

Delegate gives post-legislative wrap-up

During this legislative session I brought forward several pieces of legislation essentially aimed at individual liberties, government efficiency, and an open and transparent government. My bill HB1298 allows boaters to enjoy the same privacy rights as folks do enjoy. Currently, law enforcement may stop, board and inspect a boat for any reason. HB1298 will require that law enforcement



YOUR TURN

Guest Column
by Rick Morris

have Reasonable Suspicion, which is the same requirement to stop a vehicle, in order to stop and board a boat. This bill passed both the House and the Senate and is to the Governor for signature. My bill, HB2223, strengthens the penalties for violating Virginia's Freedom of Information Act (FIOA) and is a strong step toward a more open and transparent government. Through Virginia FIOA citizens can obtain information and documents from government officials, and if those government officials willfully and intentionally violate FOIA, without legal excuse or justification, they are guilty of a Class 1 Misdemeanor punishable up to 1 year confinement.

This time last year, the headlines were dominated by Governor McAuliffe's refusal to sign a budget that didn't include Obamacare Medicaid expansion. The year before, the focus of the legislative session was transportation funding. The 2015 legislative session was about improving K-12 education, making college more affordable, and protecting some of our most vulnerable. With Republicans in control of both the House and Senate, we worked together to pass good policy that would achieve those goals and adjourned early, saving taxpayer dollars.

While Washington, D.C., has been the source of regulation after regulation that makes it harder for the private sector to create jobs, there is a better approach in Richmond. We passed legislation making it easier for small businesses to find the funding to start and grow. We passed legislation allowing innovative transportation network companies like Uber and Lyft to safely operate in Virginia. And we passed legislation prohibiting job-killing wage floors that eliminate the jobs of those who can least afford

to lose them.

We built on our progress in recent years to pass transformative K-12 education reforms. For the first time ever, both the House and Senate passed a resolution that would allow charter schools to thrive in Virginia. There are successful models for charter schools across the country, and we owe it to children in schools that aren't meeting their needs to give them a better option.

For the first time since it was introduced 20 years ago, legislation to allow Virginia's 32,000 homeschooled students to participate in extracurricular school activities will be going to the Governor's desk. I believe this is a matter of fairness, homeschool parents pay taxes as everyone else why should they be denied access — they shouldn't.

The budget also directed more money to the classrooms in this year's budget, giving our hard-working teachers a well-deserved pay raise and providing them with additional professional development support.

I have heard concern from parents about the confusing and varying standards at Virginia colleges for accepting credit for AP coursework. We passed legislation this year to standardize it. These are just a few of the important K-12 education reforms that passed this year that will ensure all Virginia students have access to a good education.

Virginia students borrowed \$1 billion last year to pay for higher education. Rising college costs aren't a problem that's unique to Virginia, but this year we passed good solutions to hold down those costs and expand access to higher education in the Commonwealth.

We included funding in the budget to provide \$10 million more in student financial aid at Virginia schools, as well as funding to open up more enrollment slots for Virginia students. I helped pass legislation that would cap mandatory athletic fees that add to the burden of paying for college. We also passed legislation that would give students the option to work towards a \$4,000 per year degree that incorporates online learning.

One factor in unmanageable student debt is that students and their families aren't fully aware of the costs

and opportunities of their higher education options. I was proud to support legislation this year that requires Virginia schools to put on their homepage data on costs, graduation rates and other information so that students can make an informed decision about the best choice for their future.

And finally, the House built on last year's efforts to protect the most vulnerable and strengthen Virginia's safety net for those in the most need. Governor McAuliffe once again argued that Virginia should adopt the Medicaid expansion included in Obamacare, but I joined other House and Senate Republicans in showing that there's a better way to help those in need than dumping them into a massive new bureaucracy that's in desperate need of reform.

We strengthened our safety net with funding targeted to those in Virginia with serious mental illness, giving them better care at lower cost than the hospital emergency room. We increased funding to meet the need for children's psychiatry and crisis services. And we nearly doubled state support for Virginia's network of free clinics, which provide critical services to vulnerable popula-

tions in Virginia.

With the adjustment of priorities within the budget, we cut spending by 1 billion dollars. I think this is a good start. Every dollar that government spends, regardless at what level, directly comes out of the pockets of hard-working men and women of Virginia. Those with a Progressive agenda say that we need to raise taxes to provide for the people. But I believe we need to continue to look for and cut wasteful spending and non-essential government programs, which keeps more money in the pockets of hard working Virginia families.

It is my honor and privilege to be your representative in the Virginia House of Delegates, and I will continue to press for individual liberties and freedoms and a more open and transparent government that is more cost effective and efficient.

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At a glance

HB1298 updates rights for Virginia's boaters, so that law enforcement has to have reasonable suspicion to inspect, which is the same requirement for searching a vehicle.

The budget goal of the 2015 general assembly was improving K-12 education, making college more affordable and protecting some of Virginia's vulnerable.