best Lawns coordinator.

Before joining VCE-PW, Huelsman was an environmental analyst and branch lead for Prince William County's mosquito forest pest management branch. She is a Virginia Master Gardener with a deep background in horticultural and environmental issues.

Huelsman said Master Gardener volunteers working the clinics provide answers to a number of horticultural questions, such as how to take care of your lawn, how to deal with the bug eating your strawberries or tomatoes or what disease is attacking your apple tree.

The clinics are just one of many VCE-PW resources that help with your lawn and garden questions and issues. You can't make it to one of the farmers market clinics, the extension's horticulture help desk is available. Client hours are Mondays through Fridays from 8 a.m.-4 p.m.; appointments are preferred (call 703-792-7747).

You can also email questions or request an appointment at

master\_gardener@pwccgov.org. Samples of plants, bugs or whatever are welcome at the farmers market clinics or the help desk.

Lots of websites, magazines, newspapers and friendly neighbors dispense gardening advice. Some of that advice doesn't apply to Northern Virginia's climate, soil or temperate zone and is of dubious value. If you want Virginia Tech research-based advice for our particular community and your unique needs, Virginia Cooperative Extension and a Master Gardener volunteer is your best source.

Huelsman discussed some of the many other services Master Gardener volunteers provide to our community. They conduct a number of classes at their teaching garden and online and provide information regarding how to eliminate non-native invasive plants and insects.

My personal favorite program is BEST Lawns. A BEST lawns-trained Master Gardener volunteer will visit your home, collect a soil sample and measure your lawn area. You will then receive a BEST Lawn Care Handbook and a customized lime and fertilizer plan for your lawn.

To check out the many services and programs Master Gardeners offer, go to the VCE-PW's Agriculture and Natural Resources webpage. For the latest news regarding Virginia Tech research, invasive pests and educational opportunities, follow them on Facebook and Twitter.

If you are really into gardening and want to learn more or share your knowledge consider becoming a Master Gardener, give the horticultural help desk a call, send them an email or check out VCE-PW's website.

VCE-PW provides advice and education to residents via Master Gardener volunteers committed to our environment and the community they serve. What these volunteers do is not a business – it is their passion.

Al Alborn is an award-winning columnist and member of the Virginia Press Association. His column appears every other week. You can learn more about Al at [alborn.net](http://alborn.net).



AL ALBORN

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MEMBER:



# Public notices still belong in print

In this week's newspaper, on Page 26, you will find several public notices. They contain important information about various local government meetings and actions as well as, on occasion, upcoming foreclosures, court cases and attempts by local stores and restaurants to obtain licenses to serve alcohol.

For decades, Virginia law has required such notices to be published in local newspapers, where both the casual reader and someone looking for them can find them. The law – strengthened in 2019 with support from the newspaper industry – sets specific requirements newspapers must meet in order to qualify to publish these notices.

However, a proposal in the General Assembly this session would allow online-only websites to join newspapers as an option for publishing these legal notices. This is a bad idea for a number of reasons.

First, we're already in the 21st century. All legal notices published in this paper and every other paper in the state are not only posted on our website, but they are also uploaded to a searchable statewide website run by the Virginia Press Association. Those online requirements were part of the 2019 legislation.

And while there is no doubt that the number of people reading newspapers in print has declined, the number reading our websites has never been greater. InsideNoVa.com reaches over 700,000 unique visitors a month, for example.

More importantly, though, we believe our forefathers required publication of these notices in print for two reasons. A newspaper is unlike any other medium in that a reader can stumble across something that he or she was not expecting – such as a public notice about an ordinance or issue that might be of interest to them or to a friend, relative, client or vendor. That serendipity cannot be replicated online, where most users search for specific content

and then leave the site after reading it.

Secondly, a newspaper serves as a permanent physical record that the notice was actually published, that it contained all of the required information, and that it appeared the requisite amount of time before the meeting or event (all of which are required in state law).

One need look no further than the case of The Hook to see the shortcomings of posting notices only online. This longtime Charlottesville-area publication was bought by someone who apparently didn't like some of its content – so he simply erased all of it from the internet. Web sites can be updated, changed or deleted at any time. Once a newspaper is printed, it exists for eternity. This ensures that local governments and other agencies can verify – even years later – that a notice was published correctly. Not having such a record could expose taxpayers and regulated entities to costly litigation.

Supporters of allowing notices in online-only sites argue that it would create more competition, potentially lowering the cost for local governments and other entities that place public notices. In reality, these costs represent the tiniest of fractions of local governments' budgets, and there are a variety of ways to keep costs down – including putting the notices up for bid. Most localities still have at least two or three newspapers that qualify to publish legal notices, so there is plenty of competition.

As a newspaper, we obviously have a vested interest in this issue. But public notices are not some kind of welfare for newspapers. They are a small percentage of our revenue – and they cost us money to process, print and deliver.

We believe they are critical to the functioning of a democracy, though, and that only the powerful combination of newspapers and their websites can provide the transparency, serendipity and permanency necessary to ensure they serve their full purpose.

## AL ALBORN | AROUND PRINCE WILLIAM

# Pleasant memories and painful recollections

An earlier column, "You can be anything you want to be," (Nov. 24) generated a lot of interest. That column, Manassas Mayor Michelle Davis-Younger shared what it was like to be Black in Prince William County. They weren't all pleasant stories.

Readers either loved or hated that column. Some appreciated learning about a darker part of Prince William's past. Others would just as soon forget it and move on. As the Spanish philosopher George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"

It started out as just a column. After publishing it, I realized it contained an oral history about segregation and discrimination that most think of only in passing these days. I stopped by the Ruth E. Lloyd Information Center (RELIC), part of the county's library system, to look for more documentation about the history of Blacks in Prince William. The staff could point me to only three references. Stories about the lives and history of white Prince William residents fill its shelves.

Albert Williams, a Woodbridge resident, read my column and called me. He shared memories of what it was like to grow up in Prince William in the mid-1900s. Some were pleasant memories, some were anecdotal stories, others were painful recollections.

Williams is 82. I realized I was listening

to a part of history that would be lost if not captured during his lifetime and asked if he would mind sharing it for posterity and future generations. Williams agreed, saying he wanted to "fill in some of the many blank pages" in local history.

Bill Golden, a genealogist and videographer, agreed to help document Williams' story. Golden set up his mobile studio in Williams' living room and captured a few of his many stories.

Williams just scratched the service of life well lived. He was a soldier, a successful actor, a

traveler, an interesting person. He is publishing a book, "Beyond Kankey Hill" that documents his life. He shared the draft manuscript with me. It is more "missing pages" in Prince William's story. For example, Williams shares that Kankey Hill Road got its name because it bordered on a cluster of "colored people" with kinky "kankey" hair. Friends and family members told Williams that the road was renamed "Smoketown Road" because there were a lot of smoky, dark-colored people living on that road.

Williams also writes about his life in New York, his successful acting career, his time in the Army, his European travels, and his return to his home in Prince William. If you have ever been to Freedom High School, Northern Virginia Commu-



AL ALBORN

### WATCH THE INTERVIEW

» Scan this QR code to watch Golden's interview with Albert Williams on YouTube.



nity College's Woodbridge Campus or the nearby area along Interstate 95, you stood on land he once owned.

Golden's video on Williams is linked from on Prince William's Genealogy and History Facebook page. Williams' video is one of its most popular. People are interested in the "missing pages" of Prince William's history.

There is a lot of history about Prince William in the minds of the older Black residents who still live here. When they are gone, that history goes with them. Some prefer that be the case. Golden plans to keep capturing Prince William's undocumented history by doing more videos. People interested in participating in this project can contact him at norfolk1956@gmail.com. We need to remember our past.

Al Alborn is an award-winning columnist and member of the Virginia Press Association. His column appears every other week. You can learn more about Al at alborn.net.



ALBERT WILLIAMS