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The Council Connection

your connection to City Council by:

Vice Mayor Justin M. Wilson

Alexandria, Virginia

February 1, 2016

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This past weekend the Alexandria community lost one of those people that keep us safe.

[Officer Nicolette Clara passed away after a courageous fight with cancer.](#)

Officer Clara had been a police officer in the City for four years. She began with the Alexandria Police after 20 years of service in the US Army.

Our thoughts go out to her entire family and those who knew her.

Contributions in Officer Clara's [name can be made to the Alexandria Police Foundation.](#)

[Contact me anytime.](#)



Council Initiatives

Keeping Small Businesses in Business

One of the things that makes Alexandria such an attractive place to live and visit is our core of small, independent businesses. It's been a characteristic of our community throughout our history.

Yet some [recent small business closures](#) have sparked alarm as to whether that character is being threatened. The loss of a few retail mainstays in both Del Ray and Old Town are certainly cause for mourning. In some cases, those businesses served Alexandria and its visitors for multiple decades. Yet, it should not be a cause for panic.

[Smoke Detector Installation Request](#)

[Real Estate Tax Receipt Calculator](#)

[License Your Dog or Cat](#)

[Report a Street Light Outage](#)

Events/Updates

Presidential Primary Absentee Voting

The Virginia Democratic and Republican parties will be holding their Presidential Primaries on Tuesday, March 1, 2016.

The polls will be open from 6 AM until 7 PM.

[Three candidates have qualified for the Democratic Primary ballot and 13 candidates have qualified for the Republican Primary ballot.](#)

[Absentee voting began on January 15th by mail and in person.](#)

Another Parade!

[The annual George Washington Birthday parade returns to the streets of Old Town!](#)

On Monday, February 16th from 1 PM - 3 PM, the parade is always an essential part of the season!

Making up for the Snow

The recent weather-related closures of our schools has exhausted the available buffer in the calendar.

[As of the end of last month, students have missed six days. Students will now attend school on February 5th and March 4th.](#)

Help Make College Reality For Our Kids

The Scholarship Fund of Alexandria is looking for

The reasons these businesses have closed are as varied as the businesses themselves. Some of the business owners have chosen retirement after decades of operation. Some closures were due to the deaths of owners. Some closed due to steep competition by local and internet retailers.

However, we as a City can use this moment as an opportunity to improve the climate for small business attraction and retention.

In recent years, the City has worked to improve the climate for small businesses. In 2005, the [City became the first in Virginia to restructure the Business, Professional and Occupational License Tax \(BPOL\) to simplify and reduce taxation for small businesses.](#)

BPOL is a local tax paid across Virginia by businesses. It is assessed on the gross revenue of a business (neither on income nor profit).

In 2007, the [City accepted the recommendation of its Small Business Task Force. It began implementing changes in operations and regulation to assist small businesses with their interactions with City government.](#)

Also in 2007, the [City accepted the recommendations of the Mayor's Economic Sustainability Work Group, which laid out a road map for how we could improve our regional competitiveness.](#)

Along with my colleagues Councilman Smedberg and Councilman Lovain, we created a new Business Tax Reform Committee. In 2014, [the Committee provided a new set of recommendations for how the City can improve the business climate for success in our community.](#)

I believe there are several areas the City should work immediately to assist the small businesses in our community, as well as the ones who seek to open here.

It is time to expand the City's Administrative Special Use Permit process. Today, many businesses must wait through a staff review, a hearing before the Planning Commission, and later in front of the City Council prior to receiving approval to open. [The Administrative Special Use Permit process allows the City staff to make those approvals by applying a consistent and predictable criteria.](#) This saves time and money for new small businesses during their most vulnerable phase. A potential expansion of this process will come before the Council later this year.



We should reform the BPOL tax. I'm hopeful that this reform will be initiated at the statewide level. If that does not occur, we should work locally to make changes to BPOL. This would assist new businesses and target strategic growth industries for the City.

Rising commercial rents reflect a confidence landlords have in the City's business climate as well as a scarcity of available retail space. Yet, these rent levels also squeeze out even successful businesses.

We have the opportunity during our land use planning processes to not only ensure that new retail space is always a component, but also that the space is usable by the type of retail that we seek.

volunteers to review applications.

The annual "Reading Day" is scheduled for Saturday, March 12, 2016 from 8 AM until 12 PM at T. C. Williams High School (3330 King Street).

[Sign up and get details online.](#)

Citizens Police Academy

It's time to start the next class of the Citizens Police Academy.

[This acclaimed program is one of the Police Department's key public outreach efforts.](#)

[The class meets for ten weeks each Wednesday, starting in March.](#)

[Sign up today!](#)

The deadline is February 15th.

Plan The Summer

[The Alexandria PTA Council conducts the annual Summer Camp fair to help families plan for when their children will be out of school.](#)

The fair is scheduled for Wednesday February 17, 2016 from 5:30 PM until 8 PM in the T. C. Williams cafeteria (3330 King Street).

Have a Good Meal

[From now through February 7th, more than 60 Alexandria restaurants are participating in Restaurant Week!](#)

With \$35 three course meals, and \$35 dinners for two, it's a great opportunity to enjoy Alexandria's restaurants.

We must continue to support and expand the agencies that help to grow small business activity in the City. This includes the services of the [Alexandria Small Business Development Center](#), the [Alexandria Economic Development Partnership](#), the [Marketing Fund](#), [Visit Alexandria](#), and more.

The recently opened [Capitol Post, an incubator for Veterans and their entrepreneurship](#), has proved the success of providing space for small businesses to thrive.

We still have the opportunity within City Hall to improve processes and reduce red tape.

While businesses in our community can hold sentimental value, they also hold the key to keeping a balance within our economy. Let [me know if you have suggestions for improving that climate.](#)

New Council, New Duties

In conjunction with our City Council service, members of the Council serve on a variety of Boards and Commissions. At the City Council installation meeting, we designate those assignments.

On the new Council, I have retained many assignments and added a few new ones. At the installation meeting, I did have the honor of being elected as the [Vice Mayor](#) for the next three years.

I will be continuing on the City's [Quality of Life Committee](#) along with the Mayor. This group consists of representatives from the City's public safety agencies, Code Administration, Alexandria City Public Schools, and the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority. We use this meeting to track and coordinate activities that work to improve and maintain the high quality of life that our residents expect.

I also remain on the City Council/School Board Committee. This group consists of the Mayor, the School Board Chair and Vice Chair, as well as the Superintendent and City Manager. It coordinates joint activities and projects and serves as the primary interface between City government and the Alexandria City Public Schools.

I will be retaining my spot on the City's Commission on Information Technology. This group has now been re-purposed as a body focused on the City's new broadband efforts.

Along with Councilman Smedberg, I am a member of the City's Audit Committee. This group provides the Council supervision of our annual financial audit.

I'm excited to continue my work on the [Potomac Yard Metrorail Implementation Advisory Group](#). This body has been working for years to conclude the process of bringing a Metro station to Potomac Yard.

I will be a new member of the [Board of Governors of Visit Alexandria](#) (formerly the Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association). The organization is a public membership organization focused on increasing tourism expenditures within our City.

Along with Councilman Chapman, I will join the ARHA Redevelopment Work Group. This group is focused on working with the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority (ARHA) to manage the [orderly redevelopment of aging ARHA properties](#).

I also add the Employee Pension/Compensation Committee to my portfolio. This group works through the details of changes to pay and benefits for our 2,500+ City Employees.

Finally, on a regional basis, I will also be representing the City on the regional [Potomac Watershed Roundtable](#). This group exists to promote collaboration among jurisdictions in the region on environmental issues, specifically water quality challenges.

I am excited that the assignments I have taken on will provide me with the opportunity to best serve the residents of our City.

A Government You Can Trust

I've been around politics and politicians since I was in elementary school, and the vast majority of politicians are good people who honestly serve the public trust. But some aren't.

The Code of Virginia is fairly permissive when it comes to regulations on elected officials. However, it relies on timely and accurate public disclosure.

At the local level, we largely have to live by the rules established in Richmond, but we do sometimes have the ability to go farther to ensure the integrity of our government.

About 13 years ago, [Alexandria became one of the earliest jurisdictions in Virginia to post local campaign finance reports online](#). Anyone can easily review who finances the campaigns of Alexandria's elected officials.

In 2009, I, along with Councilman Smedberg and then-Councilman Krupicka, [successfully sought approval from Richmond](#) to impose new restrictions on land-use applicants. Specifically, the new laws we adopted [require land-use applicants to reveal any financial interests that they might have with policymakers](#).

Three years ago we made improvements to the motions that the City Council makes and votes on to initiate executive sessions.

Two years ago, we moved the Council's work sessions from the Council Work Room (off camera), into the Council chambers so that the public can more easily observe our deliberations.

All elected officials in the state are required to submit an annual [Statement of Economic Interests](#). Last year, Alexandria [became the first local government in Virginia to post these disclosures online](#).

The City also began [posting online the reports of our Internal Auditor for public review](#).

Yet, there is still more we can do. The Mayor has advocated for the formation of a new group to study ethics.

[On Saturday, after weeks of discussion by the new Council and the community, the Council took an important step with the adoption of a unanimously supported resolution.](#)

The resolution adopted by the Council:

- Creates a nine member Code of Conduct Review Committee to create a voluntary Code of Conduct and Ethics Pledge for the City Council
- Directs immediate consideration of a proposal to make existing financial disclosure provisions more stringent.
- Creates a new annual executive session report detailing the legal rationale and votes on convening City Council executive sessions.
- Requests authority from the Virginia General Assembly to locally impose bans on gifts to elected officials.

- Supports legislative initiatives to provide for independent review and audit of City Council personal financial disclosures.

It is my view that this package is a large step forward in continuing the trust of residents that we represent.

A Future for Alexandria Aquatics

Several years ago, the City had seven municipal pools: the [indoor pool](#) at Chinquapin Recreation Center, two large outdoor pools ([Old Town and Warwick](#)), and four small neighborhood pools (Ewald, [Charles Houston](#), Lee and Colasanto).

Over the past five years, with little new financial resources devoted, and mounting capital needs, the City closed Ewald, Lee and Colasanto. Last summer, Warwick did not open with the other outdoor pools.

In the spring of 2013, in adoption of the FY 2014 budget, the Council made a [significant financial investment in the future of municipal aquatics](#).

In partnership with [Advocates for Alexandria Aquatics](#), the Council proposed a partial rebuild of Chinquapin Recreation Center to include a new 50 meter pool, as well as aquatics improvements throughout the City.

While Warwick is now closed, [in the Fall of 2014, the Council gave the direction to the City Manager to begin engineering and building a new pool on the site](#). Unfortunately, Warwick will be closed next



season as well, but a new Warwick Pool will reopen in the summer of 2017. The recently approved Capital Improvement Program includes \$2.3 million for this project. Last

month, the City Manager brought his [final recommendation for the full replacement of the pool](#), which was approved unanimously by the Council.

For Chinquapin Recreation Center, the Council budgeted \$20 million to match the commitment of \$2.5 million of private fundraising.

One of the central components of that new investment was the exploration of feasibility and construction of a 50-meter pool at Chinquapin Recreation Center. The financing plan approved by the Council included assumptions for \$2.5 million of private fundraising from [Advocates for Alexandria Aquatics](#).

With funding from the Council for a feasibility study, the City recently [completed a comprehensive study of the potential expansion](#).

However, [the cost analysis resulted in an estimate of \\$30.5 million for the construction of the new pool](#). The City's current budget for the project (including the private fundraising) is \$22.9 million, leaving a considerable gap.

With that gap, the Council sent the City Staff, advocates and the consultants back to the drawing board. They have now returned to the Council with seven alternatives which range in price from \$22.0 million to \$28.3 million. That now places us much more in line with the budget that was allocated.

This project will now compete with others as the City Manager brings forth his proposed Capital Improvement Program later this month.

The End of Signs in the Right of Way

One of the fun things about service on the City Council is that it can be difficult to predict where the next issue will come from. In this case, a little anticipated United States Supreme Court decision will have a significant impact on Alexandria.

In June, the Supreme Court delivered a [unanimous opinion in Reed vs. Town of Gilbert, Arizona](#). Let me preface this by saying that I'm not an attorney, and most definitely not a Constitutional scholar.

Nevertheless, the case involved the town's signage ordinances and the impact those ordinances had on temporary signs that a church wished to place directing parishioners to their services.

Essentially, the court ruled that "Because content-based laws target speech based on its communicative content, they are presumptively unconstitutional..."

Said another way, if you have to read what a sign says in order to enforce your signage laws, your laws are probably not okay.

This decision is forcing the rapid [rewrite of signage regulations around the country](#) and it has done the same here in Alexandria.

We have ordinances that regulate "Going out of Business" signs, "Opening Soon" signs, and real estate signs.

Prior to the Supreme Court decision, our ordinance banned most signs from the public right-of-way, yet allowed political candidate signs under permit.



In light of the Supreme Court's ruling, the City Attorney's office advised the Council that this distinction was unlikely to pass muster. [Given that, our Staff brought this issue to a committee that had already been convened to look at other signage issues in the City.](#)

That effort culminated in our Staff bringing a text amendment to the Planning Commission. [The Planning Commission concurred with the Staff's recommendation to ban all signs from the public right-of-way, including the political ones that had previously been allowed.](#)

That recommendation came to the City Council on Saturday. Essentially, the choice before the Council came down to allowing a complete "free-for-all" in the public right-of-way (including commercial signs) or banning signs altogether. A third was also suggested that our City Attorney's office felt was on a more tenuous legal footing: Allowing a "free-for-all" during limited periods of time. My view was that this option would invite legal scrutiny and potentially costly litigation.

By a vote of 5-2, the City Council voted to ban signs altogether. [You can watch the Council's Public Hearing and deliberations on this issue online.](#)

Host a Town Hall in Your Living Room!

My regular series of Town Hall Meetings continue!



You supply the living room and a bunch of your friends and neighbors. I will supply a member of the Alexandria City Council (me) with the answers to any of your questions about our City.

Just [drop us a line](#) and we'll get a Town Hall on the calendar! Thanks for the interest!

Upcoming Issues

Budget Process Begins

The most important decision the City Council makes each year is the adoption of the annual operating budget and capital improvement program. The operating budget generally funds the ongoing costs of government (primarily personnel), while the capital budget funds one-time expenditures that provide the community with an asset (new schools, new roads, new playing fields, transit buses, etc).

This year, the City Manager will present his proposed budgets on Tuesday February 23rd, and the City Council will adopt the budget on Thursday May 5th.

It has always been my view that the most important part of the budget process is the adoption of our annual budget guidance for the City Manager. In the fall, the City Council adopts a resolution which provides direction to the City Manager as how to prepare that budget.

The guidance typically provides direction on tax policy, expenditure priorities, debt policy, and other emergent issues. To prepare the Council to provide this direction, a retreat is scheduled.

Just before Thanksgiving, the Council had our annual retreat and [received the first glimpse into next year's financial picture](#). This is the beginning of the Council's process to adopt the Fiscal Year 2017 (July 1, 2016 - June 30, 2017) Operating Budget and the Fiscal Year 2017 - Fiscal Year 2027 Capital Improvement Program.

The current projections are that next year's revenues will grow at a rate of a little more than 2% overall. If that estimate holds, that would provide the City government with about \$14 million of new revenue.

With real estate taxes generating most of our resources, that growth is driven by an estimated increase of 1.5% - 2% in our real estate tax base. As in the past, larger growth in residential real estate is being offset by continued weakness in commercial real estate.

On the expenditure side, we quickly began to see our challenge. Driven largely by [student enrollment growth](#), the Superintendent [has proposed a budget that requires \\$11.8 million of additional operating funds](#) for the Alexandria City Public Schools. The estimates also include \$9.4 million for personnel costs (salary increases and benefit expenses), \$4.5 million for non-personnel costs, and \$8.4 million of new debt service costs.

All together, that creates an estimated shortfall of \$20.1 million, before we start the process. The additional money requested by the

School Superintendent's proposed budget would require 84% of the new revenue available to the City Council. Add in the required debt service to support the ACPS Capital Improvement Program, and it would require all of the new revenue available.

By the time the Council adopts its budget in May, that gap must be addressed by tax increases, expenditure reductions, or some combination of the two. The Council begins to set that direction with the adoption of its budget guidance.

It is always easier to cut the budget in the fall, than it is for the Council to cut the budget in the spring during its budget process. As such, my preference is that the City Manager be directed to present a budget without an increase in the real estate tax rate.

Last year, [I was unsuccessful in my attempt to adopt guidance for the City Manager to not include a tax rate increase](#), but ultimately the City Manager chose not to propose a rate increase in his budget.

This year, I made a similar effort, and again was unsuccessful.

It is far too early to determine whether an increase in the City's real estate tax rate is necessary. Yet, in order to explain the necessity of a potential increase to the taxpayers, we must have the City Manager prepare a budget without such an increase.

My proposal last year was simply to prevent a tax rate increase from being included in the proposed budget. This year, I proposed restricting growth in the operating budget to the the new revenue that is available (currently estimated to be \$12 million), but allowing flexibility for new tax revenue to be utilized to fund the City's Capital Improvement Program.

While we have made progress over the past three years with new investment in capital infrastructure, I believe we have hardly made a dent in the backlog of under investment over the decades. In this current year's capital budget, we invested \$750 per resident in new infrastructure. That's last among our neighboring jurisdictions. Arlington, Loudoun and Fairfax Counties are at or well above \$1,000 per resident. That disparity is evident in our schools, our roads, our transportation infrastructure, our recreation facilities, and more.

There are really only four ways to fix that under investment: raise taxes, shift money from the operating budget, increase debt, or cut other capital programs.

I am still hopeful that the Council will use this budget as an opportunity to make an investment level in our infrastructure that supports our community and economic growth.

[You can watch Council's discussion on the adoption of the budget guidance online.](#)

Once the budget is presented, the Council will have a series of worksessions and public meetings to solicit public input and finalize the adopted budget. On Thursday, February 25th at 7 PM, the City Manager will make a presentation of the budget to the public at the Beatley Library (5005 Duke Street). I hope to see you there.

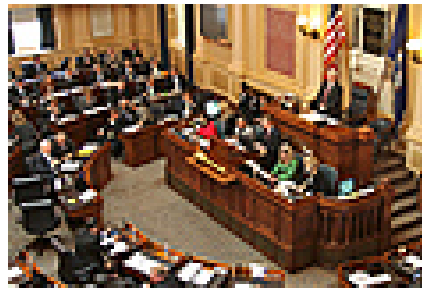
Getting Help From Richmond

Virginia is a [Dillon Rule state](#). This essentially means that local governments have no authority that is not expressly provided by the General Assembly. As such, our ability to work constructively with the legislative and executive branches in Richmond is vitally important.

The new members of the Virginia House of Delegates and Virginia Senate were sworn into office early in January, and are now nearly a month into their 60-day "long session."

Last week I accompanied two of my colleagues to Richmond for the Virginia Municipal League's annual lobbying day.

While in Richmond, we worked with General Assembly members to support the [City's annual legislative package](#). Each year the Council adopts the package to detail which legislative proposals the City supports or opposes, as well as request the creation of new legislation to benefit the City. The components of the package are inserted by City Boards and Commissions, our staff, and individual members of the City Council.



This year, I included a few specific requests in our Legislative Package:

I requested that legislation be submitted to expand the existing authority that elderly or disabled tenants have to assign their right to repurchase in a condominium conversion. [Delegate Herring carried this piece of legislation a few years ago for the City.](#)

I requested [that legislation be submitted to undo changes](#) that were made in last year's budget affecting those who can participate in the Virginia Preschool Initiative.

The City has been called upon at an increasing level to subsidize the salaries of state employees who serve our community due to the failure of the state to pay appropriate salaries. I included language that requested that the state fairly compensate their employees who serve our community.

[A recent study of the Department of Forensic Science found that 2,300 untested PERK \(Physical Evidence Recovery Kits\)](#) primarily from sexual assaults are scattered around the Commonwealth in the custody of Police Departments. I had suggested a budget amendment to provide the Department with the necessary resources to resolve the backlog.

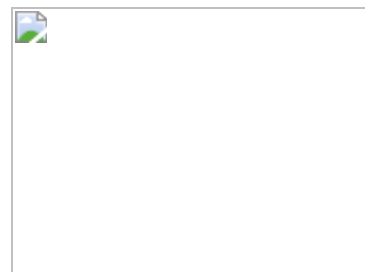
The City's legislative package also included a suggestion that I had made to increase a court fee to support the operations of the Alexandria Law Library.

It can frequently be difficult to advance an agenda in Richmond that aligns with the City's priorities, but I am hopeful that we can advance some of these important measures.

Too Much Snow

On average, Alexandria [gets 15.4 inches of snow per year](#). A little over a week ago, [we got 22 inches in one weekend](#). It was an extraordinary challenge for our region and for our City. I'm immensely proud of our City staff. They worked tirelessly without rest for days, in order to get our City back on its feet.

In the end, there weren't any fatalities. We had only one minor injury to one of our staff. All of Alexandria's streets were passable to emergency vehicles before most of our neighboring jurisdictions. [Our schools reopened before almost every other school system in the region.](#)



As with any emergency of this scale, we will do a full after-

action effort. We will determine what went wrong and what went right. We will learn from this storm as we have done in the past.

There will also be financial impacts from this storm. Our snow removal budget for this year was \$836,000. So far, we have spent more than \$3.6 million in the response to this storm. As a frame of reference, the "Snowmageddon" storm of 2010 cost the City greater than \$5 million in response. Our hope is that we will be able to qualify for Federal aid to mitigate some of these expenses.

We appreciate the patience of so many in Alexandria as we worked to respond to this storm, and I'm sure there will be more discussion to have as we conclude the after-action effort.

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