



VIRGINIA ORGANIZING

News from the Grassroots

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General Assembly Budget Conference

The Senate and House of Delegates have each passed their own version of the state budget. Now each house has to appoint conferees to work together on a compromise. After that, each house has to vote to approve that final budget. Here's where we stand now.

Education

Both the House and Senate versions of the budget included substantial funding for school construction and modernization. We support funding for school infrastructure but also want to fund the Standards of Quality and the priorities below.

While the senate included \$268.5 million for the at-risk add-on—which goes to schools with a large number of low-income students—the House version only includes \$58.3 million.

The Senate version increases the ratio of English Language Learning teachers to students, but the House maintains it at the same level.

Housing

The Senate version creates a workgroup to conduct a study on the Virginia Housing Stability Fund. The fund would create a state voucher program for low-income renters. This budget amendment doesn't create the program, just directs staff to do the study.

The Senate version also increases funding for the Virginia Housing Trust Fund, a key source of funding for the creation and maintenance of affordable housing. The House version doesn't include this increase.

Mental Health

In several parts of the budget, the House includes more funding for mental health, including for permanent supportive housing for folks with serious mental illness, updating mental health facilities, and medicaid reimbursement for psychiatric residential treatment.

Tax Cuts

Putting money in the Virginia Retirement System (VRS): The House version makes a \$500 million "super-deposit" in the VRS (which isn't necessary, but rather a way to bolster our State credit rating by increasing money in the bank); the Senate version doesn't include this "super-deposit." We oppose the House version.

The Grocery Tax:

The Senate version eliminates the State portion of the grocery tax, while the House eliminates the State and Local grocery tax. This means over \$1.2 billion of reduced General Fund, state transportation, and local revenues over the next two years in the House version, while the Senate version would see a \$372 million reduction to the General Fund and a \$190 million reduction to state transportation revenues over the next two years. We want a more just tax system that would eliminate the grocery tax and raise more revenue through progressive income tax. Unfortunately, this comprehensive approach isn't in either budget.

The Senate includes a fully refundable Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), while the House doesn't include this at all. We support the EITC.

Both houses include one-time rebates for all taxpayers, with the House version being slightly higher. Virginia already has a very regressive income tax system where the rich pay little of their wealth and the lowest income residents pay a big share of their wealth. We oppose rebates for all, but the Senate version is better.

CALL YOUR STATE LEGISLATORS TODAY AND TELL THEM TO SUPPORT OUR PRIORITIES IN THE STATE BUDGET:

\$268 million for the At-Risk Add-On to help students and schools in high-poverty areas

\$190 million for the Virginia Housing Trust Fund

Increased funding for mental health services

New funding for Coalfield Community Development Program Managers to support just transition work in Southwest Virginia

Contact info: <https://whosmy.virginiageneralassembly.gov/>



Bridge the Divide Rallies

In three areas of Virginia, chapters have held rallies to call on Congress to “bridge the divide” and pass budget legislation that funds health care and lowers the cost of medicine, funded by fair taxes on the most wealthy billionaires and corporations.

The emerging Wythe County Chapter held their “Honk for Health Care” rally last week with the support of leaders from the New River Valley. Hundreds of drivers honked!

In Norfolk on Friday, leaders from the local chapter as well as Newport News/Hampton, Portsmouth, Suffolk, and the Eastern Shore gathered outside Senator Mark Warner’s office to thank him for his support of health care for all.

In Fredericksburg today, the chapter and leaders from Richmond met at Rep. Abigail Spanberger’s office to thank her for her leadership on lowering the cost of prescription medicine.

When leaders met with Senator Tim Kaine earlier in February, he expressed confidence that Congress would pass some of these measures this year. We will continue to lift up the need. Given the effects of COVID on families and the economy, people need these programs now.



Chapter Lobby Days

Chapters have held 18 meetings with members of the General Assembly since the 2022 session began to push for our priorities of education, housing, and mental health! We will continue to drive calls and emails to their offices until the session ends.



Featured Community Partner | The Center for Sustainable Communities

Addressing the impacts of the climate crisis demands big solutions and big initiatives because the climate crisis is driven by big, systemic human behaviors. Grassroots resistance to those systemic forces is critical to stopping the things that are destroying us – those entrenched, destructive behaviors that put profit over people. But it is also critical that we imagine the things we need to start doing. We need to apply scientific and technical and engineering knowledge to the practical challenges presented by the impacts of climate change on the most vulnerable communities. Garry Harris is just the person for the job.

Harris describes himself as a “scientist, engineer, faith leader, educator, activist, and advocate” with a background in the energy industry, and his experience, expertise, and convictions give him a unique perspective on the scope of the transformation needed in our technology and infrastructure in order to ensure a sustainable future. Harris believes that a sustainable future must be one that centers the communities that are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. If sustainability means developing systems that ensure a future for future generations, we cannot achieve sustainability without justice.

Harris founded the Center for Sustainable Communities (CSC) in 2015 to apply his knowledge of science, engineering, and technology through an environmental justice and equity lens to help make communities healthier, cleaner, and safer. While many of CSC’s projects are local in scope, they work all over the United States, making CSC one of a handful of Joint Plan of Work partners that operate extensively outside of Virginia. “Give me a topic in sustainability and we either did it, are doing it, or are about to do it,” Harris says.

In 2021 CSC executed nearly 70 community-based solutions to help meet their objectives. Examples of their work include partnering with higher-education institutions and public entities to develop computer-based technologies to assess environmental hazards in vulnerable communities; developing a workforce app to assist with recruitment for sustainable living-wage jobs; developing a community benefits agreement to provide sustainable wage jobs and career pathways; advancing both the rate and total number of COVID vaccinations through an effective grassroots campaign; improving transit and transportation on a regional scale; and planning and implementing several sustainable development and community-building programs for the city of Portsmouth.

Read more on our website!

<https://virginia-organizing.org/the-center-for-sustainable-communities/>

Local Chapters and Areas Served:

Charlottesville/Albemarle County, Danville, Eastern Shore, Harrisonburg/Rockingham County, Fredericksburg, Lee County, Lynchburg, Martinsville/Henry County, New River Valley, Newport News, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Richmond Area, Suffolk, Tri-Cities Area, Washington County, Waynesboro, Wytheville

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