

## Retirements

# Zurn Closes Out a Triple A Career of Service

BY NORMAN K. STYER  
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One day in 1990, the chairman of one of Loudoun County's many citizen advisory committees left a Board of Supervisors meeting feeling the work of his panel had been dismissed and disrespected. The moment launched an unlikely political career that would help shape the county over the next three decades.

H. Roger Zurn Jr. retires from public service Dec. 31 after going undefeated in his nine elections and garnering more than a quarter million votes. He has served as a local elected official for 33 years, the past 28 as county treasurer, helping to lead the county through a period of unprecedented rapid growth.

Zurn's introduction to Loudoun came through his early work as a banker.

"I was working at First American Bank in McLean. They bought this bank here called People's National Bank in Leesburg and they called me in and said, 'You need to go in and incorporate that into our systems,'" he recalled. "I said, 'OK, just one question: Where's Leesburg.' They said just drive straight down Rt. 7 and you'll hit it."

There were just two traffic lights on that journey.

"I went to the branch and it was like a throwback to the 1950s. It was just beautiful wood paneling, much of which they've retained [at the Lightfoot Restaurant]. And the women there were just so fabu-



Norman K. Styer/Loudoun Now

County Treasurer H. Roger Zurn Jr. retires this week after 33 years of elective service.

lous. Every day somebody would bring in a breakfast—fresh baked breakfast, homemade from scratch," Zurn said. "I just found it to be so welcoming and I just stayed there."

He later went to work for Loudoun-

based Farmers and Merchants Bank as its senior lending officer, an experience that ended in his firing for refusing to sign off on a unqualifying loan for a friend of the bank chairman.

At home, he had to explain it to his

then-wife who was eight months pregnant. "Well, you were right, but do you have to be right now?" Zurn recalls her

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## Buffington Reflects on 8 Years as Supervisor

BY HANNA PAMPALONI  
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When supervisors voted to implement new local election districts after the 2020 census, the new map retired the Blue Ridge District that Tony Buffington has represented for the past eight years. That matched his retirement plans well.

Buffington, who opted not to run for the newly drawn Little River District, said the timing lined up with him wanting to take a step back from committing so much time on the board and have more time to spend with his six children aged 10 to 18.

"I need the break so that I don't miss all of my kids' high school events," he said, adding that he wanted them to remember him being present at important milestones in their lives.

But Buffington says he's not taking a whole step back from public service. County Chair Phyllis Randall (D-At Large) nominated him to serve on the Loudoun Water Board. Supervisors will vote on that nomination during their Jan. 2 meeting. That seat is a four-year term.

"I'm actually looking forward to that," Buffington said. "It's something that I wanted to do. It's less of a time commitment than the Board of Supervisors but

still keeps me involved with the county."

He also was confirmed to the Morven Park Board of Trustees and said he recently earned his real estate license and will be working some with Hunt Country Sotheby's in Middleburg and Leesburg.

"With all that, I still think I'll be less busy than I was [as a supervisor]," he said laughing.

Buffington said he has enjoyed serving on the board, even if he felt that partisan politics had become more prevalent



Hanna Pampaloni/Loudoun Now

**Tony Buffington**

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saying. They went on to form their own temp agency business.

Zurn's introduction to politics grew from a connection that grew from a business loan, when he helped Steve Stockman start his title business.

"I've had time then to be in the community, doing Rotary, Little League, soccer, you know. I wasn't political, in the least, not in the least," Zurn said. Stockman, then serving as one of two Republican members on the Board of Supervisors asked Zurn to serve on the newly formed Affordable Housing Committee.

Yes, the Board of Supervisors was attempting to address affordable housing concerns 30 years ago.

"It was basically just much of what that same conversation is today. Teachers couldn't afford to be here, firemen, police. Your average person was having trouble living in Loudoun County," Zurn said.

He got elected chairman of the new panel.

"We went around on our own dime to four or five different jurisdictions to see

what they were doing. We worked hard," he said.

Zurn made his first-ever appearance before the board to deliver the committee's final report. He left the meeting with little more than a thank you.

"So, six months went by and nothing. I started watching newspapers and stuff and nothing was done. So, I went into the board meeting one day during board comment, and said, 'Look, you know, we worked pretty hard on this report, but we're not seeing anything happening. Can you tell me what your plans are?'" Zurn said. "I'll never forget, Chuck Bos, who was vice chair at that time, said, 'We're the Board of Supervisors, and we'll do it at the time as we please.'"

He thought the board's response was "extremely disrespectful and rude."

"I went home and I told my wife what transpired. And she made a comment that she regretted it later. She said: 'Why don't you do something about it?'"

That chance—by chance—quickly emerged. "I've been very blessed in terms of things happening that you can never anticipate," Zurn said.

Six weeks later, Sterling District supervisor Alice Bird resigned. She had run in the 1987 election against her former hus-

band to take his supervisor seat following their divorce.

Zurn was one of four Sterling residents to apply for the appointment to fill the seat until a special election was held.

"And I thought—you know being naïve—hey, I've been active in the community and shown I can do things with this committee. So I applied naively thinking that I stood a pretty good shot," Zurn said.

"The only question they asked was: Are you a Republican or a Democrat? And I thought that was really weird, but because I had been approached by two Republicans, I said Republican, and I didn't think much of it," he said.

He was quickly dismissed from consideration by the Democratic majority.

"So now I was really hot," Zurn said. He met with the Loudoun County Republican Committee and committed to run against the board's appointee, Howard Smith, in the special election.

He won with 72% of the vote and by a similar margin the following year to secure a full four-year term representing the Sterling District.

He joined the board just as the national savings and loan crisis hit, collapsing the speculative land values that had inflated

the county's nonresidential tax base.

"So revenues dropped off by 20% and we had to deal with that. We ended up having to lay off about 10% of the workforce," Zurn recalled. "It was a hard time."

It was that crisis that established Zurn's reputation for fiscal discipline.

He remembers that County Administrator Phil Bolen had proposed a series of potential budget cuts in four tiers. On the list of cuts that would be the most severe was providing lunches for members of the parks and recreation board during their meetings.

"I think this is where I kind of realized that I'm probably not of the same mindset of many," Zurn said, recalling that Bolen's entire list didn't include enough reductions to solve the problem. "I just found that to be so absurd and then I just went off on that."

Board Chair Betty Tatum asked if he could do any better.

"I went and got the budget book, got a legal pad, and started going through it literally department by department, and just jot it down, I don't know, maybe 15 potential cuts, amounting to I want to say \$2 million," Zurn said, noting this was years before supervisors had any staff aides to support their work. "I just brought it back took it to the board office made copies of my legal page, just written, not typed down, and gave it to the board."

The board votes on each one, line-by-line. "Eight out of 15 got accepted, and I just thought, OK, I'm making a difference here," he said.

In the 1991 election, the first with a countywide chair, Republicans took eight of the nine seats. The Democrat, Tom Dodson, resigned a year later, creating an all-GOP board.

And Zurn, with less than two years of experience, was now a senior board member.

"We had the first budget meeting, and nobody knew anything, except for me," he said. "The very first thing we took up with the school system. I remember just nobody really had talked beforehand. There were no discussions."

The board's work session to review the school budget remains one of the most surprising, and shortest, in county history.

The meeting was called to order by Chair George Barton. There was a period of silence when no one spoke. Then Supervisor George Washington made a motion to cut \$2 million from the school budget, which then totaled just over \$83 million—a far cry from today's \$1.7 billion spending plan.

## Zurn's Lasting Initiative

A cornerstone of the political career of retiring County Treasurer H. Roger Zurn is a governing philosophy that bears his name.

The Zurn Initiative was born out of the near financial ruin caused by the savings and loan crisis following the beginning of Loudoun County's early 1990s building boom.

It started with an elementary school.

"We were at the Finance Committee, and the schools came in and said, 'we just realized we need a new elementary school next year at a cost of I think it was \$5 million,'" Zurn recalled. "Me, being naïve and stupid, I go, 'What do you mean? You're just finding out you need a school?'"

He was told that, unforeseen by the planning staff, a lot of development happened quickly in one area.

Zurn asked what other unexpected costs were coming. "We know this \$5 million, but what else? Nobody could answer my question."

That led to the county's first deep dive to understand the true cost of the development applications the board was

approving.

That spurred a detailed review of each county department to gauge how population growth impacts the cost of their operations and studies to establish for the first time level-of-service expectations—standards that could be translated into per-house costs.

"The ultimate game plan, which we never got to do, was we would take every development that was proposed, map out the cost of it and if it was positive, approve it, if it was negative decline it," Zurn said.

That effort pushed developers toward mixed use projects that would include significant office and retail components to balance the budget impact of new houses.

"That was the only way they were going to get their projects to be feasible," Zurn said. "That all just evolved out of that one elementary school, you know, popping up out of nowhere."

The work was developed under a Republican board characterized as being pro-growth.

"That board ultimately found that

balance and in the last year. Actually, we became almost anti-growth, right? It was really an interesting transition. I think we turned down four or five major developments."

When an even more pro-growth board took office the following term, Zurn said they chose to ignore many of the safeguards although staff members, including long-time budget director Ben Mays, who helped develop the model, continued to track the impacts.

Today, with the great influx of tax revenue flowing from data centers, county supervisors spend little time assessing the fiscal impacts of the developments they review or the scope of government operations.

"I can't tell you the last time we've had a program review," Zurn said. "I think we're doing we're into a lot of things that duplications either done by the state or other organizations. We can't be everything to everybody, which is what we're quickly becoming, if not already become. But until that downturn comes, when everybody blames it on residential development ... we're heading for that."

"But right now, the revenue is flowing it. It's mind boggling," he said. ■

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The motion passed on a 5-4 vote, Zurn among those opposed, without discussion.

"It was all of a sudden. There was sheer silence with everybody looking around going, did that really just happen?" Zurn recalled. "[Superintendent Edgar] Hat-trick was at the end at the table. Nobody had asked him anything. Nobody said anything to him. He's just sitting there in stunned silence."

With no future action needed, Barton adjourned the meeting.

"That began the process but actually as it turned out, it was great working with that crew during that time because everybody knew we had to do serious things in order to get this county back," Zurn said.

The new board came into office not only facing the dire land value collapse but also with little left in the budget reserves.

"Basically, we were starting from just almost a near disaster," he said. Things were so bad that bond raters began to question whether to retain the county's single A rating.

Zurn was tapped to lead the board's Finance Committee and worked to re-write the county's fiscal policies, including requirements to build up the reserves. The board also switched to semi-annual tax collections, a maneuver that included a one-time extra collection that provided an infusion of cash. That money was used to pay for a courthouse expansion and to rebuild the reserves.

"It built a reserve back up to roughly \$5 million, and then we made a policy that from that point forward that nothing could be done until there was at least 10% of a reserve. That would be the first thing. That still is in place today," he said.

That wasn't the only crisis that would land at the board's dais that term.

There was the time that supervisors were told the landfill would be out of space in four weeks. That required a \$2 million emergency to cap the landfill and start building a new one. And there was the time that the Finance Committee was told a new elementary school needed to be built immediately, a \$5 million surprise.

"It was crazy. There was just so much thrown at me. It was a hell of a learning experience. It was mind boggling, but exciting at the same time," Zurn said. "It was up to us to figure this out. No white knight was coming in and saving us. So, it was it was an interesting time."

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## Supervisors Honor Zurn for Service

As County Treasurer H. Roger Zurn entered the final month of his seventh and final four-year term, the Board of Supervisors presented him with a resolution celebrating his service Dec. 5.

Zurn got his start in public office in 1990 when he won a special election to fill the vacant Sterling District seat on the Board of Supervisors. He was re-elected to a full term in 1991 and helped guide the county through a severe economic downturn followed by a period of rapid growth. As chair of the board's finance committee, he helped develop standards for fiscally responsible development known as the Zurn Initiative.

In 1995, he was elected as county treasurer, following the retirement of George Titus. His work was credited with helping the county achieve its triple-A bond ratings and long-term financial stability.



Alexis Gustin/Loudoun Now

County Treasurer H. Roger Zurn, surrounded by county supervisors and his staff, speaks during a Dec. 5 resolution presentation in the county boardroom.

"All I ever wanted to do was do a good job. I wanted to see the county be better than when I came in and I think I've accomplished that," Zurn said, while giving credit to his staff. "They are the ones who made me look good."

Zurn also gave credit to County Administrator Tim Hemstreet.

"Mr. Hemstreet is one of the best county administrators in the state of Virginia. We've been so fortunate," he said. "Mr. Hemstreet has been an amaz-

ing person to work with and to watch him operate. People don't realize how much he puts on his own shoulders to make sure this county really winds up in the right place."

"The one thing I want everybody to remember when I leave is that I never lied. I always told the truth. I always tried to do the right thing. I'm proud of that and I've so appreciated the time I've had serving this county," Zurn said. ■

## Graham Enters Fourth Decade of Town Council Service

BY NORMAN K. STYER

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Roger Zurn this week steps down as the longest serving county government elected official, but his not Loudoun's longest serving representative. That distinction goes to Round Hill Vice Mayor Mary Anne Graham who was first elected in 1983.

She moved to Round Hill in 1977 just after the small town built its first sewage treatment plant. Water was supplied by a spring-fed reservoir. Commuter traffic flowed through downtown before the Rt. 7 bypass was built. The Town Council met in a small back room in the general store and most of the town's administrative work was done by the mayor and his wife, Jeff and Betty Wolford.

She first joined the Town Council by being appointed to fill a vacant seat and then was elected to her first four-year term. She hasn't served consecutively, having lost a reelection bid along the way.

"I learned that you had to campaign," she said.



Norman K. Styer/Loudoun Now

Mary Anne Graham stands in front of the Round Hill Town Office.

She also ran for mayor once in 1990's three-way race. "I only got 27 votes, but people have come up to me since that time and said, 'I was one of those,'" Graham said.

During her service, the town has seen huge changes, the most substantial being the approval of the 1,100 home planned unit development, then known as the In-

tergate rezoning, around its borders.

"It was done by the county. I don't think anybody was terribly happy about it, but it was a done deal," she said.

The establishment of a town park helped to bring the town together, she said, and the recently completed streetscape improvements on Main and Loudoun streets made the town safer for motorists and pedestrians.

She had a 29-year military career and retired from the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority. Along the way, she built her editing and proofreading skills with experience publishing newsletters. At council meetings, the mayor announces gold star awards when the review meeting minutes pass muster without a correction from the fastidious editor.

"I guess you just have an eye for certain things," she said.

"I've enjoyed being on the council. I can't believe that it's been 40 some years. I enjoy it. I like taking on the responsibility," Graham said.

Graham starts her next four-year term Jan. 1. ■