BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
STAFFORD COUNTY, VIRGINIA
MINUTES
WORK SESSION
APRIL 9, 2025

CALL TO ORDER – A work session of the Stafford County Board of Supervisors was called to order by Deuntay Diggs, Chairman, at 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday, April 9, 2025 in ABC Conference Room, George L. Gordon, Jr. Government Center, 1300 Courthouse Road, Stafford VA.

ROLL CALL – The following members were present: Deuntay Diggs, Chairman; Tinesha O. Allen (remote), Vice Chairman; Meg Bohmke; Pamela Yeung; Darrell English; and Monica Gary.

Absent: Crystal Vanuch.

Also in attendance were William Ashton, County Administrator; Rysheda McClendon, County Attorney; Taylor Dunn, Deputy Clerk; Dr. Daniel Smith, Superintendent; various staff members; and other interested parties.

Dr. Yeung motioned, seconded by Ms. Bohmke, to allow Supervisor Allen to participate in the meeting remotely.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (5) Bohmke, Diggs, English, Gary, Yeung
No: (0)
Absent: (2) Allen, Vanuch

BUDGET WORK SESSION

Andrea Light, Chief of Budget, said that during their work session today, they aimed to concentrate on the capital improvement program. She mentioned that before them was the 10-year Capital Improvement Plan, and behind that were the County's 3R projects.

Ms. Light stated that their goal was to focus on those projects that begin in fiscal year 2026, ensuring the Board was comfortable moving forward with these projects. She noted that she did not anticipate a detailed agenda to review each project individually, but she would bring that back to the Chairman if they would like to approach it in a more structured manner.
Ms. Light began with education. She indicated that starting with the schools, they had Drew Middle School and High School Number Six. She emphasized that High School Number Six was actually the continuation of Drew Middle School, and the cost remained the same as the previous year.

Ms. Light highlighted that the appropriation for elementary schools, including Hartwood Elementary School, was moving forward. She detailed that specifically, the replacement project for Hartwood Elementary School was scheduled to start in 2026, as well as the Critical Systems Restoration project at Thompson Middle School. Additionally, she pointed out that there were plans for a fine arts wing at North Stafford High School.

Ms. Light concluded by opening the floor for any questions regarding these projects.

Mr. English said that in reference to the Hartwood Elementary School replacement, it seemed the project would be going back to the schools. He said that he thought Westlake had donated that property to them and asked for clarification that the land was suitable for an elementary school.

William Ashton, County Administrator, confirmed that it was.

Dr. Yeung said that her comments were not intended to criticize Hartwood School, but Hartwood had a brand-new school and she was concerned about the proximity of these schools, which would only be one mile apart with a new school built in this location.

She said that in contrast, Embrey Mill would save 750 kids from having to walk to school and significantly reduce transportation costs—but it had ultimately been denied. She said that she was not going to speculate on the reasons for this decision, but she did want to highlight the potential negative impact of these decisions on the community and Stafford County as a whole.

Ms. Bohmke stated that she had called Supervisor English earlier that day regarding Hartwood Elementary School. She said that her initial question was about the $3,785,000 they had programmed in the budget for FY26, and she would like to know what specifically was included in that dollar amount. She said that if it involved a proffered piece of land, she would like to understand what they would be spending that money on.

Jason Towery, Chief Facilities Officer, clarified that the $3 million was allocated for design, and to deliver Hartwood by 2028, design work would need to begin promptly—ideally starting this summer, or even sooner.

Ms. Bohmke said that if she recalled correctly, one of the reasons for building a new Hartwood Elementary School was that the existing school was not currently connected to water and sewer services. She said that she had always thought the intent was to identify an alternative site to replace the school, and she was now hearing that they would be building on the existing site.

Mr. Towery clarified that it would be built on the Westlake site.

Ms. Bohmke asked if there was sufficient capacity within the school division to handle all the architectural drawings and manage these projects effectively so they didn't encounter issues such as those that occurred at Stafford High School, which had a lengthy punch list that never got accomplished and resulted in subpar work at the end. She said that she was not pointing fingers, but it ultimately did not work out well, and they were significantly behind schedule. She said that the school division failed to inform the board of their situation, and she should have listened to the contractors on the ground but was misled by the school staff, who provided inaccurate information.

Ms. Bohmke said that her second question was related to enrollment. She said that she agreed with Dr. Yeung's perspective, which was debated and disagreed with by some, including herself. She said that now, it appeared that the situation with elementary schools 18 and 19 was somewhat inequitable. She said that she would like to examine the numbers to determine whether they should proceed with building a new Hartwood Elementary or redirect those funds to Embrey Mill, which had a suitable site and had supported the original plan to build an elementary school there.

Mr. Towery responded that from a design and construction standpoint, they had been contracting with a third-party consultant, Macdonald Architecture & Technology, for approximately two years to supplement their project management services. He said that this expertise had not only assisted with design but also with construction, allowing them to enhance capacity while they navigated this peak period of construction. He added that they were utilizing a state contract to facilitate this partnership, and he had no doubt that Macdonald would continue to be a great partner moving forward and would help provide the capacity necessary to handle the process.

Mr. Towery said that regarding the timing of 20 versus Hartwood Elementary, there are pros and cons to both approaches. He said that if they looked back a few years, Hartwood had once been at the top of the priority list but had been later moved down the list in an effort to address capacity issues at the elementary schools. He said that at that time, their resolve was to focus on schools 18 and 19, which provided significant immediate capacity.

He said that the driving force had always been the condition of Hartwood Elementary School—its age, the well, and the sewer systems. He said that as the 18 and 19 issues began to resolve, the focus had shifted back to the critical infrastructure challenges at Hartwood. He said that their proposal has Hartwood scheduled to be designed to open in 2028, and Elementary School 20 was planned to open in 2030, immediately following the completion of the other facility.

Mr. Towery said their intent from the school side was to have the schools open almost simultaneously, which wasn't the norm. He said that there was a two-year gap, due primarily to their ability to rotate back and get to another school. He said that Elementary School 20 was the fourth of four builds, with 18, 19, Hartwood, and 20 were the four builds currently under contract for design services. He said that their intent was to complete all of that as early as possible, ideally by 2030, but there was a question about funding and whether that could be accomplished.

Ms. Bohmke said she thought it would be a fair discussion for the Board to have, as they had the ability to make changes to this proposal. She recalled the intense conversations regarding Embrey Mill, and although she hadn't discussed this with Dr. Yeung, she had always been in favor of it from the start—primarily due to the enrollment numbers surrounding that area. She said that the fact that schools 18 and 19 were being built in their current locations was acceptable, but she believed this was something the Board should discuss, with priority focus around the enrollment numbers. She said that she would be looking at the data to support switching these schools, but they had a lot of other topics to discuss so she didn't want to delve into the details on this just yet.

Dr. Yeung stated that she had questions about the design, which she had posed to Dr. Taylor, and he had told her they were utilizing this particular design because it could be replicated at all elementary schools—and she asked if they were again paying for design.

Mr. Towery explained that they were receiving efficiencies through a comprehensive prototype contract versus, so it's for four builds. He said they paid a design fee with each build, but it was a reduced fee versus having four separate contracts.

Dr. Yeung responded that the reason they went with 18 and 19 was for the design-fee savings—and if they were planning on building two for savings, that's fine, but she was not okay with just building this one school. She stated that Embrey Mill had over 2,000 students, Westgate was expected to have around 800, and 400+ students were moving to the Garrisonville District each year. She emphasized that there was no reason why they shouldn't be building a second school in tandem with Hartwood. She said that it was unfair to both parents and students, and there was no reason they should not be building two schools at the same time.

Mr. Towery stated that they were finding efficiencies in the two project they were already undertaking, which would benefit Hartwood and 20, as well as other schools in the future that would realize savings on construction costs from tis process. He added that he was aware of the School Board's goal to provide and construct both schools.

Dr. Yeung responded that she felt the should move forward with building as soon as possible, especially given the current situation with wood imports from Canada, which were expected to increase by 2030. She added that they could not predict the future, and it was wise to act now.

Ms. Gary said that she recalled Ms. Light stating there were some things that were done to extend the longevity of the current school, and she asked Mr. Towery to elaborate.

Mr. Towery replied that they had done some work in the kitchen, which required a significant investment. He said that in 2020, they had spent approximately $120,000 on repairs to the air conditioning system. He said that in 2018, they had undertaken a major renovation and replacement of the wastewater treatment plant, which cost around $800,000. He said that additionally, they had spent about $187,000 on the generator as part of that project, but it had been roughly five years since they had invested any substantial funds into the school. He said that in 2017, the water distribution system received approximately $210,000 in work, while the library received around $59,000 in work.

Ms. Gary recalled that there had been some discussions more recently.

Mr. Towery stated that some of the major systems that would need to be addressed, including HVAC systems. He said that these would require either targeted replacements of large units in the $200,000 to $500,000 range, or larger renovation replacements, which would cost $2 million to $5 million, depending on the extent of the work. He said that the well system would require some further attention in the near future, and although the well system was still functioning properly, he did not want to give the impression that it was on the verge of failure. He noted that despite other comments that had been made, some systems were indeed well beyond their typical useful life.

Ms. Gary asked what a new build would mean in terms of maintenance of the current building.

Mr. Towery responded that it would depend on how far they would need to look to move that forward. He said that if they were discussing an extended period, such as 5–10 years, they would need to reconsider investing in some of those systems sooner rather than later. He said that he was suggesting an investment of around $3–8 million, reflecting the level of attention required.

Mr. English commented that Hartwood Elementary was a bit of a money pit, and he asked if the tax rate would be affected if they moved the school projects up another year.

Mr. Ashton stated that Westlake was offering the property and would also be building the roads and the water and sewer infrastructure to that site, which was currently not under construction. He said that to move forward with further engineering drawings, they would need to have the necessary infrastructure in place, including water, sewer, and roads. He said that this would require more attention to some of the specific details.

Mr. Towery stated that they had been in contact with the developer at Westlake, and he had received assurances that the necessary elements would be in place by the time the project was completed. He said that the developer was confident that this would be the case within another year, and he was satisfied with their assurances.

Ms. Bohmke commented that with the current administration in D.C., they did not know what was going to happen with tariffs—particularly on steel, aluminum, wood, and other building materials. She said that she was bringing this up because although Westlake had broken ground, they had projections of 700 for the number of homes they planned to build, but that figure was from many years ago. She said that what set Westlake apart was that there were no children currently living in the area, whereas the Garrisonville district had children with immediate needs.

Ms. Allen commented that she was not sure keeping it in the fiscal year really mattered, because even if they removed it, there was nothing they could do to try to save money toward the tax rates from that point of view. She said if she were looking at it just for the sake of adjustments to their tax rates, moving Hartwood did not do anything to the tax rate. She said that if they were discussing future needs and what made sense, she would rather come back in October when the schools returned with their CIP and present it to the Board then, and then have the conversation about Hartwood and Embrey Mill. She said that if their focus was solely on this budget and the CIP, moving Hartwood off or keeping it on did not impact the tax rate.

Mr. Towery said that one of the challenges with the schools growing at their current rate was that they had explored the possibility of using Hartwood, after it was replaced, as a temporary location for either the day school or Rising Star programs. He noted that Drew and Melchers facilities, which currently hosted these programs, were even older. He said that if the decision was to delay Hartwood, it was essential to understand that even a year, the current thinking was that if they completed Hartwood and opened it in 2028, they could temporarily relocate the day school there while working towards the new day school facility in the outyears. He said that they could then offline the Melchers facility sooner, as it was an even older facility, and it was crucial to be aware of this potential domino effect.

Daniel Smith, Superintendent of Stafford County Schools, said that one of the scenarios Mr. Towery was describing was a contingency plan they worked on with the County, specifically related to the day school scenarios. He stated that the schools were happy to provide any information they had available, including both the comprehensive plan and CIP that had been adopted by the School Board. He said they did not have the authority to alter this plan, and it had been adopted by the School Board in the order in which it was presented.

Dr. Yeung stated that as someone who had visited the day school multiple times, including during her time on the School Board, she had some concerns. She said that the fact that they had the day school coupled with the Rising Star complex made her wonder if they were approaching this correctly. She recalled that the day school was initially located in Drew Middle School, and now they were pairing it with the Rising Star complex. She mentioned that Head Start programs versus local programs were funded by either state and federal governments—and she wondered if they should proceed with bricks-and-mortar facilities and invest in programs that may or may not be available in the future.

She said that as someone who had fought for Drew School, she was concerned that they were moving forward with the day school replacement without considering the potential impact on other programs. She said that she was thinking about the fact that the day school had been initially budgeted at $89 million, but the cost in 2025 was up to $96 million and in 2026 was expected to reach $113 million. She said she would have liked to see a more forward-thinking regional approach, such as a regional day school that could potentially secure state funding.

Dr. Yeung commented that the North Stafford Fine Arts Wing did not make the original list but had now been reinstated, and she wondered whether they should prioritize sinking $8 million into it or focus on making it manageable for the students, with the long-term goal of building a new high school when the time was right. She said that for her, this was a matter that could be revisited, even if it may not impact the tax rate today but could have a positive effect in 2027. She said they needed to think about how to manage taxes not just for today but for the years to come, developing new revenue streams from sources such as distribution centers, data centers, and other initiatives.

Ms. Bohmke asked what the schools' narrative was in terms of redistricting as they proceeded with this new elementary school, if Hartwood Elementary was to become a Rising Star day school.

Mr. Smith responded that the schools have not included the Hartwood Elementary rebuild at this point, as the redistricting was just based on projected enrollment patterns in the schools, specific demographics and ELL learners, and other variables.

Ms. Bohmke asked Ms. Light if they would be issuing VPSA bonds for Hartwood or Embrey Mill, as this would impact the tax rate if they issued bonds because of debt service costs.

Ms. Light replied that it would impact the tax rate in 2027, as they would issue the bonds in 2026.

Ms. Bohmke said she would like to ask the Board to flip those projects.

Ms. Allen said this was why she had made the comment that unless they are touching the projects affecting the CIP—the two elementary schools and the high schools—it would have no impact on the current budget. She suggested that they address this in October, when the schools come back to them with their budget and CIP.

Ms. Bohmke acknowledged Ms. Allen's point and directed her comments to the schools, as there were things they would be working on that related to replacement of Hartwood Elementary. She said that it would be disingenuous for this Board to proceed if they were interested in switching the order of projects, as the schools would have a new budget effective July 1, 2025.

Mr. Smith said that items set to open in August 2028 would need to be started this summer and would greatly benefit from the extra time. He said that the rationale for the Fine Arts Wing at North Stafford was to achieve parity with their other high schools, and his understanding was that the current wing had limitations, such as only having one dedicated space for orchestra and drama club.

Dr. Yeung stated that the schools were sending the wrong message by just having an arts wing pop up on a list but not a school that is obviously needed because of a measured enrollment increase of 700+ students.

Ms. Bohmke said that she had additional school-related questions regarding the 3R education number of $17,049,000, noting that she had questions related to the press box and concession stand at Stafford High School. She said that upon reviewing the relevant documents, she noticed that the proffer sheet listed them for various projects, including those from Leland Station, Falmouth Heights, and Southgate. She said that according to this information, those projects were not included until FY27, and she found this to be unacceptable. Ms. Bohmke asked Ms. Light to confirm whether this was accurate.

Ms. Light responded that she believed the press box was part of the next fiscal year, 2027.

Ms. Bohmke asked what it would take to move that up, since they were sitting on $753,000 of proffer money, since there were proffers specifically assigned to this project.

Mr. Ashton explained that in consultation with the County Attorney, it was their understanding that proffer money for schools was intended to expand capacity—not replace existing facilities. He said they therefore believed they were restricted from using proffer money for the press box and concession stand, which was a separate issue.

Ms. Light indicated that when the schools met with the budget office and planning staff, the press box and concession stands would essentially expand capacity and thus would be applicable.

Mr. Towery added that they would be rebuilding and expanding the bathroom facilities for the concession stands, so it would be in alignment with the proffer monies. He confirmed that it would also apply to the locker rooms.

Ms. Bohmke asked if the projects could be moved up to this fiscal year.

Mr. Towery responded that he felt it was possible, if there were an item in FY26 they could shuffle out and they have a decision on the $753K, as there would be a $1.3 million addition to FY26 if they moved it into FY26 without pushing something out.

Ms. Light said that almost $1.3 million of the proffers was coming from Fox Chase Common was future projected money and had not yet been realized, and in the past, the Board has budgeted current fund balance to appropriate items that would be covered and repaid by proffers later.

Mr. English cautioned them not to bank on anything until they know it was in hand.

Ms. Bohmke noted that she didn't see anything on here regarding Musselman Park.

Ms. Light said that anything related to parks would be lower down on the list.

Mr. English said that Musselman was an example of what he was talking about.

Ms. Bohmke suggested moving the projects up and moving something else out.

Mr. Diggs stated that they would park those items for now and come back to them.

Ms. Light said that the next items on the list were related to the sheriff's department: a virtualized prime site upgrade related to the radio site's PSB security implementation, with this being the third portion of public safety building security updates. She said that the last item on the list was a radio channel upgrade to TDMA, which cost $142,000, and this expense would be covered by the radio funds received by the city, which included the Fred, Fred Bus Go, and Fred Bex Go accounts. She noted that this used to be the bus, and she is not sure what it is now, but they also pay Stafford for radios and Mary Washington. She said that Matthew Lehane had previously discussed transportation with the Board on multiple occasions, and he could address any questions.

Mr. English asked if they were to reallocate $700,000 from the Poplar Road and Truslow return lane, as they had done in the past, if that would shift the tax rate in a positive direction. He emphasized that Brook Road was a top priority and should not be compromised, but he wondered if adjustments to other projects could have a beneficial effect on the tax rate.

Ms. Light responded that many of their transportation projects were tied to state funding from VDOT, which was associated with Smart Scale, revenue-sharing, and other funding streams. She said that this created a difficult situation, as it was challenging to untangle and separate these funds. She said that the County had approximately $7.5 million in personal property funds allocated to transportation each year, and they could reallocate those funds—but given that most projects had multiple funding sources, it was a complex issue.

Ms. Bohmke asked how they had arrived at the transportation contingency for the coming year, which was $1.3 million.

Matt Lehane, Transportation and Funding Manager, explained that the transportation contingency was added to the budget by the Board one or two budget cycles ago, based on their historical expenditures. He said that this contingency accounted for approximately 5% of their expected expenditures for Fiscal Year 2026.

Ms. Bohmke asked about transportation studies for $250 million and what they were for, as she had talked to CTB Member Laura Sellers, who said they were going to be able to conduct a road study on Truslow Road.

Mr. Lehane explained that there were two studies—one on Truslow Road and one on Mine Road—both funded by VDOT. He said that transportation studies are conducted on an as-needed basis. He said that this year, the study would be used to support revenue-sharing or TAP projects, helping to meet the requirements for those applications. He said that next year, the study could be utilized for Smart Scale or other studies as needed.

Ms. Bohmke said that Belmont Ferry Farm Bike Trail was currently scheduled for 2034 and cost $9 million, and she wondered if there was any possibility of accelerating this project, potentially securing federal funding to help offset the costs. She said that although it was primarily located in Council Member Diggs' district, its impact extended to both of their areas.

Mr. Diggs said that he would definitely like it to be moved up, and they have discussed federal grant possibilities as well as private developer support. He emphasized that they are currently trying to secure funding for it.

Ms. Bohmke asked about the U.S. 17 pedestrian improvement projects, as her recollection from FAMPO discussions was that they weren't going to do that project.

Mr. Lehane responded that the section spanned from Old Forge Drive to Lendall Lane.

He said that to his knowledge, the most recent FAMPO discussion was regarding C-MAC funding and approximately $500,000 allocated to that project, which had been added a couple of years ago. He said that until they received further direction from FAMPO or the Board of Supervisors on a future grant application for that project, it remained in an outyear status. He said that he believed it was currently listed for FY27, so they did not have any direction to move forward at this time. He said that the Board of Supervisors had recently approved a corridor study for Route 17, with the intent of converting it into a Smart Scale project. He said that his current thought was that they were incorporating the sidewalk project into this future project that would result in one corridor project with sidewalks, which was already included in the CIP, plus any other roadway improvements developed as part of the corridor study.

Ms. Bohmke stated that the County website showed $5.4 million for FY26 under their budget.

Mr. Lehane said that was referring to the Route 17 Business STARS Improvement Study. He said that this project was entirely funded by Smart Scale funding, which meant it was 100% grant funded. He said that as a result, it would not have any impact on their tax rate or local funding. He clarified that this project was a realignment of Old Forge Drive and RV Parkway, and the addition of sidewalks and a median on U.S. 17.

Ms. Bohmke pointed out that during their road transportation study a couple of years ago, Butler Road widening had been identified as the number one project in Stafford in the entire transportation plan, and it needed to be four laned from Wawa to Route 1. She said that when she saw a $1 million allocation in FY36, it gave her cause for concern. She said that they had conducted a survey with the community and had that information available, and they could not leave this pushed out that far; it was too important to south Stafford.

Mr. Lehane stated that the estimated project cost was $90–100 million, and they had previously applied for it in the Smart Scale program but did not receive that funding. He stated that they had discussed potential next steps at their work session in February, and one possibility was an interchange intersection study involving Route 17, Route 1, and Butler Road. He said that staff suggested incorporating the Butler Road widening into this project, and whether done alone or with a future interchange, it would require significant local funding.

Mr. Lehane said that in the Smart Scale program, they likely needed $50–70 million in local funding to get the $20–40 million in Smart Scale funding to make the project successful. He said that they would therefore need to reevaluate the project as part of the larger widening project, as part of the study. He said that they currently planned to return to the Board in May or June with additional information on these studies, which the Board had requested at the work session.

Dr. Yeung asked if the high school access project listed was next to High School 6.

Mr. Lehane explained that the project was related to redoing the high school ingress and egress points at the high schools, as well as road improvements for roads surrounding those schools. He said that rather than come to the Board with requests for road funding, staff wanted to present a study that would determine the needed projects going forward. He emphasized that this was just a budget request for that study, and he clarified that the Courthouse Road study was in FY25.

Ms. Allen said that while it’s not ideal, she would like to address the Brook Road situation and have a conversation about that money. She said that they did not know yet whether they would get the federal PROTECT grant, but they could not remain at a standstill indefinitely with the money sitting idle. She said that she never supported the S-curve for that road and voted to build an alternative road that went through a different location, and it was time for them to discuss this.

Ms. Gary commented that they had been having these conversations, and she asked Mr. Lehane to confirm the funding split and amount.

Mr. Lehane responded that the PROTECT grant would be approximately 80/20, with a project cost of about $12.8 million. He said that once they approved the grant and received it from the Federal Highway Administration, the County’s split amount would be approximately $2.5–$3 million. He also explained that they worked through engineering and design last year and received notice of potential PROTECT grant award, so they performed additional NEPA work. He stated that this was a separate process from the grant agreement—with engineering and design at about 60%

completion—and everything was proceeding smoothly. He said that their key deadline for making a decision on the PROTECT grant and determining next steps for the project was likely to be in the spring of 2026, at which point they could move forward with the construction stage.

Ms. Allen asked for confirmation that if they didn't get the grant and the funding, they would have to come up with additional funding toward the project.

Mr. Lehane confirmed that they would need an additional \$2–\$4 million to have the project proceed.

Ms. Allen expressed concern about this situation, given uncertainty at the federal level and the potential impact of materials costs due to tariffs.

Mr. Lehane emphasized that they build in contingency and inflation costs to account for that. He explained that regarding the FHWA funding, they are working with senators' offices, grant agreement offices, and their grant consultants to get more information on project funding. He added that they just do not have all of the answers at this time.

Ms. Gary stated that Anthony Toigo has been working on this for quite some time, and she has spoken to several aides in Senator Warner's office—and it does not seem that these projects are on the chopping block.

Ms. Allen clarified that her concern is not that this project is on the chopping block, it is the timing of the funding and the potential tariff impacts.

Dr. Yeung asked if Embrey Mill Park maintenance was supposed to have been done with the transportation projects as part of Embrey Mill.

Ms. Light responded that the maintenance shop was not in the FY25 CIP, and this was a new project that was pushed out. She noted that this would be a bond-funded project, and there was no capacity when compared to some other projects.

Dr. Yeung stated that she would also like the Embrey Mill Fire and Rescue Station to be moved up, as it had been moved out three or four years. She said she would like to hear from the fire chief on the need for this station and why it is essential for the community, particularly Hartwood.

Jospeh Grainger, Administrative Services Chief for Fire and Rescue, stated that the Station 15 project involved constructing a fire and rescue station within the Embrey Mill development. He said that it was identified in their community risk assessment standards as a priority area, given that the region of the County was outside of their standard five-minute drive time, which prompted them to submit the project. He said that they conducted an analysis of the demand zone and call volume, and their projections based on the last several years of call data in that area indicated approximately 1,000 to 1,200 calls per year, currently being answered by apparatus from Fire Station 2, Stafford Courthouse, Garrisonville at Fire Station 14, and Fire Station 9 in Aquia. He said that this densely populated area has experienced a significant amount of call volume, making the project necessary. He also clarified that their request for Station 10 was for engine company staffing there, not a CIP project.

Ms. Bohmke commented that they used to have a public safety committee that looked at call volumes, response times, and other data to inform their decisions. She asked the chief if he felt the expenditure should be moved up, without considering other obligations in the County.

Assistant Chief Grainger explained that they had three active construction projects, with the first being the combination of Fire and Rescue Station 8, which would co-locate the Volunteer Fire Station in Rock Hill and the Volunteer Rescue Squad in Rock Hill. He said that both stations were currently located along State Route 610, adjacent to the Marine Corps range, where they were likely operating today; unfortunately, these were poorly located. He said that their goal in Rock Hill was to increase efficiency by consolidating the two stations into one and relocating it to the center of the city, where it would have a better response pattern.

Assistant Chief Grainger said that the second project was the replacement of the Aquia Harbor Volunteer Rescue Squad, which was constructed in the early 1990s using tilt-up construction that was only designed to accommodate EMS units, with two ambulances responding from that location. However, they had been operating a fire engine out of there for over a decade and a half, making it one of their busiest paramedic engine companies in the County. He said that the third construction effort was the Embrey Mill Fire Station, which had been submitted for funding in fiscal years 2028 and 2029. He said that due to funding constraints, it had been delayed to 2030 and 2031. He said that this project aimed to improve efficiency, provide modern facilities that could accommodate the necessary apparatus and address community growth.

Ms. Bohmke stated that given that Fire and Rescue submitted to doing this in 2028, that gives room for the Board to decide what other items in the CIP coming on in 2028 could be discussed and possibly reshuffled.

Mr. Ashton stated that the original date of 2028 was based on their five-year plan, which included a fire levy of three cents starting next fiscal year, which would have supported the completion of the project by that date. He said that considering the various pressures mentioned in his budget presentation, he had recommended a five-cent increase in the real estate tax rate. He said that after careful consideration, their staff decided to hold off on proposing an additional fire levy at this time, which would impact their ability to afford fire and rescue projects in this case. He said that as a result, the project's completion date was pushed back to 2030. He agreed with Assistant Chief Grainger that they would have preferred to complete the Embrey Mill Fire Station by 2028; however, the budget reality was forcing them to delay, and they were now planning to increase the proposed fire levy increase.

In response to Mr. English's questions regarding fire service facilities costs, Assistant Chief Grainger confirmed that Rock Hill was $18.5 million, Embrey Mill was $15.5 million, Aquia Harbor was $26 million, with each of those projects including cost escalations and contingencies.

Ms. Bohmke asked for additional detail on the replacement apparatus budget, as they had a significant ask of $5,143,000 for this year.

Assistant Chief Grainger responded that for heavy apparatus replacement, the estimated cost in FY26 was $2.3 million for two engine companies and $1.8 million for a ladder truck. He said they were currently considering ambulances, which were expected to take approximately 12 months to build, as well as engine companies, which were anticipated to take around 24 months; heavy apparatus, including ladder trucks and heavy rescue, were projected to take 36 months to complete.

Mr. English asked if an ambulance lease program would be beneficial for low-volume call areas, such as Griffiths-Widewater, rather than buying them outright.

Assistant Chief Grainger responded that they have contemplated that in the past for cost efficiency, but the preferred protocol has been a fleet rotation replacement plan, which involved purchasing a new ambulance, placing it at a busy station, and allowing it to run for two to three years. He said they conducted a comprehensive maintenance program on it and then relocated it to a slower station; at five years, the unit was evaluated again to assess its mileage, wear and tear, and the cost of replacing it. He said that through this fleet rotation and increased staffing of ground transport units, they have realized a reduction in rapid wear and tear on ambulances. He said that as a result, they had modified their CIP requests to include purchasing only two ambulances per year, starting with FY26. He said that by using their fleet replacement plan to spread out the utilization, they had been able to purchase fewer ambulances than before, but Fire and Rescue could reexamine leasing.

Ms. Light stated that the courthouse was in the CIP and had funding allocated for design in FY25; for comparison, the courthouse across the street had undergone a full buildout at $209 million.

Mr. Diggs said that it was worth noting that this facility was located below the schools and above Fire and Rescue, and they were currently exploring ways to lower the tax burden for constituents this year and next. He said his concern was that as they considered pulling items out of the CIP and delaying implementation, they may be setting themselves up for increased costs in the long run—with this facility appearing to be a prime example of this. He expressed concerned about the potential impact on the CIP and the decision to delay or implementation, asking if staff had information on the courthouse that might shed some light on this beyond simply delaying it.

Ms. Bohmke said they did not have any debt for the current year, so it was not significantly impacting the tax rate; however, it would have an impact in future years. She said she did not think there was much to discuss at this time, as the real conversation would take place in the fall.

Mr. Ashton agreed that they would have an in-depth discussion this fall. He said that this year was particularly challenging, and the general consensus among staff was that next year would be even more difficult—so deferring things and pushing them into next year would only make the conversations more difficult. He said that a new courthouse was needed as the County continued to grow, and they would likely face more law enforcement issues in the future. He said that the debt service level in future years was a massive concern, and it was essential that they pay attention to it now. He said that while he may have a year or two to delay, he did not think he had much of a luxury beyond that. He said that other parties may be very interested in this project, and delaying too much longer could force their hand.

Ms. Gary agreed that this approach could be forced upon them, and she believed they were moving forward with a well-planned strategy, examining existing lands and considering the courthouse as a potential site—which would only be a temporary solution. She said that this was a long-term plan, and she was confident in its direction. She mentioned the comments being made on social media, with some points well taken. She said that if people had questions, they could send emails, and the Board and staff would be happy to respond.

Ms. Bohmke said that it was clear when looking at comments on social media, they often reflected how people felt, even if they were not always accurate. She said that it was essential to acknowledge that many people shared these sentiments, despite being the only ones posting. She said that unfortunately, some individuals did not understand the need for a new courthouse. She said that she believed it was crucial that the County's message was communicated effectively, and providing clear information online about their goals, the project's design, and the process they had followed could help address concerns and build understanding. She said that she had noticed that many colleagues had been involved in these conversations, even those who weren't part of the Board at the outset, and given their current situation with the state, transparency was vital.

Ms. Light said that for information technology, there were two projects listed in FY26, both of which were funded with 3R money. She said that as per policy, the Board allocated 3% of its expenditures to 3R projects—repair, replacement, rehabilitation—and these projects fell under the cash funding category. She said that under Parks and Recreation, the first two projects were the Carl Lewis addition and the Aquia Landing parking expansion. She said that the Carl Lewis addition was a complete rebuild after the facility burned down in a fire, and it was fully cash funded with the 2% transient occupancy tax. She said that last year, the Board decided to allocate 2% of transient occupancy tax towards parks projects, including Musselman and Carl Lewis, and a portion of the Aquia Landing project would receive $47,000 of that funding. She said that the remaining amount would be funded, ensuring full coverage. She said that the next sheet included additional 3R projects for parks, community facilities, professional studies, and space needs studies. She said that the space needs studies were focused on implementing recommendations within the government center and other localities to address staffing needs.

Mr. English asked why Musselman Park was not on this list.

Ms. Light explained that the money was there from last year, but there is no new money this year so it does not appear as a new budget item.

Ms. Bohmke said that the 3R list has Embrey Mill replacement of turf field 5 and 6, and the Pratt parking lot, and she wondered if these were items that could wait.

Chris Edwards, Chief Operating Officer, stated that the current parking lot was in poor condition but could possibly be delayed—although it would cost more down the line due to wear and tear. He said that this section appeared to be the final piece in completing the paving loop at Pratt Park, which was the reason for the CIP funding.

Ms. Bohmke noted that the fields at Embrey Mill were for little kids, and she wondered whether they needed turf instead of grass, the latter of which she felt was preferable for them. She said that years ago, they had a limited number of fields—but now they have numerous fields, so games could be moved in the event of bad weather.

Mr. Ashton stated that revenue is realized when fields are used, and they would lose that if games were canceled.

Ms. Bohmke said she would like to see the data on that.

Ms. Allen stated that her understanding is that the Embrey Mill soccer fields are used for official tournaments, and it was concerning if they couldn't have those games because they would lose revenue—including tourism income.

Mr. Ashton agreed to get the financial data on the revenue realized from games on the turf fields versus the cost of changing the fields from grass to turf.

Ms. Light clarified that the project was converting from grass to turf, and if the Board decided not to prioritize replacing the parking lot, the $1.5 million cost could be reallocated to another 3R project. She said that this could be another County project, the press box at the schools, or any other school project that had bond funding. She said that by reallocating this $1.5 million, the Board could utilize the funds this year, rather than relying on bond funding.

Ms. Allen stated that she was not familiar with the Pratt Park situation but was aware of the concession issues at Stafford High School, and she believed it was essential that their children and families had a safe and enjoyable experience when attending their games. She said that she was in full support of completing the 3R project for the schools to remove it from their list. She said that her only concern was what Mr. Edwards had mentioned, as she was unsure about the severity and potential degradation of Pratt Park, as she did not have that information. She said that if she were to ask the Board, she would like to know if they were committed to addressing this issue and potentially incurring additional costs. She said that if it was not a priority, perhaps it should not be included in their CIP for the coming years, but rather pushed to a later year. She said that she was concerned that the parking situation may not be directly related to the plans for Pratt Park, which included expanding services and opening up new amenities, such as the water features.

Mr. Diggs said that he spent a significant amount of time at that location, and he was surprised to discover that it was paved, as he had initially thought it was just gravel.

Mr. Edwards said that the surface was a mix between gravel and older asphalt, which had degraded to resemble a gravel parking lot.

Mr. Diggs said he did not think it was a significant issue, although they did host events such as Dare Day and the Fourth of July there, and he had spent considerable time at the facility. He said that he had recently received a complaint about the loop, which he had submitted to staff, so he would like to see that aspect of the project completed. He said that he did not believe it posed a significant risk to drivers, such as blowing a tire or damaging their vehicle. He said that he thought it was something they could potentially move forward with next year.

Mr. Edwards said the only other major project currently underway in Pratt Park was the second park location, so he did not think this project would have a significant impact on the overall park plans at this time.

Mr. Diggs said that he was aware that the budget may be more challenging next year, but if they found themselves in a similar situation next year—perhaps in five years—it could be a different story. He said that funding could be unpredictable, allowing them to adjust the timeline as needed, but it did not significantly impact the outcome either way and they should continue discussing it.

Ms. Bohmke said that she would like to bring up the loop that had been in place for a while now, and she had expressed the need to complete it when Mike Morris was present. She said that she had been hearing complaints about it frequently, and she believed the community would be excited about this development. She said that for children on training wheels or riding bikes, the loop presented a significant obstacle, as they encountered large rocks that were difficult to navigate. She said that the parking lot, on the other hand, could simply be pushed out of the way for another year and then reevaluated next year. She said that perhaps there was a more cost-effective method, which she thought was called “chip and chip” or “tar and chip,” that could be used for this.

Ms. Light stated that this concluded the CIP items for discussion.

Ms. Bohmke asked Donna Krauss about information regarding the departments.

Ms. Krauss stated that Ms. Bohmke had asked for a five-year review of specific departments, categorized and detailed in some groupings, for the Board of Supervisors budget. She said that this included Budget and Management, Information Technology, and Community Engagement. She said that as an example, the Board of Supervisors budget saw an increase in the grants contract for the federal grant consultant. She said that they moved this contract from the County Administration budget to the Board of Supervisors budget, as it was an initiative that Supervisor Bohmke had proposed and they wanted to track as part of the budget.

Ms. Allen said that she did not have any specific questions, but she wanted to comment on the CIP. She said that as others could see, they were facing a significant challenge in finding areas to cut costs. She said that most of the suggestions they had made were one-time expenses, which were unlikely to have a significant impact on the tax rate. She said that she welcomed any additional ideas or suggestions that others may have for reducing costs, but based on their conversation today, she did not see many opportunities for savings.

Ms. Bohmke said that she truly appreciated everything staff had done to get to this point—and in looking at various departments, there had been significant increases in costs. For example, personnel costs, which included salaries and insurance, had skyrocketed. She recalled when she first started working, insurance costs were a mere 12% of her salary; now, she had heard from HR that it was around 40%. She said that was unsustainable—not just for Stafford County, but for corporate America as a whole. She said she appreciated the changes made to health insurance this year, and it would be interesting to examine the employee versus employer share of costs, and perhaps it could be another data point to consider on Tuesday. She said she had only seen the proposed increases, but overall, things were just more expensive.

Ms. Bohmke stated that it was challenging for both parties to review and critique the budget, and it was difficult to sit here and dissect the budget that had been prepared for them. As someone who had been on the board for a considerable amount of time, she said, she had witnessed various budgets being presented and the process of making changes to them. She said that it wasn't easy, and she appreciated the effort staff had put into getting them to this point today.

Ms. Gary echoed Ms. Bohmke's sentiments and said that this budget was particularly challenging, adding that she appreciated the collaborative approach they were taking.

Mr. Diggs agreed, complimenting staff on the phenomenal job they had done putting the budget together and the effort both staff and the Board had put into the budget process. He said that as they worked to identify areas to lower the budget or tax rate, he was still in the process of refining their approach but appreciated the effort. He also said that he appreciated his colleagues for being willing to have these conversations and work together. He said that in contrast to last year, when it felt like they were scrambling at the last minute, this time they had started having these discussions much earlier, taking the time to understand each other's perspectives and moving forward together. He acknowledged the employees of the County, who may have had concerns over benefits and other issues. He said that on behalf of the Board, he wanted to express their appreciation for the employees' hard work and thank them for their dedication. He said that he believed they would get through this together.

ADJOURNMENT

The Board adjourned its meeting at 5:15 p.m.

William H. Ashton, II
County Administrator