

LAW ENFORCEMENT

EDWARDS NAMED CITY POLICE CHIEF

Hiring comes as RPD repairs erosion of trust, employee morale

Richmond's interim police chief is now the department's full-time leader.

A nationwide search that began in March ended in mid-July with the selection of Rick Edwards, who has nearly 24 years of experience with the department. Edwards was made interim chief in October after Chief Gerald Smith resigned following claims, later discredited, that the department thwarted a mass shooting plot at Dogwood Dell on July 4, 2022.

That same month, Richmond City Council allowed its employees to collectively bargain; in May, members of the department voted to enter contract negotiations with the city through the Richmond Coalition of Police. Its vice president, Carl Scott, who was part of the selection committee, said the independent union was looking forward to working with Edwards "in making the agency equitable and fair for our officers while developing better community relations."

The contract negotiations are occurring as the department continues to fill vacancies that in 2022 exceeded 130 posi-

tions. At a quarterly crime report presentation in July, Edwards noted that RPD had seen a 74% increase in applications compared to the first half of 2022 and that it had recently rehired 10 former Richmond officers and was looking forward to the graduation of its latest police academy class in August. "We still need that manpower," he said, "and we're still building our agency back."

In announcing Edwards as chief, a city press release noted he "has worked tirelessly to re-establish trust both within the department and the community [and] implemented new core values, updated policies and initiated the new body-worn camera release policy." That sentiment was echoed by James Minor, president of the Richmond chapter of the NAACP and a member of the interview panel, who said Edwards has "made a concerted effort to re-engage with the community at all levels. He was intentional in reaching out not just to the NAACP but other organizations to have authentic conversations about hard topics. This is the type of leader we need for the police department and for our community." — **Mark Newton**



Rick Edwards became the permanent chief of police in July.

DEVELOPMENT



Gambling On It

CASINO PLANS HEADED FOR SECOND REFERENDUM

PLANS FOR A RICHMOND CASINO are back on the table and headed to November's ballot.

Following a City Council vote to put the casino before voters a second time, after plans were narrowly rejected in 2021, a Richmond Circuit Court judge and the Virginia Lottery in July paved the way for another referendum. But while state budget language barring the city from seeking another casino referendum expires Nov. 1, a new budget – still awaiting approval as of press time – could further extend the ban. The \$562 million ONE Casino + Resort project is planned for 2001 Walmsley Blvd. and 4700 Trenton Ave. in south Richmond and would be operated by RVA Entertainment Holdings LLC, a joint venture of Urban One Inc. and Churchill Downs Inc. Advocates have touted the jobs and revenue the project could bring to the area, while opponents cite the potential harm of the gambling industry and the results of the previous referendum as reasons to reject the casino again.

"I am excited to see the Virginia Lottery and the Richmond Circuit Court approve the referendum for a Richmond destination-resort and entertainment venue that will provide 1,300 good-paying jobs and an estimated \$30 million in annual revenue to tackle our community's greatest needs," Mayor Levar Stoney said in a statement after the court's approval. "Richmond is experiencing record development and growth, and with the addition of a destination resort we will change the economic trajectory of Southside for years to come." — **MN**

FROM TOP: GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY RICHMOND POLICE DEPARTMENT

All-in on a Casino

Supporters of the proposed Richmond Grand resort hope big donations and other incentives will hit the jackpot with voters

BY MARK NEWTON OCTOBER 25, 2023

The following is an online extra from our November 2023 issue.

1 of 2



Photo illustration by Kyle Talley



With an Election Day turnout in their sights, proponents of bringing a \$562 million casino to South Richmond have turned up the heat.

The project, now named the **Richmond Grand Resort and Casino**, has attracted millions of dollars from advocates, particularly from casino organizers Churchill Downs and Urban ONE. Each has given **just over \$4 million** to the campaign Richmond Wins, Vote Yes, which in turn has **funneled \$800,000** to Richmonders for Good Jobs, according to the Virginia Public Access Project, which lists the two donations as the largest single corporate contributions in the state's history. Casino officials have also pledged to work with the Richmond Area Building and Construction Trades Council on bringing union labor to the project.

Richmond politicians are also throwing incentives to voters, who in 2021 narrowly rejected the casino. Mayor Levar Stoney and Richmond City Council have moved forward a plan to turn the estimated \$19 million in gaming tax revenue into the Child Care and Education Trust Fund to improve child care and preschool education "as soon as fall 2024," a city statement says. It also plans to use a separate \$26.5 million payment to build two care centers and make a flurry of improvements to city parks.

Opponents, including local philanthropists Robert and Barbara Ukrop and Democratic activist Paul Goldman, have thus far sent a total of **just under \$200,000** to the campaign **No Means No Casino**.

"The pro-casino advocates are using their oversized bank account to run incessant ads, pay every group and buy every vote on a long shot \$8 million bet to get their referendum passed a second time," says Farid Alan Schintzius, a strategist and organizer with No Means No Casino. "People are sick of it. We said 'no' the first time, and we meant it."

Early voting ends Nov. 4; Election Day is Nov. 7.

POLITICS

DEMS RECLAIM HOUSE, SENATE

Youngkin now faces tougher obstacles to his agenda and plans for higher office

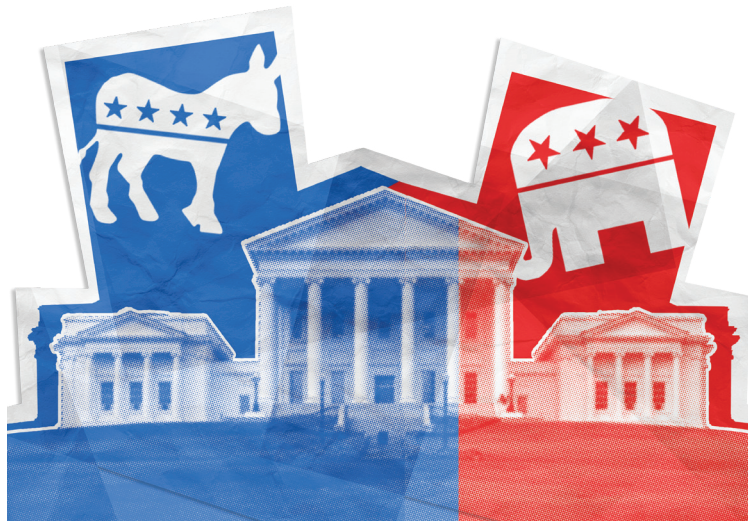
Virginians on Nov. 7 rejected Gov. Glenn Youngkin's plea for continued legislative support, giving full control of the state legislature to Democrats and setting up Del. Don Scott, D-Portsmouth, to be the state's first Black speaker of the House of Delegates.

The power shift follows the reshaping of the state's political landscape by Supreme Court of Virginia-appointed special masters. All 140 House and Senate seats were up for grabs, and redistricting drove 40 incumbents to retire.

"This win sends a message to Gov. Youngkin and to MAGA Republicans across the nation that there is no place for their extreme agenda in Virginia," House Democratic Caucus Campaigns Chair Dan Helmer said in a statement. Current Speaker of the House Todd Gilbert stated that, "in the end, our focus on better schools, safer communities and lowering the cost of living couldn't overcome a dishonest Democratic focus on a lone issue."

Democrats' focus on that issue — abortion rights and Youngkin's proposed 15-week ban on the procedure — drove their victory, says Alex Keena, an associate politics professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. "I was struck by the fact that Democrats seemed to do very well in districts that went for [President Joe] Biden. Even Democrats who lost tended to outperform Biden's vote share. And so, clearly, you saw the electorate shift to the left a little bit."

Several tight races in the Richmond area were key to the



blue wave, including Democrat Del. Schuyler VanValkenburg's win of Henrico County's 16th District Senate seat over Republican Sen. Siobhan Dunnivant. What it portends for the remainder of Youngkin's term, however, is unclear.

"I can see two different possibilities," Keena says, "and it really depends on what Youngkin wants to do, if he wants to run for president or, more likely, he wants to face [Sen.] Mark Warner in 2026. [In the latter case,] he can try to work with the Democrats and cross the aisle and sort of humble himself and really commit himself to bipartisanship and find common ground to pass things that both parties are concerned about. ... The alternative, which I really fear but I think is probably more likely, is that the Democrats will force Youngkin into a lot of uncomfortable votes. They're going to pass a lot of policy. They're going to force him to veto a lot of stuff, and Youngkin may not be willing to compromise because he knows that, in order to win a primary election, he has to cater to the more extreme side of the Republican base that doesn't necessarily want to see compromise."

—Mark Newton

POLITICS

All Bets Are Off

Casino folds in second referendum



THE RICHMOND GRAND RESORT AND CASINO bet it all on the River City, but the \$10 million campaign ultimately flopped with voters for a second time.

Two years after a referendum to bring a casino to South Richmond narrowly failed, opposition to a second proposal grew even stronger, ending in a defeat of 61.6% to 38.4%, a difference of 15,000 votes. Conceding the loss, the group behind the \$562 million project said it was "proud to have run a community-centered campaign to create more opportunities for residents of this great city to rise into the middle class."

Richmond officials, in trying to build support, had pledged to use tax revenue to create a child care program and new and upgraded parks. But the campaign hit a snag just days before the vote when supporters, including host Preston Brown, made racist and antisemitic remarks about opponents on a radio show featuring Urban ONE founder Cathy Hughes, a major stakeholder in the casino.

"It's got to be embarrassing for [Mayor] Levar Stoney to put so much of his political capital into this initiative and to be so out of step with voters," says Alex Keena, an associate politics professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. U.S. Rep. Abigail Spanberger, D-7th, is running for governor, and Stoney is said to be planning a run. "You have to think that this is a really big barrier to that happening if he can't get this passed."

Stoney said in a statement that he "will continue to be a voice for communities that have been historically overlooked and underserved."

The casino's defeat is "a complete repudiation of everything that [Stoney] has tried to do to this city," says Farid Alan Schintzius, a strategist and organizer with the anti-casino group No Means No Casino. "And [the fact] that people turned out in the [numbers] they did, it's pretty remarkable. It shows me that the Richmond that I've known and loved is real and alive and well." —MN

FROM TOP: KYLE TALLEY; GETTY IMAGES