BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
STAFFORD COUNTY, VIRGINIA
MINUTES
REGULAR MEETING
MARCH 4, 2025

CALL TO ORDER – A regular meeting of the Stafford County Board of Supervisors was called to order by Deuntay Diggs, Chairman, at 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday, March 4, 2025 in the Board Chambers, George L. Gordon, Jr. Government Center, 1300 Courthouse Road, Stafford VA.

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

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

INVOCATION

Mr. English led the invocation.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Dr. Yeung led the Board in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America.

CHAIR REMARKS

Mr. Diggs said that it was Ramadan, so to the Muslim community, he extended greetings: Assalamu alaykum, bi khair, alhamdulillah, Ramadan Mubarak. He said that on behalf of Stafford County, he wished their Muslim community a blessed and joyous Ramadan that began this Friday. He said that he hoped this sacred time of reflection, renewal, and fellowship would bring them peace and fulfillment. He said that on March 17, Stafford Utilities would begin its annual flushing program, which would run through the end of May.

Mr. Diggs said that this system-wide flush ensured a high level of disinfection of all County water mains, and it did not adversely affect water quality. He said that during that time, customers may notice a slight change in the taste or smell of their water. He said that for more information, please visit the news section on the front page of Stafford's website.

Mr. Diggs said that if someone knew a teenager or anyone else who was looking for a summer job, Stafford Parks, Recreation and Tourism was holding a job fair on March 12 for seasonal positions. He said that the fair would be held from 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. at the Rowser Building, located at 1739 Richmond Highway. He said that he wanted to commend their Parks staff for their excellent job in integrating summer hires and providing them with valuable job experience and knowledge to help them move forward in their careers. He said that if someone was interested in learning more, please visit the job fair.

Mr. Diggs said that additionally, Serve, Stafford's local food pantry, was in need of donations to replenish their depleted shelves. He said that visitors to the Government Center may drop off items in the bin located in the lobby before March 10, 2025. He said that for more information, please visit the news area on the front page of their website.

ADDITIONS – DELETIONS AND APPROVAL OF THE REGULAR AGENDA

William Ashton, County Administrator, said that he had two additions to the agenda. He said that first, under County Administration, they had the appointment of Ms. Tolanda Parker as Stafford County's Falmouth District Representative to the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (FAMPO) Citizens Transportation Advisory Committee. He said that her Boards, Authorities, Commissions, and Committees (BACC) application was included in the packet.

Mr. Ashton said that second, they had the appointment of Ms. Darla Stencavage as the Garrisonville District Representative to the Stafford County Agriculture and Land Conservation Committee. He said that her application was also included in the packet.

Ms. Allen motioned, seconded by Dr. Yeung, to approve the regular agenda as amended.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (7) Allen, Bohmke, Diggs, English, Gary, Vanuch, Yeung
No: (0)

CONSENT AGENDA

ITEM 1. COUNTY ADMINISTRATION; APPROVE JANUARY 24, 2025 JOINT BOARD OF SUPERVISORS AND SCHOOL BOARD WORK SESSION MINUTES

ITEM 2. COUNTY ADMINISTRATION; APPROVE JANUARY 24, 2025 ANNUAL ADVANCE MINUTES

ITEM 3. COUNTY ADMINISTRATION; APPROVE JANUARY 25, 2025 ANNUAL ADVANCE MINUTES

ITEM 4. COUNTY ADMINISTRATION; APPROVE JANUARY 28, 2025 BOARD OF SUPERVISORS WORK SESSION MINUTES

ITEM 5. COUNTY ADMINISTRATION; APPROVE FEBRUARY 4, 2025 BOARD OF SUPERVISORS MEETING MINUTES

ITEM 6. COUNTY ADMINISTRATION; APPROVE FEBRUARY 18, 2025 BOARD OF SUPERVISORS MEETING MINUTES

ITEM 7. HUMAN SERVICES; BY VIRTUE OF POSITION, APPOINT DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE SEAT REPRESENTATIVE TO THE COMMUNITY POLICY AND MANAGEMENT TEAM (CPMT)

ITEM 8. COUNTY ADMINISTRATION; APPOINT MR. CHAD YOUNG AS THE GEORGE WASHINGTON DISTRICT REPRESENTATIVE TO THE STAFFORD COUNTY AGRICULTURAL AND LAND CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

ITEM 9. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT; PROCLAMATION TO RECOGNIZE MARCH AS WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH PROPOSED PROCLAMATION P25-03

ITEM 10. R25-50; CAPITAL PROJECTS TRANSPORTATION; REQUEST REIMBURSEMENT FROM THE POTOMAC AND RAPPAHANNOCK TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION (PRTC) FOR TRANSPORTATION EXPENDITURES PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-50

ITEM 11. R25-53; CAPITAL PROJECTS; AUTHORIZE THE COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR TO EXECUTE A TASK ORDER WITH BKV GROUP DC PLLC FOR DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION ADMINISTRATION SERVICES FOR MUSSELMAN PARK PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-53

ITEM 12. R25-58; CAPITAL PROJECTS; AUTHORIZE THE COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR TO EXECUTE A CHANGE ORDER TO TASK ORDER NO. 5 WITH RUMMEL, KLEPPER KAHL, LLP FOR ADDITIONAL DESIGN ENGINEERING SERVICES FOR THE U.S. ROUTE 17 NORTH WATERLINE EXTENSION PROJECT, PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-58

ITEM 13. R25-63; DEVELOPMENT SERVICES; PETITION VDOT TO INCLUDE RISING SUN ROAD, RIVERS EDGE DRIVE, BRIDGEPOINT DRIVE WITHIN RAPPAHANNOCK LANDING SECTION 5 SUBDIVISION INTO THE SECONDARY SYSTEM OF STATE HIGHWAYS, PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-63

ITEM 14. R25-46; PLANNING AND ZONING; APPROVE REQUESTS TO GRANT TIME LIMIT EXTENSIONS FOR VARIOUS ZONING RECLASSIFICATION AND CONDITIONAL USE PERMIT APPLICATIONS (PROJECTS KNOWN AS ATTAIN AT STAFFORD, STAFFORD ONE INDUSTRIAL, VENTURE BUSINESS PARK, WESTLAKE UMWF PROFFER AMENDMENT, AND CELEBRATE VA TOWN CELEBRATE PROFFER AMENDMENT) PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-46

Mr. English requested to pull Item 11 for discussion.

Ms. Bohmke requested to pull Item 14 for discussion.

Dr. Yeung requested to pull Item 10 for discussion.

Mr. Diggs asked if Dr. Yeung would like to address Item 10.

Ms. Allen motioned, seconded by Mr. English, to approve the consent agenda as amended.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (7) Allen, Bohmke, Diggs, English, Gary, Vanuch, Yeung
No: (0)

Dr. Yeung said that for the $10 million project, the expenditures total $3,509,768. She said that she would like to know the details of this project's expenditures. She said that the reimbursement was $5.2 million, leaving $1 million remaining. She said that she assumed that this reimbursement was for half of the project's duration. She said that she was wondering where the second half of the project's reimbursement was coming from, and whether it would follow a similar reimbursement structure for the fuel tax from Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission (PRTC).

Andrea Light, Chief Financial Officer, said that this was a typical process they follow with PRTC, their fiscal agent, for all their fuel tax revenues. She said that as the Board was aware, PRTC manages their cash and reserves on their behalf, disbursing funds when they have spent down on projects. She said that these projects include expenses such as paying for Stafford Airport and reimbursement requests for projects funded with fuel tax revenue. She said that this process has been ongoing for the past couple of years, typically occurring twice a year. She said that as a result, they can expect another item like this in approximately six months.

Mr. Diggs asked if Mr. English would like to address Item 11.=

Dr. Yeung motioned, seconded by Ms. Allen, to approve Item 10.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (7) Allen, Bohmke, Diggs, English, Gary, Vanuch, Yeung
No: (0)

Mr. English asked what the timeline was for this project, and if staff could explain the situation a bit more.

Mike Overton, Construction Program Manager, said that the timeline was as follows: they would award a task order for design. He said that the design they anticipated would take approximately eight months to complete. He said that assuming it could be completed expeditiously, they should begin construction near the end of this year.

Mr. English said that to provide some context, this issue had been ongoing for eight years. He said that he had inquired about the possibility of accelerating this process, as they had previously set aside funds to complete it. He said that he was informed that there were discussions about watershed issues related to this project.

Mr. Overton said that he was not aware of any watershed issues with the project. He said that the funding for the project had dropped from the bond for this fiscal year. He said that the project timeline had already been accelerated to a significant extent. He said that normally, a project of this nature would likely take around 12 months for design. He said that, given the progress they had made with the planning phase, he believed an eight-month timeline was reasonable.

Mr. English asked if they knew what the design would look like, and if it had changed from its initial plan.

Mr. Overton said that it was consistent with the findings from a study that Parks and Recreation had provided.

Mr. English thanked staff. He said that he believed this was a long-overdue development, and Ms. Musselman had been advocating for it for some time. He said that he was glad that they were moving forward with this. He said that to ensure they were on track, he would like to see an update in three months to assess their progress on this project, especially because it was in his district.

Mr. Diggs asked if Ms. Bohmke would like to address Item 14.

Mr. English motioned, seconded by Ms. Allen, to approve Item 11.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (7) Allen, Bohmke, Diggs, English, Gary, Vanuch, Yeung
No: (0)

Ms. Bohmke said that this particular item was regarding the extension of the time limit for applications for rezonings, conditional use permits, and proffer amendments. She said that there were five projects in total, representing three different districts. She said that she was wondering if staff could provide an update on each project individually, so they could better understand the scope of each and make more informed decisions.

Mike Zuraf, Director of Planning and Zoning, said that for this item, they had several applications under consideration that were nearing their time limits and were requesting extensions. He said that in the background report, staff had provided a summary of each application, including the requested extension and the time limit involved. He said that he would review each item individually. He said that the first application was for a zoning reclassification for the Attain at Stafford project in the Falmouth District.

Mr. Zuraf said that the request was for an extension from April 24 of this year to September 30. He said that this project had already received a previous extension. He said that it was an urban development zoned project, and as such, it involved complex design and code compliance issues. He said that given the project's residential nature, it required careful attention to detail upfront to ensure conformance with the applicable codes and zoning regulations.

Mr. Zuraf said that they had spent significant time with the applicant to address these complexities, and once approved, certain aspects could not be revisited. He said that residential projects required detailed proffer analysis, which they had thoroughly reviewed to ensure the applicant was adequately mitigating the impacts, particularly regarding schools. He said that this application was close to being scheduled for review by the Planning Commission.

Mr. Zuraf said that the next one was Stafford 1 Industrial, located in the Falmouth District. He said that this was a rezoning from A1 to M2 heavy industrial, and it involved a request for an extension of the original deadline from November 24, 2024, to November 24, 2025.

Mr. Zuraf said that the main issue with this one was that it had gotten caught up in the overall surge of applications. He said that the applicant was keeping the possibility of a data center open, and they generally required more specific details in the proffers related to that type of use. He said that as a result, the applicant was requesting additional time to provide the necessary information for staff to review.

Mr. Zuraf said that the next one was Venture Business Park, also in the Falmouth District. He said that this was a rezoning from B3 Office to M1 Light Industrial, located at the end of Venture Drive, near the Sheetz store at Burns Corner. He said that the applicant had requested an extension of the original deadline from December 4, 2024, to December 4, 2025.

Mr. Zuraf said that staff had provided comments in March, but the applicant had not responded, so they were uncertain about their plans for resubmitting this project. He said that the fourth project was the Westlake UMW Foundation proffer amendment, located in the Hartwood District. He said that this involved a proffer amendment on land zoned M1, seeking to remove a use restriction.

Mr. Zuraf said that there was a requirement to set aside a portion of the area for an institution of higher learning, which was no longer part of the plans for Mary Washington University. He said that the request was to extend the deadline from December 20, 2024 to December 12, 2025. He said that the applicant received their comments on October 11, and staff was awaiting resubmission.

Mr. Zuraf said that the applicant had a new end user for this project, and they were revising their development plan accordingly. He said that the last item on the agenda was the Celebrate Virginia Town Celebrate Proffer Amendment. He said that this request sought to extend the time limit from January 19, 2025 to January 19, 2026.

Mr. Zuraf said that it was a significant proffer amendment, involving upwards of 1,300 homes, located in the RBC zoning district on 482 acres, near the Del Webb project. He said that this was a large residential rezoning with numerous complexities involving proffers, transportation, and other factors, which made these projects more time-consuming for staff to process.

Ms. Bohmke asked if the Celebrate Virginia development was a 55-and-older community.

Mr. Zuraf said yes.

Mr. English asked Mr. Zuraf to clarify UMW pulling out of the Westlake development.

Mr. Zuraf said that there would be a different end user of the redevelopment, but he was unsure of who that would be at this time. He said that they were working through the details and had not submitted that information yet.

Ms. Vanuch said that she did not like that this item appeared on the consent agenda, so she would like to thank Mr. Zuraf for providing the summaries of the requests. She said that her main challenge was that staff had submitted comments multiple times for each application, and all but one of these applications were currently waiting on the applicant to resubmit to the County. She said that in some cases, it had been six months, while in others, it had been a year.

Ms. Vanuch said that as a result, she struggled to support any of these extensions, with the exception of the Stafford 1 Industrial, which appeared to have been responsive to staff's comments. She asked what would happen if they did not accept these timeline extensions and the applicants would have to go through the process again.

Mr. Zuraf said that the application would need to be closed out, and they would have to resubmit in order to continue the process.

Ms. Vanuch said that she posed the question to her colleagues: how long should they allow these applicants to wait? She said that if they reviewed the packet, even for the Celebrate Virginia Parkway application, staff had received their previous comments on July 15, 2024, and they were still waiting for a response.

Ms. Vanuch said that given that they were aware that staff were already stretched thin with resources, she believed it was reasonable to deny all extension requests, except for RC23155322, which they could consider separately.

Ms. Vanuch motioned, seconded by Ms. Bohmke, to deny all extension requests except for RC23155322.

Mr. Diggs said that he understood what Ms. Vanuch's concern was, but they also wanted to remain open for business and attract new businesses to Stafford County, in order to generate revenue. He said that therefore, he had some concern about the potential impact of this decision on their overall situation.

Ms. Vanuch said that Celebrate Virginia was requesting the removal of the following: an extension to complete the project, cash proffers for retirement housing, clubhouse facilities, and other amenities; the maximum number of retirement housing units allowed; site and building design requirements; multiple road utility infrastructure and buffer requirements; and the removal of these requirements would allow for new use restrictions, increased unit limits for retirement housing and commercial apartments, revised site and building designs, and new permitted uses.

Ms. Vanuch said that they were also requesting new cash proffers for retirement housing and commercial apartment units, as well as new land dedication requirements. She said that this application was not currently scheduled for public hearing or Planning Commission review. She said that she found it puzzling that they would consider allowing such changes. She said that it seemed like a lengthy process, potentially spanning years, and it was not about facilitating business operations, but rather ensuring that developers met their financial obligations in a timely manner.

Ms. Gary said that respectfully, she had heard a list of items that people were permitted to apply for, and in her opinion, it was about being open for business.

Ms. Gary motioned, seconded by Ms. Allen, to approve Item 11 as presented.

Mr. English said that he wanted to reiterate his question regarding the Westlake project. He said that there had been issues with that project, and he was unclear as to why an extension was being requested. He said that it appeared that the issue was related to the University's decision to pull out.

Mr. Zuraf said no; the applicant was not the only party involved; a new potential user and developer would be taking over that land. He said that the actual end user, who had been initially involved when the application was submitted, had changed. He said that as a result, they were being forced to re-evaluate their plan.

Ms. Vanuch said that they were also requesting to remove their proffers.

Mr. Diggs said yes, but the item would still require approval from the Board.

Ms. Bohmke said that Ms. Vanuch was making a compelling point. She said that she would like to ask Mr. Zuraf, could he please inform them, as she was aware that Attain had been in operation for a considerable amount of time, primarily serving her district. She said that Stafford 1 Industrial was a commercial project, and the Venture Business Park had been established. She said that she would like to know the original submission dates for those projects to her department, rather than the review dates.

Mr. Zuraf said that Attain was initially submitted on August 9, 2022, but it was not officially submitted until April 24, 2023, due to missing details. He said that the Stafford One plan was submitted on November 14, 2023, and the Venture plan was submitted on December 4, 2023.

Ms. Bohmke asked, in a typical environment, how long it takes to process an application on average, considering that some are more complex than others. She said that the applicant originally submitted application for Attain was in August2 022,, but unfortunately, they had not provided all the necessary information, so they had to resubmit. She said that that was not the County's responsibility, but rather the applicant's.

Mr. Zuraf said that in a perfect world, they would have been able to address this issue more effectively. He said that when they were short-staffed and lacked sufficient personnel to handle these cases, a large number of cases would inevitably come in. He said that if they had been fully staffed and everyone was on board to handle these cases, it would typically take about a year, or perhaps a little less, to resolve a simple case.

Dr. Yeung said that she understood Ms. Vanuch's point. She said that she had been reviewing the applications for Garrisonville, and one of the issues they were facing here was that the high caseloads and short staffing over the last year had impacted staff's ability to process applications and resubmissions within typical timeframes, leading to the need for requested time limit extensions. She said that given her understanding of the issues at the County level, she would be voting to approve these applications.

Ms. Vanuch said that to be fair, that text was copied and pasted under every single one of these, even those that have been ongoing for three years. She said that examining the dates and times of when they were deemed administratively complete, for instance, the one at Celebrate Virginia Parkway was marked as complete on January 19, 2024. She said that their staff had returned all necessary materials to the applicant by July 15, 2024, yet the applicant had yet to respond after nine months.

Ms. Vanuch said that the that the next example was the applicant deemed administratively complete on December 20,, 2023, for Hartwood Westlake. She said that their staff had submitted their response to the applicant on October 11, 2024, but the applicant was still awaiting a resubmission due to changes in their plans. She said that she believed that forcing the applicants to go back through the process would be more beneficial to their staff, as they would have to pay for the process and go through it again.

Ms. Vanuch said that it would also set a standard for developers, making it clear that if they wished to do business, they must be responsive to their staff. She said that the business community had expressed concerns about staff not responding in a timely manner. She said that it was not their staff's issue, but rather the applicant's lack of responsiveness to their staff. She said that therefore, she would not continue to grant these extensions; the applicants could go back through the process.

Mr. English asked how much money it would cost the developers to begin the process again.

Mr. Zuraf said that the low end was likely around $14,000, while the high end was probably closer to $25,000. He said that the applicant would be required to pay again for the rezoning process. He said that the applicant's representative was present if they had any questions.

Mr. Diggs called the vote on the substitute motion to approve Item 11 as presented.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (7) Allen, Diggs, English, Gary, Yeung
No: (0) Bohmke, Vanuch

PRESENTATIONS BY THE PUBLIC

1. Howard Rudat, Rock Hill District, said that as the County Administrator prepares to present his budget, he would offer that if the Trump Administration's approach were taken, the staff's workload to develop the budget would have been significantly reduced. He said that Mr. Ashton could have simply brought in someone with no experience in governance and have him send an email to every County employee stating they could resign immediately, without

considering the effect those departures would have on the County. He said that although more than 50% of Stafford's budget needs would have disappeared, the result would have been catastrophic.

Mr. Rudat said that this was precisely the approach the Trump Administration was taking to Stafford County by recklessly slashing the federal workforce. He said that over 10%of Stafford's civilian labor force was employed in federal positions, and the economy would be severely impacted by the firings. He said that unemployment would skyrocket, people would be unable to pay their bills, and the demand for assistance would increase.

Mr. Rudat said that furthermore, if Trump and DOGE fulfilled their promises and dismantled the Department of Education, the 2% of the Stafford school budget that came from federal dollars would be eliminated, and Stafford County would need to find almost $9 million to cover the loss. He said that this $9 million would cover essential items such as the National School Lunch Program, making it a must-fund. He said that he would suggest that federal workers who were losing their jobs seek assistance from the state, but the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Attorney General were tone-deaf to the ramifications that this would cause in Virginia.

Mr. Rudat said that instead of fighting for Virginians, they were supporting the decimation of the federal workforce. He said that it was irresponsible for the Governor to say that no one should worry about losing their jobs because there were plenty of jobs in Virginia. He asked if Virginia businesses would hire an aging federal workforce and if they would allow fired federal workers to retain their seniority or restore their benefits. He said the answer was, of course not. He said that as the economies of the nation and Virginia plummeted, and as Virginia businesses unfortunately must downsize, the new hires would be the first to go.

Mr. Rudat said that regarding the employment resources the Governor had touted, he clicked on the Resources for Impacted Federal Employees link on Virginia.gov. He said that the first thing that appeared was a page explaining how to apply for unemployment benefits. He said that this sends a concerning message. He said that previously, several members of this Board had encouraged their colleagues to write a letter to the Commonwealth leadership regarding concerns with garbage collection. He said that he was confident that they held the lives and livelihoods of Stafford residents in higher esteem than trash.

Mr. Rudat said that he urged this Board to send a letter to Richmond, expressing their concerns to the state leadership about the devastating impact of massive cuts to the federal workforce on Stafford's economic well-being. He said that they needed local elected officials to prioritize Stafford's needs over party politics and make decisions for the best of Stafford that benefited their schools, economy, and future. He asked the Board to send a letter to Richmond, stating that enough was enough and that they needed leaders who would put Virginians first and help save Stafford’s economy.

2. Deanna Fisher, Garrisonville District, said that she would like to reiterate her request to the Board of Supervisors to set an advertised rate that will not increase the real estate taxes they

pay this year. She said that when she spoke on February 18, she was concerned about some of the public comments she heard, which she believed contained faulty logic.

Ms. Fisher said that she would like to address a few of these points. She said that regarding recent tax increases, it was true that their property taxes have risen by nearly 30% over the last three years. She said that this increase was largely due to the average assessed property value being factored into the tax rate, rather than a direct increase in the tax rate itself.

Ms. Fisher said that this comment was misleading. She said that additionally, she was surprised to hear that Stafford schools are experiencing an increase of around 600 students every year, and that this cannot be done without any tax increase. She said that a School Board member told her that asking the Board of Supervisors not to raise taxes was equivalent to asking them not to fund schools.

Ms. Fisher said that this was not true. She said that another point she would like to make was in response to someone's comment that parents are concerned about the schools' budget increases, despite the fact that SOL scores have not improved. She said that a person also mentioned that their County ranks 112th in Virginia in terms of spending per pupil, and that it would take $81 million to bring them to the state average.

Ms. Fisher said that she found this metric to be irrelevant. She said that spending more per pupil does not necessarily mean that schools are better. She said that in fact, she had seen that the lowest five school districts in the state, with regard to spending per pupil, have some of the highest SOL scores. She said that furthermore, while it was true that a family budget must increase when more children are added, this was not a direct correlation. She said that this brings her to another important point. She said that she has seen that there are approximately 32,000 students in Stafford County public schools.

Ms. Fisher said that according to the most recent census data, this was a good estimate of the number of school-age children in Stafford County. She said that however, it was essential to note that not all of them are in public school classrooms. She said that many students are being homeschooled, some are in private schools, and some are in virtual Virginia online schools.

Ms. Fisher said that therefore, School Board arguments that funding must increase based on the estimated 32,000 students may not be entirely accurate. She said that the current funding model, which allocates funds for the total 32,000 students, may not be sustainable in the future. She said that the introduction of school choice, which would follow the child with funding, could have a devastating impact on school funding.

Ms. Fisher said that simply increasing taxes was not a viable long-term solution. She said that there was room for waste reduction in schools and other areas, and they must explore alternative funding sources to ensure the continued success of Stafford Public Schools and Stafford County as a whole.

3. Jacob Fisher, Garrisonville District, said that he was here to discuss some of the problems in Stafford schools. He said that as a junior in the STAT IT program, he had been able to excel

academically, but many students in Stafford were not as fortunate. He said that recently, he became concerned about the future of high school students when he learned that no middle school teachers in Stafford were able to assign homework anymore.

Mr. Fisher said that it was his understanding that the school work was entirely online in Canvas and must be completed in class. He said that he believed the solution to the issue with the Chromebooks was not to eliminate homework for middle schoolers, as this was doing them a disservice. He said that he firmly believed that after COVID, they should have moved back to using books, papers, and pencils, as these methods were more effective for learning and engagement.

Mr. Fisher said that providing physical books would allow students to learn more. He said that this was not a good situation. He said that furthermore, he believed that teaching cursive would be beneficial, as it was essential for reading and signing one's name as an adult. He said that he was given a brief lesson on cursive in third grade, and he thought it should be included in the school budget. He said that his next concern was the change in the selection process for specialty programs such as STAT IT and STAT Engineering to be lottery-based instead of merit-based.

Mr. Fisher said that he believed this would be detrimental to the programs and students, as many would fail or drop out due to a lack of aptitude. He said that he thought this change should be based on merit, not equity and inclusion. He said that additionally, he was curious about the free food provided specifically to students fasting for Ramadan. He said that while he was okay with this being done, he believed it should be available to all students of all faiths. He said that he wondered if students who were fasting on Ash Wednesday and abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent could also receive free food. He said that he had also observed other wasteful practices at SCPS.

Mr. Fisher said that one significant waste was the large number of 4K TVs brought in for hybrid learning during the COVID pandemic. He said that these TVs are very expensive and wasteful, as most people do not notice a significant difference between 4K and lower resolutions. He said that the Chromebooks connected to them were often cheap and struggled to process fast enough to support 4K, resulting in choppy screens. He said that the current unit price for these TVs was $710, as of today. He said that he was unsure of the original cost or if a bulk discount was applied, but it was likely that over a million dollars had been wasted on these.

Mr. Fisher said that there were much cheaper alternatives available that could achieve the same results for under $400 or $300. He said that in fact, he could count on one hand the number of times he had seen teachers use these TVs this year. He said that kids were not democrat or republican, so it seemed unfair that politicians prioritized winning arguments over how much to raise taxes rather than improving education for all students.

4. Mary Hanson, Falmouth District, said that she was strongly opposed to any tax increase. She said that year after year, the School Board had requested budget increases at the expense of taxpayers. She said that given the low SOL scores reported, this did not appear to be a great

return on investment. She said that they could not continue to allocate funds towards a system that appeared to require a complete overhaul.

Ms. Hanson said that with that in mind, she was requesting an independent audit of the County budget, including a line-by-line examination of the School Board budget over the last five years, to include actual expenditures. She said that this was a reasonable request. She said that throughout her career as a certified budget analyst and business financial manager for the Department of Defense, she had been responsible for formulating, justifying, and defending large budgets on a monthly basis.

Ms. Hanson said that she could attest that no budget request was sufficient to keep the lights on. She said that as someone who had experienced the importance of budgeting firsthand, she knew that there was always a need for a cushion, as they never knew what they would not receive. She said that all parties involved with the County budget had a fiduciary responsibility to be good stewards of taxpayers' money.

Ms. Hanson said that she was reminded of the Republican creed, which stated that fiscal responsibility was their responsibility, and that responsibility must be exercised at all levels of government. She urged the Board to exercise this responsibility and provide transparency into the school budget. She said that this was not about being against children, but about understanding the stories of those who were affected by the budget decisions.

5. Shamgar Connors, Hartwood District, said that some of them may already know him, as his story received national media coverage when he was removed from the kidney transplant list at UVA Hospital for not receiving the COVID vaccine. He said that he was here today to discuss the Stafford Schools budget. He said that he previously spoke about this at the School Board meeting, but he was interrupted and his First Amendment rights were infringed upon.

   Mr. Connors said that the School Board members had an agenda to push, and they did not like what he was saying. He said that they even cut off his time early, which was illegal. He said that they allowed hecklers to disrupt the meeting and did not take action. He said that they claimed they did not have to stop them. He has spoken to many parents, and none of them support raising taxes.

   Mr. Connors said that there are citizens on fixed incomes who cannot afford tax increases. He said that he was aware that his liberal friends may think taxes come from an infinite source, but that was not how it works in reality. He said that the Stafford School Board has endorsed and held a DEI committee meeting, and there is another DEI initiative on the Board of Supervisors.

   Mr. Connors said that they were all aware that Trump's executive order requires these programs to be disbanded or risk losing millions of dollars in federal funding. He said that the School Board was set to lose $44 million in federal funding. He said that he questioned why taxpayers would support a Board and people making a budget that was willing to throw away millions of dollars in aid to push a political agenda.

Mr. Connors said it does not make sense to ignore executive orders and expect taxpayers to pay more money due to the School Board's incompetence, which would likely result in losing federal funding. He said another point was that the Stafford School Board presented a budget that includes hiring 36 new ESL teachers for 4,700 students who likely cannot speak English, most likely because many of these students are here illegally. He said that he questions why local taxpayers should be responsible for funding teachers for individuals who are breaking their laws and illegally invading their country.

Mr. Connors said those who wished to improve this situation were knowingly aiding the foreign invasion, and he believed severe consequences should be imposed. He said that he suggested they follow the lead of Ohio and Oklahoma, which recently made it clear that proof of citizenship is required to register for school. He said that Ohio spent approximately $500 million on educating undocumented students last year alone.

Mr. Connors said that it was unfair to ask other taxpayers to foot the bill for a political agenda that prioritized educating non-citizens over their own children. He said that for instance, Stafford was eliminating gifted programs due to a lack of funds for teachers, yet they were allocating money for 36 ESL teachers. He said that it should have been their focus to educate their own children, rather than diverting resources to non-citizens.

Mr. Connors said that there was no incentive for students to strive for excellence, as the focus was on educating those who were not even citizens. He said that instead of raising taxes to fund this, there were alternatives, such as seeking exemptions or reporting these issues through the NDEI portal (ndei.ed.gov). He said that this should be dismantled immediately.

6. Perry Garley, Hartwood District, said that it was time again to publish the property rate for Stafford County, and once again, they were hearing the same concerns from the same voices. He said that if property taxes were not raised and the schools were not funded, it was implied that they did not care about their children. He said that property taxes had been increasing every year with no end in sight. He said that the School Board already received the majority of tax revenue.

   Mr. Garley did not think they should raise property taxes until all other revenue streams had been explored and exhausted. He said that furthermore, he questioned the School Board's spending habits. He asked if the School Board and Board of Supervisors had conducted a thorough, line-by-line review of their budget to identify areas of inefficiency or opportunities for reduction.

   Mr. Garley said that he believed the School Board should not receive any increase in funding unless they made their budget publicly available, in its entirety, line by line. He said that this could be done in read-only mode, and it was not a difficult task; Stafford County had a wealth of smart IT professionals who could assist with this. He said that the taxpayers of Stafford County deserved full transparency into the School Board's budget process.

   Mr. Garley said that the Potomac Global Newspaper had reported that the schools faced financial challenges due to increased budget demands for specialized services. He said that he would like to know why these costs had risen so significantly and what services they covered. He said that he urged the School Board to show the public the spending trail. He said that if they refused, it raised concerns about accountability. He said that they were simply asking for transparency, along with lower rates.

Mr. Garley said that he had heard some claim that there had not been a tax increase in the county, but he believed that was misleading. He said that when tax rates were low, assessments were high, and the same budget amounts were taken from their wallets. Interestingly, 17 Counties in Virginia had a rate over 0.8%, with Stafford being one of them.

Mr. Garley said that he was respectfully requesting that the Board's supervisors keep proposed tax rates low, demand accountability from the School Board regarding their budget, and require the posting of the full, line-by-line budget online in read-only mode for citizens to review and comment on. He said that it was only fair that Stafford citizens knew where their tax dollars were being spent.

7. Cliff Heinzer, Aquia District, said that as they entered budget season, he wanted to reiterate the importance of education and the need to prioritize it in their budget. He said that despite being among the most prosperous Counties in Virginia, currently ranked fifth or sixth wealthiest, with an estimate of $117 per student. He said that this was particularly concerning when compared to far less prosperous communities, which often prioritized the future of their children by investing in quality education.

   Mr. Heinzer said that their children deserved the same quality education that they received, and it was essential that they recognized this. He said that he believed they all agreed that the burden of supporting their schools should not solely fall on residents, but rather that they needed to attract businesses to their area. He said that the current barrier was that businesses were deterred by their education system's inability to support the employees they wished to hire.

   Mr. Heinzer said that to address this, they must make the necessary investment to attract businesses and, in turn, reduce the tax burden on residents. He said that he would remind the Board that a solution that took 15 years to implement was not a viable solution for the children currently in their system. He said that when discussing the need to be cautious about the tax burden on retirees, the data was clear: most retirees, like himself, were in a better financial position to pay taxes than young working families.

   Mr. Heinzer said that he wanted to acknowledge the hard work and dedication the Board put into this budget season. He said that they were doing their best for the County, and he believed they deserved a raise. He said that the Board had not had a raise in 16 years, and it was time for that. He said that he wanted to express his gratitude for the Board’s efforts and ask that they consider priorities when reviewing this year's budget.

8. Jenny Solt, Rock Hill District, said that at the last Board of Supervisors meeting, it was suggested that taxes had not increased significantly, and that Stafford's growth was the reason for the price we pay. She said that she was here tonight to provide evidence that the Rock Hill

District's real estate taxes had actually increased substantially, and this rise was significantly higher than the growth of the County.

Ms. Solt said that UVA's Weldon Cooper Center provides the official population estimates for Virginia, and according to their website, Stafford County's population increased 6.7% from 2020 to 2024. She said that while Stafford was indeed growing, their real estate taxes grew four times that amount in the same time period. She said that as someone who had lived in Stafford County for 20 years, she could attest to the fact that she lived in a single-family home with a little more than a third of an acre. She said that the Rock Hill District's real estate tax bills, which she had brought with her, showed that the taxes had increased by 24.5% from 2021 to 2024.

Ms. Solt then asked her friends, who had lived in their same homes since 2021 and had made no renovations or improvements which would affect their assessments, to look up their tax bills. She said that the data they provided included: 24.2% for another family in Rock Hill, 27.4% for a friend in the Garrisonville District, 28.7% for a friend in the Aquia District, 19.1% for a friend in the Hartwood District, 26.2% for a friend in the George Washington District, with the highest increase being 39.2%. She said that these modest homes across the County demonstrated that this was not an isolated issue.

Ms. Solt said that even with this limited data, the lowest increase was 19.1%, and the highest was 39.2%, averaging out to 26.2%, which was comparable to the median increase for the entire County, 31.3%. She said that when averaged out, it was 31.5%. She said that considering that none of the County's salaries had increased by this amount, it was clear that they could not afford this level of tax increase.

Ms. Solt said that when real estate taxes rose, families faced an immediate financial burden. She said that individuals who had owned their homes for decades were struggling to keep up with the rapidly escalating tax rates, and they should never be placed in this difficult situation. She said that for renters, landlords were simply passing on the increased costs to their tenants.

Ms. Solt said that these drastic increases created a cycle where families were forced out of their neighborhoods due to unaffordable housing costs. She said that this issue disproportionately affected low- and fixed-income families in Stafford County. She said that her salaries had not increased by 20-30%, and her population had not grown by 20% to 30%. She said that therefore, it was puzzling that her real estate taxes continued to rise

9. Julia Lewis, Falmouth District, said that she wanted to express her appreciation for the Board's hard work, particularly given the upcoming budget. She said that she was reviewing the agenda packet for this meeting and read through the transcript of the work session your Board held with the School Board on January 25. She said that she would like to thank Ms. Bohmke for asking questions about the proposed replacement for Drew Middle School at Cliff Farm.

   Ms. Lewis said that although this may appear to be a better use of the land than the age-restricted housing unit that their Board voted down last year, there are many unanswered questions. She said that upon reviewing the minutes, Mr. Towery listed the parties that the feasibility study has spoken with, yet there was one group that has not been consulted: the public. She said that there were neighbors on all four sides and in the airspace, and everyone in this room desires to be heard, and so do they.

Ms. Lewis said that she urged the Board to give the neighbors a seat at the table to discuss this project before it was finalized. She said that the biggest concern was regarding the School Board's plans for the 181 acres in the back of Cliff Farm Road. She said that after 18 years, they still have no clear idea of how this property will be used, and she was uncertain about how this would impact the future use of this property.

Ms. Lewis said that she doubted that this would be a significant factor in the planning and design of this middle school. She asked if there would be adequate roads, water, and sewer. She said that as noted during their Board's vote on the age-restricted community, failure to properly plan for future growth could significantly impact future tax dollars to fix problems that should not have to be fixed.

Ms. Lewis said that additionally, a school would likely spur unplanned growth here on the edge of the urban services area. She said that the Planning Commission had expressed concerns about this issue very clearly in their vote against the age-restricted community. She said that while a school may be a permitted use under A1 zoning, the School Board should be held accountable for addressing this concern now, rather than waiting until it was too late. She said that in closing, she requested that the School Board or Board of Supervisors hold a community meeting.

Ms. Lewis said that this project appeared to be moving forward rapidly, as Mr. Towery stated their plan to purchase the land in June. She said that she believed the public should have the opportunity to participate in the process. She said that she urged the Board to consider the broader implications of this project and its potential long-term consequences. She said that she wondered if this hasty, short-term solution would lead to significant taxpayer obligations in the future.

10. Kristen Maxson, Falmouth District, said that there was an error concerning a tax map number with purchase development rights, as declared by Planning and Zoning, and it pertained to August 2024. She said that this was a concerning issue to the program and the handlers. She said that the resolution concerning R25-53, noted the 2023 Master Plan was not readily available for Musselman Park, as stated, and could be found on Stafford's public web page or within the agenda. She said that seeing page 256 of 482 of the agenda today, she asked how the public should respond to this resolution when it was not updated.

    Ms. Maxson said that the Stafford GIS Database was showing land divides that were placing land locks from Osprey Lane to Belle Plains Road and Vance Way to the power line south. She said that these divides were mathematical and did not allow for building, with hatch limits such as narrow guardrails back to back. She said that the GIS maintenance and use was public funded and publicly owned. She said that GIS parcels were to be unique and should be truly representative. She said that this was a misuse of the system and the taxpayers' funding.

Ms. Maxson said that regarding the Board of Supervisor Work Session of February 17, 225 Route 1 at Courthouse impacts were highlighted in red. She said that potential roadways were scribbled as a yellow highlight tic-tac-toe grid cutting up 24 land parcels and more. She said that the west area boundaries were behind Colonial Forge High School and the Woodcutters Road. She said that also, underground cabling was starting in the design of this area. She said that the impact on the local Stafford community was a concern.

Ms. Maxson said that regarding Item 2 on the agenda today, Northern Virginia Conservation Trust in Annandale, Virginia, NVCT, she was questioning how a mega home builder and seller representative was able to get on this program. She asked if they volunteered their land that they were targeting here, maybe with an egress along with an agent. She said that the actual memo was not available until today and it was dated October 6, 2022. She said that they needed their documents when they were dated. She said that civil rights were tainted with string-bound incentives and restrictions. She said that she agreed that it was disgusting, as stated on page 63 of today's agenda.

11. Molly Denham, Hartwood District, said that tonight, the County Administrator would present his County budget proposal, and after its presentation, the public would have the opportunity to make comments. She said that this was how they, as constituents, could participate in their governance and provide their representatives with their opinions on how to collect and spend their tax dollars.

    Ms. Denham said that this allowed the Supervisors, as elected officials, to determine a way forward that aligned with their constituents' desires. She said that she found it slightly disturbing that some of their local representatives seemed to have already made up their minds on what was best for the County, and had publicly determined the course of action without considering the County Administrator's proposal or public input.

    Ms. Denham said that, based on past historical behaviors, she would imagine that nearly half of this Board had already made tentative plans to follow the leader in this regard. She said that the biggest question for the public concerning the budget was always the tax rate for the year, and more specifically, the real estate budget. She said that the public would be bombarded with claims about the tax rate, including the assertion that Stafford County had raised taxes by 30%.

    Ms. Denham said that this statement was not entirely factual and was misleading. She said that there were two factors that contributed to their real estate tax bill: the tax rate and the assessed valuation of a home. She said that she would like to remind them of a couple of facts. She said that in FY21, the real estate tax rate was $0.97, and the median assessed valuation of a home was $370,000. She said that in FY22, the real estate tax rate was lowered significantly to $0.85, primarily due to COVID, with no plan to return to pre-COVID levels after the pandemic.

    Ms. Denham said that nearly four years later, and their current real estate tax rate was still below pre-COVID levels at $0.89, while the median assessed valuation of a home was now $520,000. She said that she was not a mathematician, but she could tell them that the median assessed valuation of a home was the primary cause of the problem, not the tax rate. She said that she had been attending this Board's meetings for some time, seeking a plan, thoughts, ideas, and even expressions of mild interest in addressing affordable housing.

Ms. Denham said that unfortunately, the Board had failed to develop a plan to alleviate the COVID-19 tax burden they were facing, and it had also collectively failed to address the underlying factor contributing to the increasing tax bill. She said that she urged the public to hold their public representatives accountable and focus on the real issue: the rising cost of living in their County. She said that perhaps they could finally develop a comprehensive plan that would enable their tax rate to keep pace with the growing needs of their County.

12. Vera Ward said she was here today to bring attention to an urgent health and safety issue affecting a valued business in their community, Woof Houze. She said that this had been a vital resource for many families and their dogs, including hers, but was now in jeopardy due to an ongoing environmental hazard caused by a business neighbor.

    Ms. Ward said that Woof Houze shared its building with a granite and stone company that had been generating large amounts of silica dust. She said that as they were aware, prolonged exposure to airborne silica was a serious health risk, causing respiratory issues and long-term damage. She said that this hazardous dust had been infiltrating the Woof Houze facility, creating unsafe conditions for staff, clients, and the dogs in their care.

    Ms. Ward said that despite efforts to mitigate this issue, the situation became so severe that Woof Houze had been forced to close its doors at the location, leaving them with the burden of relocating while still being responsible for their lease. She said that this crisis had directly affected her life as well as others in their community. She said that her dog, Purple, had benefited immensely from Woof Houze, where she had regained her confidence and socialization skills after a traumatic incident in their neighborhood.

    Ms. Ward said that now, with this unexpected closure and uncertainty surrounding the business's future, Purple had lost her safe space, and she feared that she may also lose it permanently if Woof Houze was unable to recover from this hardship. She said that the burden of addressing this issue should not be solely on Woof Houze; the County must step in to ensure small businesses were not forced out due to unsafe conditions created by their neighbors, and landlords should be held to a standard of safety and good business practices.

    Ms. Ward said that she urged the Board to take action by investigating in the environmental hazards, enforcing necessary safety regulations, and exploring ways to assist Woof Houze in relocations or holding the party responsible for remediation efforts. She said that Woof Houze had given so much to their community, not just by providing exceptional care for their pets but also by creating jobs.

Mr. Diggs said that to clarify, Woof Houze was located in the George Washington District, on Musselman Road.

13. Elizabeth Hauser said that Woof Houze was essential to their community. She said that Woof Houze was a unique business that stood out from other facilities in their area. She said that

they not only offered behavior modification and obedience training for all types of canines, but also provided puppy daycare. She said that Woof Houze created a healthy, safe, and fear-free environment for canines to play and socialize.

Ms. Hauser said that throughout the day, they received training reinforcement with a focus on obedience and socialization. She said that they engaged in enrichment activities to stimulate their minds. She said that unlike kennels, the pups at Woof Houze roamed freely all day, interacting with their friends and staff. She said that they had adopted a mixed-breed pup from a local animal shelter in February 2024, and six weeks of training was required.

Ms. Hauser said that it had been years since they had a puppy, but a friend who had adopted rescues highly recommended Woof Houze. She said that their high-energy pup started training at Woof Houze at 10 weeks old. She said that today, she was over 15 months old and now attends puppy daycare. She said that Woof Houze had taught them how to appreciate her nature, understand her drives, provide proper socialization, and mental stimulation to prevent destructive behavior.

Ms. Hauser said that the training was so successful that they did not hesitate to adopt a high-energy six-month-old puppy. She said that when she dropped off their dogs at puppy daycare, they could not wait to see their extended family. She said that it was challenging to list the many ways Adia and Woof Houze had improved their lives. She said that according to estimates in 2024, one million canines were euthanized in the United States, and their local shelters were currently at capacity, facing a crisis.

Ms. Hauser said that frequent posts and stories could be found on social media and the internet about dogs who were adopted but ultimately were not good fits for their families and needed to be rehomed. She said that thanks to the efforts of Adia and individuals like her, as well as her extensive volunteer work, many dogs who were previously neglected, abused, and abandoned received much-needed behavior modification and obedience training and went on to find safe, loving homes. She said that there were not enough people like Adia and organizations like Woof Houze to meet the needs of all the dogs in need.

14. Cynthia Bruner said that she was also here to speak on behalf of Woof Houze, but was a resident of Spotsylvania County. She said that as a lifelong dog owner and advocate, she had been involved in dog rescue for many years. She said that two and a half years ago, she took in a stray dog with serious behavioral needs.

    Ms. Bruner said that she researched local trainers and found that Woof Houze was the only place that offered fear-free training methods, without the use of shock collars or e-collars, and forced behavior. She said that she had been working with Woof Houze for two and a half years, and her dog had made tremendous progress. She said that her dog was once unable to be around other dogs, but now she could, and she had found a safe and loving environment.

    Ms. Bruner said that her story was not unique; many dogs adopted from shelters and rescue situations required specialized care, which was exactly what Woof Houze provided. She said that she wanted to emphasize that without Woof Houze, she would not know what would have happened. She said that this was why she was asking for the Board’s support in helping Woof Houze navigate the challenges posed by the commercial landlord. She said that the facility had been closed, and it was an intolerable situation. She said that she was sincerely asking for the Board’s help in this matter.

15. Sarah Lemberg said that she was also here to speak on behalf of Woof Houze in the George Washington District. She said that she was not a resident of Stafford County, but she had been living in the greater Stafford, Fredericksburg, and Spotsylvania area for over 11 years. She said that she recently welcomed her very first dog into her family and had been working with Woof Houze since her dog was about 12 weeks old. She said that her dog started at Woof Houze's puppy academy and continues to attend school, where he receives ongoing training and reinforcement multiple times a week.

    Ms. Lemberg said that the work that Adia and her team did at Woof Houze was particularly noteworthy, as it not only built confidence in the dogs, but also in the parents who entrusted them with care. She said that Adia collaborated with local shelters in Spotsylvania, Stafford, and Fredericksburg, and worked closely with families who were adopting these dogs, including those with red alert dogs that may be considered difficult to train and adopt.

    Ms. Lemberg said that she provided essential socialization and opportunities for these dogs to find good homes. She said that this work had a significant impact on their community. She said that earlier, she had heard several people express a desire to bring businesses to Stafford County. She said that she wanted to emphasize that by supporting Adia and Woof Houze, they could help keep a small business in Stafford County and contribute to the well-being of their community.

16. Pam Evans, Rock Hill District, said that she was present tonight to discuss Woof Houze, an organization that held great importance for her and the community. She said that she had been a Woof Houze customer since last July. She said that she was searching for a suitable place to train their newly adopted two-year-old Malamute named Chase.

    Ms. Evans said that in his short life, he had been in several homes, and his last owner, a homeless person, had left him tied to a lamppost. She said that she was seeking a place that could help Chase trust people and overcome his separation anxiety. She said that fortunately, Adia proved to be the perfect solution.

    Ms. Evans said that the first time Chase met Adia, he fell in love with her. She said that although Malamutes are strong-willed and independent, Adia demonstrated exceptional understanding and care. She said that as a result, they decided to enroll Chase in play school, where he attends twice a week. This helps him socialize with other dogs and work through his separation anxiety. She said that the first morning they dropped him off, he was terrified. She said that as they walked away, he was crying and pawing at the window. She said that Adia texted her several times throughout the day to let her know that he was doing well.

    Ms. Evans said that by the time they picked him up, however, he did not want to leave, and it had been this way ever since. She said that it was not just Chase who adores Woof Houze;

every single pup who attends the facility loves it. She said that they were engaged, entertained, and thrive under Adia's care. She said that Adia and her staff are truly exceptional. She said that Woof Houze was more than just a doggy daycare; it was more like a kindergarten. She said that her friends who live outside the area were amazed by the stories she shared about Woof Houze. She said that Adia and her staff were phenomenal. She said that right now, Adia's hands were tied, and she cannot grow her business. She said that they need the County's help.

17. Angela Carswell said that she was also here on behalf of Woof Houze, the training facility for her dog, Romeo. She said that Woof Houze is more than just a facility; it was a community that deeply understands the importance of providing a safe and nurturing environment for their beloved pets. She said that Adia, the owner, has dedicated years of her life serving as an advocate for all dogs, giving and volunteering her time selflessly to shelter and partner with neighboring shelters.

    Ms. Carswell said that Adia was a pillar in the community, saving dogs and educating humans on how to give these dogs a better and longer lifespan. She said that the newest location at 501 Musselman Road in Fredericksburg represented the expansion of her commitment to the well-being of everyone. She said that she had provided care for every dog that they care for. She said that the concerns they were here to raise today were in relation to the safety of the building Woof Houze now occupies, especially considering the establishment next to and connected to this granite company, which uses a chemical called silica.

    Ms. Carswell said that Adia took every precaution to ensure that the facility met and meets the highest safety standards. She said that she followed the proper steps, according to the County, with a change of use and necessary inspections, inquiring and asking for assurances about ventilation, compliance, and safety codes to ensure a safe and healthy environment for both her employees and her dogs. She said that however, her employees' and customers' health were being jeopardized for months. She said that the facility was forced to close operations on January 27, and they were called to pick up their dogs due to constant exposure and the lack of accommodations or correction from the landlord.

    Ms. Carswell said that this had a significant impact on the business, the health, and the livelihood of staff and Adia, including their pets. She said that personally, as someone who works in D.C. and lived in Fredericksburg, traveling 50 miles a day, Woof Houze was the only place she felt safe bringing her dog. She said that her family cares deeply about Woof Houze, and they want to ensure that their dogs were spending time in a safe environment, without constant exposure that may be causing them to become unwell.

    Ms. Carswell said that therefore, she was asking the County to hold the landlords accountable and ensure that proper inspections were done. She asked if the building was truly compliant with all relevant codes and regulations. She asked if the residents living just a few hundred feet away from the building may also be exposed to potential health risks. She said that they were concerned that the situation may not be entirely transparent, as there had been reports of dogs getting sick, including a recent case of kennel cough.

Ms. Carswell said that they were not convinced that the exposure was not a contributing factor. She said that they were respectfully requesting any additional assistance the County could provide, as well as any information that may not have been previously discussed. She said that this was a matter of serious health and safety concerns for both humans and animals, as well as extreme hardship for the owner and employees.

18. Jamie Rieti, Falmouth District, said that she was here to discuss Woof Houze. She said that she did not have prepared remarks but wanted to share what happened. She said that six weeks ago, she received a call that her dog and the employees at Woof Houze were evacuated due to health concerns. She said that they were experiencing symptoms, and two employees were hospitalized.

    Ms. Rieti said that it turned out that the company next door was not following proper protocols, and they all ended up getting sick. She said that her dogs also fell ill. She said that she wanted her dog to continue going to Woof Houze because she does not trust any other facility. She said that she understood that the Board may think she could take her dog to another doggy daycare, but she wanted to stick with Adia and Woof Houze. She said that she believed something went wrong, and she was hoping the County could provide assistance.

    Ms. Rieti said that this issue was not limited to the George Washington District; it was a Stafford issue that required collaboration to help this small business. She said that she believed in Adia and her commitment to providing quality services. She said that she would continue to support Adia. She said that she would greatly appreciate it if the County could help them out.

19. Adia Washington said that she was the owner of Woof Houze. She said that as a suffering small business owner in Stafford County, she was deeply concerned about the challenges they faced in supporting local entrepreneurs here. She said that since opening her business with multiple locations within a year, she had dedicated her life's work to creating jobs and providing services for their community, particularly pet parents.

    Ms. Washington said that however, she was now facing a heartbreaking reality of potentially closing her doors entirely due to a situation that she knew could have been avoided. She said that her employees had fallen ill, her customer base had dwindled, and she was financially strained and in severe debt. She said that this adversity had been compounded by exposure to an unsafe toxin coming from a neighboring property.

    Ms. Washington said that it was devastating to realize that these challenges could have been prevented with proper inspections and accountability from commercial landlords, property managers, and County inspectors. She said that in her attempts to seek assistance, she had reached out to Stafford County Inspections, but unfortunately, she had never received a call back, despite going in person and being told she would be contacted. She said that this lack of response was unacceptable and underscored the urgent need for improved support and communication for local business owners suffering in critical situations.

    Ms. Washington said that however, there was never a lack of communication when the County emailed her asking for payments. She said that she needed County inspectors and the County organization to step up and respond when they were in need or under duress. She said that it was imperative that they hold the County's landlords and property managers of those landlords in the community accountable for leasing unsafe, out-of-code properties. She said that stricter regulations and oversight were necessary to protect business owners from hazardous conditions.

Ms. Washington said that additionally, she urged the County to prioritize thorough and comprehensive inspections by Stafford County inspectors and fire marshals who could genuinely identify potential hazards and ensure that businesses operated safely. She said that she shared her story not to simply highlight her struggles, but to advocate for systemic change that would benefit all small business owners in Stafford County.

Ms. Washington said that by implementing these measures, they could create environments where entrepreneurs could thrive without the fear of unsafe conditions jeopardizing their livelihoods. She said that her life's work was now at stake. She said that with over 26 years of experience in this industry, she took pride in everything she did. She said that she sincerely asked for the Board of Supervisors' support in seeking a better way to ensure that situations like hers did not happen again.

Ms. Washington said that her location, which was initially planned for closure, was now housing all operations of all three locations, and she had less than a 60-day lease due to the building that could not be returned to. She said that she appreciated the Board's attention to this critical issue. She said that together, they could explore solutions that would not only safeguard the future of the business, but also support and uplift all local entrepreneurs in Stafford County.

20. Shannon Fingerholz, Hartwood District, said that every year, a significant amount of time is spent by the School Board and constituents advocating for school funding, taking away resources from other essential needs of the school. She said that she thought it was time they consider a revenue-sharing agreement, similar to those used by other school systems.

    Ms. Fingerholz said that it would save time, reduce costs, and enable better planning, rather than relying on broken promises from both Boards. She said that the tax credit for their veterans has been a recurring issue, cutting $22 million from their County's revenue. She said that with a billion-dollar budget, this credit represents only 2.2% of the total. She said that it had been a predictable expense since around 2011; it was no longer a surprise and was not to be blamed for the lack of school funding.

    Ms. Fingerholz said that the frequent cancellations of three-on-three meetings between the School Board and Supervisors hinder communication and erode trust. She said that it was clear that the Board of Supervisors as an entity not prioritize their school system. She said that if something was predictable, it was also preventable. She said that instead of resisting the need, they should be planning for the need, but they were choosing to neglect.

    Ms. Fingerholz asked if the Supervisors wanted their legacies to be that they were elected year after year, or if their legacies would be that they made a positive impact on their families. She said that she was asking that they take responsibility for the needs of their schools and make a positive impact on their families. She said that they should fund the schools for what they require.

Ms. Fingerholz said that she would also like to address the concern regarding a lack of transparency in the School Board budget. She said that a quick Google search gives all necessary information. She said that if they visit the Stafford County Schools website and use their search bar, they can easily find the budget information. She said that the County was very transparent about its finances, and the numbers were readily available. She said that while it may be a lot to sift through, it was all there if they were willing to take the time.

Ms. Fingerholz said that she also noticed that the timer has started running as soon as people approach the microphone, rather than when they begin speaking. She said that to help those who were not familiar with this process, she suggested giving them some grace. She said that it often took a moment for people to take a breath and get settled. She said that perhaps they could wait until they start speaking before the timer begins.

21. Mary Becelia, Falmouth District, said that tonight, this Board will discuss adopting amended bylaws to establish an investigatory process for the removal of appointees to Boards, Authorities, and Commissions. She said that appointees were citizens who stepped up to serve Stafford County. She said that as the individual who was falsely accused of misconduct by a member of this Board in July 2024, convicted by this Board, and subsequently had her life turned upside down by this lie, she wanted to express her gratitude for the Board taking this important step to protect current and future citizen volunteers.

    Ms. Becelia said that at the February 18 Board of Supervisors meeting, there was considerable discussion of what the amended bylaws would provide to a citizen who faces an accusation. She said that as someone with firsthand experience, she would like to offer a perspective.

    Ms. Becelia said that firstly, the amount of time granted to a citizen before appearing before the closed session should be more than 24 hours. She said that this time was necessary for the citizen to speak with witnesses, obtain leave from work, arrange for childcare, and collect themselves, especially if the charge was unexpected, as in her case.

    Ms. Becelia said that secondly, it was troubling that a citizen volunteer would appear before the Board of Supervisors in closed session with no witnesses. She said that in her case, she was cautioned by wise mentors not to appear alone before this body when she was accused, and she feared that a similar scenario could unfold if a citizen was accused of misconduct and appeared alone in a closed session.

    Ms. Becelia said that thirdly, if the governing body determined that the citizen was guilty, she asked what appeal process would be in place. She said that this seemed to have been overlooked in the drafts she had seen. She said that she hoped she was missing something in that regard.

Ms. Becelia said that in conclusion, she respectfully requested that the amended process allow five business days for the citizen to prepare for the meeting, and also permit the citizen to bring at least one relevant witness to the closed meeting. She said that anything else would be little more than a pro forma exercise left for this Board, with no real chance for a citizen to clear their name should the charge against them be false.

Ms. Becelia said that she appreciated the Board's consideration of this matter. She said that she was grateful that they were taking it seriously, as she believed they were making progress in putting this behind them.

22. [1:25:56 Speaker?] said that he would like to address some comments regarding concern about the potential shortage of educated students for employers. He said that he believed this would be an indictment of the school system, as it suggested that high school graduates may not possess the necessary skills for most jobs. He said that if that was the case, then it was reasonable to assume that high school graduates should be able to perform basic tasks such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as being punctual and able to come to work on time.

    He said that these expectations had not changed over time. He said that what mattered was the dollar amount generated from adjustment, regardless of if it was the real estate tax assessment or property value assessment. He said that he would like to address the gentleman who claimed they could afford higher taxes because they did not have a mortgage.

    He said that he was not sure if the gentleman was as old as he was, but he could attest that he had recently finished paying his taxes, which included his wife's health insurance for $14,000. He said that he had also seen firsthand the rising costs of long-term care, which could exceed $100,000 per year. He said that he previous spouse had passed away, and he had spent $230,000 on her care.

    He said that therefore, the fact that he did not have a mortgage was irrelevant. He said that he would need the funds in the future, and he would prefer not to rely on his child for care. He said that he recalled a contractor who had spoken at a previous School Board meeting suggesting that he could save the county $50,000 per month by providing more cost-effective services for the school system.

    He said that he believed they needed to hear more about such proposals. He did not see the level of detail in the school budget that would indicate whether the subjects being taught were in high demand or not. He said that as a result, he had a lot to learn and, unfortunately, he did not have the answers he would like. He said that he would appreciate it if someone could provide more information. He said that additionally, 85% of the school budget was allocated to salaries, and he would like to know how that made the students smarter.

    He said that he was only sharing his thoughts, but someone had mentioned that it was a disgrace due to the amount spent per student. He said that he agreed that it was a disgrace if their student scores continued to decline.

23. Steve Schwartz, Aquia District, said that he did not have anything prepared, but he arrived late and listened. He said that he strongly believed that the discussion on tax was a short-term solution, and they had not really explored that option thoroughly. He said that they were relying on homeowners to cover the costs, which he thought was unfair. He said that as a parent of a school-aged child, he had five, and they were currently down to one. He said that while they were working on preparing them for life, they put a lot of heart and soul into their children.

    Mr. Schwartz said that many American families were struggling to make ends meet in this community. He said that there were not many retirees in this community; they were majorly working families. He said whether it was taxes or the valuation on their property, those families would calculate the percentage they were paying from last year, the year before, and this year, and that mattered to the homeowner and resident of this community. He said that he was concerned that they were not looking at the long-term solution and instead focusing on short-term fixes.

    Mr. Schwartz said that he heard discussion about affordable housing and witnessed it being realized in the form of apartments and subsidized housing. He said that he did not see $500,000 average houses being built and more available housing in the community. He said that they also failed to encourage small businesses to develop in their community, which was a missed opportunity.

    Mr. Schwartz said that every year they were looking at short-term solutions and not long-term solutions. He said that as for the school, he acknowledged it needed the funding, but he would like to see more transparency in the budget, such as scrutinizing contracts and selecting local contractors who could have saved the school money. He said that he would like to know what made the out-of-state contractor more suitable and what benefits they provided. He said that these were the kinds of details they would like to see if they were going to invest more in their schools.

24. James Fisher, Garrisonville District, said that at the previous Board meeting, he had emphasized the importance of being responsible stewards of taxpayers' dollars and urged the Board to demand receipts from their departments to ensure that the funds were being used as intended. He said that without accountability, blind trust could lead to a misalignment of expectations, where what was expected versus what was actually spent could be significantly different.

    Mr. Fisher said that Stafford County ranked 112th out of 130 in terms of education spending per student, while they ranked 71st in SOL scores. He said that however, this was only one data point, and there were many other factors to consider. He said that he would point out that Stafford County spent $10,622 per student on education, yet ranked 71 out of 130 in SOL scores. He said that in contrast, Poquoson City, which spent the same amount, ranked fourth in the state in SOL scores. He said that York County, which spent $300 less per student, ranked seventh.

    Mr. Fisher said that on the other hand, Tazewell County, ranked near the bottom in per-pupil expenditures, yet their SOL scores ranked 11th. He said that meanwhile, Fredericksburg City, spent $2,400 more per student, ranked 125th in SOL scores. He said that Tazewell County's spending per student spent nearly $8,000 more per student on education, and was only surpassed by Arlington County, which ranked 55th in SOL scores.

Mr. Fisher said that to clarify, he did believe that the schools should be adequately funded, but they needed to consider a broader range of data points when evaluating their education spending and its impact on student outcomes. He said that simply throwing more money at the problem and increasing funding for the schools was not a solution. He said that providing more money did not automatically translate to a better education for their children.

25. Bart Randall, Garrisonville District, said that he appreciated the effort that went into preparing the budget, and he appreciated the regular work that the Board did. He said that he understood that a significant amount of time and effort had been put into getting the budget ready. He said that he would have liked to have seen the budget before presentations, but he was sure there was a reason for that. He said that tonight, he would like to discuss a couple of key points that he believed should be included in the budget.

Mr. Randall said that firstly, he would like to ensure that the budget was balanced, and they were not using debt to fund expenses. He said that in the past, they had relied on debt to cover County expenses, and he would like to move away from that. He said that he believed they should strive for a true balanced budget, where what they brought in equaled what they sent out, without using debt to cover expenses.

Mr. Randall said that secondly, he would like to address his previous remarks about test scores. He said that teachers in Stafford were often teaching their students in hallways because class sizes were too large for the classrooms. He said that class size was a critical factor and could have a significant impact on test scores. He said that even with the three new schools coming online, he believed those schools should have been in place ten years ago.

Mr. Randall said that instead, they had had to rely on trailers or "learning cottages," which could be a temporary solution. He said that larger-than-average class sizes certainly impacted test scores, in addition to other things. He said that he would like to discuss their business revenue. He said that growing a County was not rocket science, and he believed they could achieve this through smart planning and decision-making.

Mr. Randall said that they were currently in the midst of a process that many Counties in the northern region had undergone, including Arlington, Fairfax, and Prince William. He said that they all went through the same process, which may have taken place 35 to 50 years ago. He said that they needed revenue, and unfortunately, they did not have enough businesses to generate it, so they must determine where they would get revenue from.

Mr. Randall said that the northern Counties now had businesses that they were able to rely on, but Stafford currently did not. He said that he would like to see a comparison of their business revenue to that of the other Counties in the northern region in the budget. He said that he appreciated the work that was being done and the effort that had been made; it was not an easy process.

26. Lisa Nguyen, Falmouth District, said that she would like to discuss the budget for schooling. She said that, having experienced the effects of reeducation camps in Vietnam, she strongly believed that CRT should not be funded. She said that in Vietnam, reeducation taught individuals that the government served as the parent, and parents were not really parents. She said that no budget should go towards CRT at all.

REPORTS BY BOARD MEMBERS

Ms. Gary – stated she truly appreciated being there and listening to everyone's perspectives. She said that she did not always agree with what she heard, and sometimes they made her angry. She said that if they lost sight of what was truly important, which was listening to each other, they would be in serious trouble. She said that regarding the budget, it was clear that there were many concerns.

Ms. Gary said that a budget was not just a financial document, but also a reflection of their values and priorities. She said that they all brought different perspectives and worldviews to the table, and this was what made this process so important. She said that as they discussed and debated, she urged everyone to be patient with one another and with the Board.

Ms. Gary said that they needed to be able to have open and honest conversations, and she wanted to ensure that they could do that in a way that respected each other's differences. She said that she did not need to remind them that they were all passionate about making Stafford great, because it already was and they would continue to do so. She said that she was grateful for the dedication and time that many of them had invested in the community.

Ms. Gary said that she had attended some recent events, which they could see on her Facebook page. She said that she was thankful for everyone speaking at today's meeting and asked that everyone be kind to each other. She said that they should have difficult conversations outside of this Board room so they could make real progress and be an example to the rest of the country that was struggling right now.

Ms. Vanuch – stated she wanted to begin by apologizing to her colleagues. She said that over the past year, she had stated that this Board had consistently raised taxes by 30%. She said that the actual number was 31.5%. She said that she had communicated with the Commissioner of Revenue and made sure the new County Administrator understood their approach to the budget in Stafford County and the state code regarding budgets, property assessments, and tax increases.

Ms. Vanuch said that she wanted to ensure the community understood that when an assessment was increased on a home, the Board by law was required to advertise any increase that was not equal to the current rate as a tax increase. She said that whether the assessment went up or not, if they did not equalize the tax rate and hold a flat budget, that would be considered a tax increase.

Ms. Vanuch said that the Commissioner had actually fought for state law to be transparent about this, as northern Virginia localities like Fairfax and others would raise assessments, keep the tax rate the same, and claim they had not raised taxes. She said that as a result, this Board had increased taxes 31.5% over the past three years. She said that the average tax bill in 2021 was $2,994, which had now risen to $3,938, a $1,000 increase.

Ms. Vanuch said that she looked forward to hearing comments and continued communication regarding the budget process. She said that they had a FAMPO meeting last week, and their staff had been working with FAMPO staff for several months to secure a guaranteed revenue source for transportation. She said that they had partnered with Spotsylvania County against the City of Fredericksburg's will and secured $2.8 million in STGB/CMAQ funding guaranteed to Stafford County year-over-year.

Ms. Vanuch said that this was a significant win for transportation, as they had previously received only a couple of hundred thousand dollars last year. She said that she was excited to move forward with completing projects using this guaranteed revenue source on the FAMPO side. She said that she wanted to make a comment, which was that she and Ms. Gary did not often see eye-to-eye on things, but she wanted to address a point Ms. Gary had made about being respectful of others while others were speaking.

Ms. Vanuch said that unfortunately, she did observe two audience members chuckling during a discussion about school funding, which was particularly disappointing given that it was the Superintendent of Schools and a School Board member. She said that she would like to remind everyone that this was a great place to observe and listen, and she encouraged everyone to be respectful while others are speaking.

Dr. Yeung – stated she wanted to take a moment to acknowledge those celebrating Ramadan and wish them Ramadan Mubarak. She said that she also appreciated the freedom to express their individual truths. She said that over the past month, she attended several regional meetings, including the Regional Housing Committee, Virginia Railway Express (VRE), George Washington Regional Commission (GWRC), FAMPO, PRTC, the Fredericksburg Regional Alliance, and the Central Rappahannock Regional Library (CRRL) Board.

Dr. Yeung said that one of her highlights was the Student Climate Action Summit on Saturday, February 22, where students presented on a wide range of environmental topics, and it was great to see young students getting involved in environmental issues. She said that a key highlight from the Library Board meeting was the creation of a subcommittee to explore ways to improve community access to meeting rooms. She said that they recognize the growing demand for these spaces, particularly for events like dance performances, recitals, and small business gatherings.

Dr. Yeung said that she would like to bring forward an important issue regarding their County's financial stability. She said that since they do not have an economist on staff, she was unsure who to direct this request to, but she believes it was crucial that they examine the potential impact of federal employee layoffs on their local economy and revenue streams. She said that Stafford County and the surrounding region have a significant federal workforce, making these job losses a potential risk to their financial health. She said that while property taxes may not be immediately affected since homeowners were still required to pay them, the real concern was the impact on their income tax base and overall economic activity.

Dr. Yeung said that in the past, they had delayed property tax bills during times of hardship, but if people are without jobs, simply delaying a payment may not be a viable solution. She said that the economic effects of federal job losses include decreased consumer spending, housing market and property tax declines, local business revenue and job losses, impact on their County tax base and services, and increased demand for social services. She said that additionally, there was a regional economic impact, which affected areas beyond Stafford County. She said that to proactively assess and mitigate this risk, she requested that the staff provide data and analysis on some key questions.

Dr. Yeung said that she would like to know how many federal employees in their area were at risk of job loss and what level of uncertainty exists regarding these layoffs. She said that she was curious about the potential revenue loss if these layoffs significantly impact their local economy. She said that she wanted to know what impact the job losses would have on their tax base, and whether they could quantify the number of unemployed individuals to predict how this would affect their County's revenue stream.

Dr. Yeung said that understanding these figures would enable them to make informed decisions and develop strategies to support their residents while maintaining the County's financial stability. She said that she appreciated the Board's attention to this matter and looked forward to staff insights. She said that she wanted to ask the Board if they agreed that they should be examining these numbers to understand the impact on their fellow constituents. She said that by doing so, they could begin to develop a plan and avoid waiting until the situation became more severe.

Ms. Gary said that she believed it was beneficial to be proactive, but everything was happening at a rapid pace, and they did not have all the information about what was to come. She said that this was also affecting federal contractors and their employment. She said that since they had something from staff, she would refrain from speaking further.

Donna Krauss, Deputy County Administrator, said that she believed they would need some time to understand where they could obtain this data. She said that they had had a conversation with their CFO earlier that evening, as Mr. Mayausky was reviewing some data. She said that she did not want to promise that they could find something they did not have access to and how they would attempt to mitigate that challenge for the County. She said that she thought they would need some time to at least understand if they could address this challenge if the Board were to provide direction.

Mr. English said that he would assume it would be possibly three to six months before any significant impacts were felt. He said that he had a family member who received notice that today would be their last day of work, so he was unsure of how the timing of everything would play out.

Ms. Krauss said that she believed it would be a challenge for the County to reach out and ask people if they were unemployed. She said that therefore, they wanted to obtain some data, possibly including the number of federal employees they had in the County. She said that the way the data was reported and collected may provide a percentage, but determining the actual number of individuals within that percentage who were unemployed remained uncertain. She said that the federal government was still working to develop a comprehensive understanding of this process, which would be essential for making informed decisions. She said that as a result, it was unclear whether they would be able to accurately determine the number of unemployed individuals.

Mr. English asked if the unemployment office would be able to provide an analysis six months from now, indicating where their unemployment had increased.

Ms. Krauss said that it was possible if it was reported. She said that they had a brief discussion during the COVID-19 pandemic about this issue, and the numbers were highly variable. She said that it would present a significant challenge. She said that for the Board's information, she would like to elaborate on their discussions.

Ms. Krauss said that as an example, they were collaborating with the school system to potentially host a job fair in the future, with the goal of raising awareness about available opportunities in the community. She said that this could help unemployed individuals access information on how to apply to schools and government agencies. She said that while they were exploring ways to support this initiative, they were still in the process of understanding the potential financial implications.

Ms. Vanuch said that she would like to bring up a couple of points. She said that the 7th Congressional District is home to the largest percentage of federal workers in the United States, with approximately 56% of the district's workforce employed by the federal government. She said that she had a report on this topic that she could share with the Board if they were interested in reviewing it.

Ms. Vanuch said that it was worth noting that this was more than just Stafford County. She said that they likely had some good baseline data on this from previous government shutdowns, where their sales tax and other data had been impacted. She said that however, the impact of federal workers on their local economy was still a variable to consider. She said that for example, if federal workers were reassigned to out-of-state positions, it could lead to an increase in homes for sale in their area.

Ms. Vanuch said that she was not sure if Stafford County staff had any specific data on this topic, but reviewing their previous sales tax and economic data from government shutdowns may provide some insight. She said that historically, Stafford County had been disproportionately affected by government shutdowns, and when the economy was struggling elsewhere, they tended to outperform the baseline economic statistics due to their high concentration of federal workers. She said that however, when a federal government shutdown happened, they underperformed the baseline economic statistics due to their high population of federal workers. She said that therefore, it may be a good starting point to explore this further, and she believed that not raising taxes would be the best course of action.

Ms. Gary said that she was receiving calls about this issue daily, so she would appreciate it if staff could keep the Board apprised of any new information as it came in.

Dr. Yeung thanked Ms. Krauss for taking her calls and answering some of her questions during the week. She said that she believed it was essential that they did not wait six months. She said that they had data, as Ms. Vanuch had mentioned, and mitigating risk was achieved by examining past experiences and identifying potential solutions. She said that this plan, as Ms. Krauss mentioned, would be beneficial for individuals seeking their assistance, as they would continue to look to the County and the Board as a resource. She said that she appreciated their efforts in this regard.

Ms. Allen – stated that she planned to share some information at their next Board meeting regarding their transportation projects update. She said that for their district, that included a major project set to start in the spring, approximately a month from now, and two other projects in the Griffis area. She said that as they began budget season, which began today, they must maintain a level of mutual respect, not only among themselves in the community but also among Board members and their counterparts across the street.

Ms. Allen said that they could not assume that crowd expressions or people's languages indicated negative comments or gestures without clarification. She said that as elected officials, it was their responsibility to avoid inflaming difficult decisions that affected every Board member and community member, whether they participated in person or through emails or general communication. She said that the tax rate was always difficult, and elected officials should not create unnecessary discord or discontent. She said that with that in mind, she would like to extend an apology to their School Board counterparts for earlier comments made in that spirit.

Ms. Bohmke – stated that the Woof Houze spokespeople had departed, but she saw Paul Santay from Planning and Zoning meet with the owner and their team, but she felt bad for them that they had not received comments back, emails, or phone calls from their staff. She said that for that, she apologized. She said that it was unfortunate that they had had to take time out of their evening to come here and speak in order to be heard by the County. She said that that should not have been necessary.

Ms. Bohmke said that she wanted to assure everyone that if they experienced a similar situation in the future, they should not hesitate to contact Mr. Ashton by phone, email, or by contacting their Supervisor. She said that if they did not receive a response from their Supervisor, they could also reach out to another one. She said that she personally answered emails for people outside of her district, and she knew her colleagues did the same, as they were there to serve and ensure their needs were heard.

Ms. Bohmke said that she had seen Mr. Santay jump on the opportunity to meet with the Woof Houze representatives, and she appreciated his efforts. She said that she knew he was on top of it, and it was unfortunate that they had not been responded to. She said that additionally, she wanted to mention a couple of meetings she had attended recently. She said that if they had followed last week's meeting, they were working with Spotsylvania County and the City of Fredericksburg regarding the river crossing, possibly across the Rappahannock River off of Route 17. She said that the City of Fredericksburg had voted 7-0 last week.

Ms. Bohmke said that she had watched their meeting and reviewed the public comments. She said that she did not stay up to watch the end of the meeting, but she checked in the next morning to confirm the outcome of the vote. She said that the reason she brought this up was that it was crucial in relation to their technology overlay district for data centers, which they had recently approved.

She said that this decision would have significant environmental impacts, particularly regarding the river crossing from their side of the river.

Ms. Bohmke said that at the FAMPO meeting last week, she asked the Board to request a presentation from the subsidiary Citizens Transportation Advisory Committee (CTAC), which is comprised of appointed constituents who make decisions on behalf of transportation. She said that CTAC had conducted thorough research on various river crossing options and would present their findings at their next FAMPO meeting.

Ms. Bohmke said that they may be exploring a modified approach, which could be a combination of existing options. She said that the specifics would be determined at a later time. She said that on the VRE front, their ridership numbers had been steadily increasing since the required return to in-person work for federal employees, with a notable spike in recent months. She said that they used to have 18,000 riders per day, but were now seeing a significant increase.

Ms. Bohmke said that she would provide more details on this topic after their next VRE meeting this month. She said that additionally, Dr. Yeung and she were both members of the Landfill Board, where they had approved the Executive Director's balanced budget. She said that they also removed the recycling bin at Gale Middle School in South Stafford due to its impact on traffic flow. She said that according to the most recent information, the facility would be located at the Howell Library site.

Mr. English – stated that he was also going to mention that the new recycling facility was located at the Howell Library. He said that he would like to briefly mention his welcome for Jim Peterson, who had returned to the Commonwealth Attorney's Office. He said that Jim Peterson had begun his career in 1994 and was a prominent prosecutor, particularly in homicide cases in Virginia.

Mr. English said that his reputation as a prosecutor in the community had led him to join the Justice Department, where he had been named Prosecutor of the Year in 2010. He said that now, he was back in Stafford, bringing 30 years of prosecution experience to the office. He said that his return was a positive addition to their team, and he would like to extend a warm welcome to Jim Peterson.

Mr. Diggs – stated that he wanted to start by acknowledging the presence of Chairwoman Siegmund from the School Board, Superintendent Dr. Smith, and School Board member Susan Randall from the George Washington District. He said that it was important for the community to understand that they were a unified team, working together to navigate this budget season. He said that he wanted to assure everyone that the relationship between the School Board and the Board of Supervisors would not be adversarial this year.

Mr. Diggs said that he also wanted to extend an apology to Superintendent Dr. Smith and School Board member Randall for any insinuation of misconduct. He said that as they worked together, he encouraged them to be mindful of their interactions with one another. He said that they may have different approaches and perspectives, but ultimately, they must respect each other. He said that Ms. Allen had emphasized this point, and he agreed. He said that he loved the collaborative spirit that defined Stafford.

Mr. Diggs said that he would also like to invite everyone to his first town hall meeting on March 27 at 6:00 p.m. at Stafford High School. He said that this forum would provide a platform for discussion on various topics, including data centers and local projects. He said that he would share his perspective on the budget and other relevant issues. He said that he encouraged everyone to attend and engage in conversation on topics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, CRT, as well as other subjects that interested them.

Mr. Diggs said that he believed in fostering open dialogue and surrounding himself with people who thought differently than he did. He said that to the constituents in his district, the business owner, and those who attended from outside the County, he was direct about his concerns regarding Woof Houze. He said that Ms. Vanuch had already collected information about that for him today, and he would be following up with them, in addition to speaking with staff.

REPORT OF THE COUNTY ATTORNEY

Rysheda McClendon, County Attorney, said that she had no report at this time.

REPORT OF THE COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

ITEM 15. PRESENTATION OF PROPOSED FY2026 BUDGET

William Ashton said that he would like to indulge the audience for a moment, as this was the first time he had a microphone since the discussion began. He said that starting on March 10, their new Parks and Recreation Director, Eugene Lowe, would be joining them. He said that Eugene Lowe brought over 20 years of experience in Parks and Recreation from Prince William County, where he served as an Assistant Director.

Mr. Ashton said that Eugene Lowe held a Bachelor of Science in Sustainability Management from George Mason University and was a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt certified professional. He said that they hoped he would bring a data-driven, efficiency-focused approach to his leadership at that department moving forward. He said that they were pleased to have him on board, and he would introduce him to the Board when he arrived.

Mr. Ashton said that he was pleased to present to the Board the proposed Fiscal Year 2026 Stafford County budget. He said that as staff prepared to present this budget, they faced numerous challenges in terms of increases in mandatory spending requirements, which forced them to make some difficult decisions. He said that to guide their approach, they focused on a series of strategic priorities that kept them focused on the long-term implications of their decisions.

Mr. Ashton said that their goal was to balance fiscal prudence with the demands of the County, while avoiding a penny-wise, pound-foolish approach that could hinder their progress in future budget years. He said that to achieve this, they sought to increase efficiency in the use of their limited resources without compromising their ability to meet their strategic goals. He said that this budget proposal was designed to meet community expectations through strategic efficiency.

Mr. Ashton said that to begin planning an organization's future, it was often helpful to examine where they stood today and the accomplishments of their recent past. He said that Stafford County had been fortunate to have achieved many successes over the past year. He said that the Board, working in conjunction with their staff, had been instrumental in achieving tremendous progress for the citizens of Stafford County, and many of these accomplishments were showcased on the crowded screen.

Mr. Ashton said that they were very proud of these accomplishments, and he would like to highlight a few notable achievements. He said that they would see that Stafford County was recognized nationally by winning three 2024 National Association of Counties (NACo) Achievement Awards. He said that two of these awards were in human services, one in civic education and public information, highlighting their commitment to providing outstanding government programs and services.

Mr. Ashton said that they had also made significant strides in education by breaking ground on a new high school and approving two new elementary schools, ensuring that their growing community had the resources it needed to meet the demands of future generations. He said that on the financial front, they had been recognized for their fiscal responsibility, having passed audits and receiving consecutive years of recognition from the Government Finance Auditors Association for budgeting and excellence in financial reporting. He said that they received this awards consecutively for 35 and 42 years, respectively.

Mr. Ashton said that last November, the County also reaffirmed their AAA bond ratings; this was a testament to the County's commitment to fiscal excellence, an aspect that had drawn him to apply for the County Administrator position and one that he was excited to continue as they moved forward. He said that understanding the community they served was crucial in crafting a governmental budget. He said that as they reviewed the profile information on the screen, Stafford County continued to maintain one of the highest median incomes in the Fredericksburg and northern Virginia regions. He said that median income had risen by $4,000 over the past year.

Mr. Ashton said that their population had also grown by 7,500 in the same period. He said that the market price of homes had risen to $530,000. He said that this year, they would be examining travel patterns, and the travel-to-work indicator was an important consideration. He said that although the 37.6-minute commute time was a decrease over previous years, they should see this number increase in the near future due to changes in the federal workforce and various road construction projects.

Mr. Ashton said that there was no doubt that Stafford County's economy was strong, boasting a very low unemployment rate. He said that however, they would continue to monitor the federal government situation and its impact on Stafford County residents. He said that to compare this with peer jurisdictions, the following were displayed, which they benchmarked their self against. He said that these included close neighbors or other Counties of similar size and scope of services.

Mr. Ashton said that among these comparable jurisdictions, Stafford County had the highest median income and the highest percentage of school-age population – 19% of Stafford residents are school-aged. He said that their County was the third most affordable community amongst these comparable jurisdictions for both real estate and personal property taxes. He said that one of the most striking changes they had observed over the past year was the shift in growth direction.

Mr. Ashton said that according to the University of Virginia Weldon Cooper Center, Stafford County had fallen from the top ten to 11th place, a significant decline from its perennial ranking in the top five over the past five years. He said that this data further displayed a major shift in the George Washington region, as Caroline and Spotsylvania Counties had entered the top ten for the first time ever.

Mr. Ashton said that when creating any budget, it was essential to identify the budget drivers that would affect their revenue and expenditure levels. He said that these drivers were predominantly mandatory, driven by factors such as debt service, contractual obligations, and elements of the national economy.

Mr. Ashton said that the primary driver of this budget was debt service, which required an additional $5 million per year to service the new school construction debt incurred last fall. He said that this increase would result in 85% of their debt service being devoted to education. He said that however, this was not the largest driver they needed to consider.

Mr. Ashton said that when crafting this budget, they had to account for the unfunded mandate of disabled veterans tax relief. He said that he would like to take a moment to discuss this, as it was intended to be educational and not to express a position for or against the program. He said that in fact, he had voted in favor of this program in 2010, as many of them had, and it was subsequently made a Virginia Constitutional Amendment.

Mr. Ashton said that they honored their veterans and those who made sacrifices that changed their lives upon returning home; they must take care of those veterans. He said that what he was about to discuss was more directed at the state's unfunded mandate than the program itself. He said that in 2011, when this unfunded mandate was ratified in the Virginia Constitution, there were only 157 disabled veterans in Stafford County. He said that by 2024, that number had risen to over 4,300.

Mr. Ashton said that in 2011, less than half a million dollars were provided in tax relief, which had increased to over $22 million in 2024. He said that to put this into perspective, the average tax bill in 2011 had $12 dedicated to this program, but now that same tax bill would have close to $400. He said that this was significant because, throughout the Commonwealth, 8.5% of the Veterans Tax Relief granted to Veterans in the Commonwealth was granted by Stafford County, yet they held only 2% of the Commonwealth's population.

Mr. Ashton said that this fiscal challenge would only worsen. He said that the Commissioner of Revenue recently informed this Board that his office was seeing 10 new applications for relief each day. He said that as a budget driver in the proposed budget before the Board, they needed to level set the years. He said that the data provided by the Commissioner, which spanned calendar years, would not match the fiscal years they used, which were July to June.

Mr. Ashton said that the proposed budget showed that Stafford County's estimated disabled veterans tax relief was projected to rise by $11 million in the upcoming fiscal year, equivalent to $0.423 cents on the real estate tax rate. He said that this problem Stafford County had been facing was also a statewide issue, manifesting here more significantly.

Mr. Ashton said that they were not alone, and through the efforts of this Board and County staff, they had successfully raised the issue to the General Assembly, and thanks to the hard work of their legislators, the state was beginning to take notice of the program. He said that several proposals had been put before the General Assembly on this matter, but unfortunately, there would be no relief in the upcoming fiscal year. He said that before he moved on, he would like to reiterate the comments he had made earlier.

Mr. Ashton said that he did not believe, and he doubted anyone in the room believed, that this program was not worthy. He said that it was a disproportionate, unfunded mandate that Stafford County taxpayers had been asked to bear. He said that the long-term success of this program would require Commonwealth intervention.

Mr. Ashton said that other notable drivers included mandatory commitments totaling approximately $2.4 million related to inflationary pressures and contractual obligations. He said that their partner commitments were also rising by approximately $2.4 million, with the majority of this increase related to the $2.2 million increase in their commitment to the Rappahannock Regional Jail.

Mr. Ashton said that they must consider what would happen if they were to do nothing and simply maintain the same level of expenditures as last year, with the same amount of revenue coming in. He said that they had previously discussed the potential for an $11.8M in tax relief and the $4.8M increase in debt service to schools. He said that they had also discussed the increase $4.8M increase for community obligations. He said that he wanted to caution that he was not proposing that they should do nothing.

Mr. Ashton said that however, if they were to keep the expenditures the same, that would result in an $0.08 increase. He said that they started with this $0.08 increase as their starting point. He said that they would not be proposing an $0.08 increase; he would be discussing it shortly. He said that with this in mind, they would examine the base budget and look for ways to increase efficiency. He said that in the coming slides, he would outline the proposed budget and highlight the areas where they had been able to find efficiencies.

Mr. Ashton said that as they began to discuss the proposed budget, it was essential for those watching this presentation to understand the financial planning process, which began with examining community needs. He said that in 2024, they conducted the community survey for the second time, and the Board incorporated the feedback into their guidance. He said that community needs and expectations were filtered through their comprehensive plan, which in turn informed their strategic plan, adopted by this body, and governed how the staff operated on a day-to-day basis.

Mr. Ashton said that they used the strategic plan to inform a five-year financial plan, which they briefed the Board on last fall. He said that the work then began on the budget based on the five-year plan, which set expectations for the Board, staff, partner agencies, and constitutional officers, about where they thought the budget would end up once they were done.

Mr. Ashton said that when considering the County's budgets, which were comprised of several distinct categories, including schools, general government, and utilities, it was essential to note that utilities were not included in the billion-dollar budgets. He said that half of the budget came from the state for schools. He said that after accounting for these factors, they were left with approximately $500,000 in tax revenue.

Mr. Ashton said that examining the pie charts on the screen, with expenditures in red on the left and revenues in blue on the right, it was crucial to point out that a significant amount of debt was being absorbed to address school investment needs, driven by strong student growth across the community. He said that the County also continued to experience strong economic revenues. He said that focusing solely on the proposed general fund budget, almost half of the County's operating budget was dedicated to schools, at 49%.

Mr. Ashton said that this left the other half to fund a wide range of programs and services provided by the government, including public safety, Sheriff, Fire, and General Government. He said that on the revenue side, property taxes remained the largest primary source of revenue, estimated to be about 70% of their overall revenue structure. He said that in broad terms, the proposal included a $0.05 real estate tax increase, not the $0.08 previously mentioned, and he would explain how they arrived at this number momentarily.

Mr. Ashton said that a $0.05 increase brought this proposal more in line with the rate identified in their five-year financial plan, which included a 4.5% tax increase projected for this year. He said that the proposal set the fire levy at the same rate as last year, despite the five-year plan calling for an increase to $0.03. He said that they had chosen not to implement the $0.03 increase, instead opting for a $0.05 increase.

Mr. Ashton said that for the average property owner, the proposed rate equated to about $229 per year, or $19 per month, of which $10 would be dedicated to the schools. He said that this budget represented a 3.8% increase over last year's budget, slightly more than the consumer price index (CPI) of 3.1%. He said that when they began crafting a budget, their first step was to establish a set of budget priorities.

Mr. Ashton said that these priorities were based on their strategic plan and included thriving communities, education, and a competitive workforce. He said that they had focused on these priorities through strategic planning and efficient resource management, with the goal of meeting community expectations while fostering a sustainable future. He said that to achieve this, they initially set out to identify $4 million in potential cuts to the current base budget, which they could reallocate or remove.

Mr. Ashton said that this was the most significant reduction they had been able to achieve in several years, more than doubling last year's efforts. He said that their goal was to decrease the base, free up resources, meet community priorities, and control taxes to the greatest extent possible, while charging residents. He said that through this effort, they were able to find $4 million in inefficiencies and reductions in the current base.

Mr. Ashton said that among the various methods they used to free up $4 million, the most significant was how they would handle vacancy savings, and he wanted to emphasize this point to the Board. He said that this budget took an aggressive approach to utilizing vacancy savings. He said that to achieve this, they would need to closely manage and monitor their vacancies before they could hire.

Mr. Ashton said that this would involve implementing measures such as targeted hiring freezes, extending onboarding processes, and utilizing other tools to maximize and leverage the savings related to personnel funding. He said that by taking this approach, they could better utilize their resources and free up capacity. He said that the budget team and he had received over 70 new position requests from various departments and constitutional officers.

Mr. Ashton said that however, he was not recommending any new positions funded by taxpayer dollars, and instead recommending a few revenue-neutral positions that would generate user fees or other revenue sources to cover their salaries. He said that these savings, combined with some new net revenue identified through rezoning efforts last year, would allow them to close the $0.08 gap and reduce the proposed increase to $0.05. He said that as their top priority, the Budget team and he had worked to improve their commitment to their thriving community by funding the Economic Development Authority's administrative support needs.

Mr. Ashton said that they had also added three revenue-neutral positions to Community Development to focus on planning, review, and inspections and the Carl Lewis proffers of $490,000 in World Series investments to support the County's sports tourism effort were all included in this proposed budget. He said that this proposal also funded $3.9 million for an upgrade to the computer-aided dispatch system for public safety, a project that should have occurred several years ago.

Mr. Ashton said that there was also $180,000 to create an emergency communications training platform. He said that this would help support their unsung heroes, the 911 operators who answered emergency phone calls. He said that they were also proposing an increase in funding for leadership training, targeted towards the County's future leaders, to ensure they had pathways to retain staff and provide succession for employees who chose to leave the workforce.

Mr. Ashton said that their focus on education was a priority, and this budget proposal included a $5 million increase in the school's transfer, a commitment to teacher pay and academic programs. He said that this $5 million was consistent with the five-year plan and the expectation set. He said that to support this increase, approximately $5 million in new debt service for the construction of new schools, an $800,000 increase in public and private day school expenditures, and $1.3 million in funding for capital 3R projects to support ongoing maintenance at their schools would be necessary.

Mr. Ashton said that this was a $12 million increase that demonstrated their commitment to educating their youth, who made up 19% of their community. He said that from a staff perspective, their next priority was to honor their commitment. He said that the budget proposal before them envisioned a 2.75% increase in public safety for the step system. He said that they felt that neglecting the step system would put the Sheriff and Fire Department at a competitive disadvantage and potentially lose these valued members of their public safety service.

Mr. Ashton said that they also sought to level set the remainder of government with a 2.75% increase. He said that these increases were designed to help employees cope with inflationary pressures and the healthcare increases he would discuss in a few moments. He said that the proposal funds the remaining 25% of the 2023 Marketplace Study and funds 50% of the 2024 Position Assessment Review, the goal of which was to ensure that positions were classified in the correct pay grade, thereby allowing them to remain competitive in employee recruitment and retention.

Mr. Ashton said that one of the most significant factors leading to the pay proposals was the $1.4 million increase in healthcare, of which a percentage would be borne by employees. He said that in crafting this budget, they analyzed and worked to ensure that no employee would be receiving less money next year than this year, with a special focus on their lower-end employees. He said that they examined the lowest-paid employees who participate in their healthcare plans and analyzed the impact of this on them, and the results were dramatic if they did not address it.

Mr. Ashton said that he would next shift attention to the proposed budget's other funds, starting with capital construction. He said that the budget proposal included $10.5 million for the Drew Middle School rebuild efforts, $3.8 million for planning the Hartwood Elementary School rebuild, $1.4 million for critical systems at Thompson Middle School, and $500,000 for the North Stafford High School Fine Arts Wing.

Mr. Ashton said that they would be funding three new apparatus using proceeds from the fire levy, with costs of $5 million, $15.9 million, and $970,000 for Aquia Station 9, Rock Hill Station 8, and Embrey Mill, respectively. He said that in total, they had approximately $80 million of projects planned for FY26. He said that the Transportation Fund had $57 million of transportation projects underway, including the ongoing construction of Berea Church Road, which was progressing well.

Mr. Ashton said that Route 1 at Telegraph and Woodstock was set to begin in the coming weeks, and Route 1 at Courthouse Road would start later this spring. He said that they also had five bond projects in engineering, with Onville Road being the closest to begin. He said that furthermore, the County was using federal funding to improve Brook Road.

Mr. Ashton said that they would also enhance turning options at the intersection of American Legion and Eskimo Hill Roads. He said that this budget proposal also included a study of high school access points, aimed at improving school safety at these critical intersections. He said that in their Utilities Fund, they were in the third year of a 6.5% rate increase plan, designed to ensure a reliable and sustainable utility system moving forward.

Mr. Ashton said that in the coming year, the projects that they would focus on included a $2 million investment in regulatory upgrades to meet PFAS mandates, as well as a $36 million Utilities Department expansion project, $3 million dedicated to neighborhood water mains, and $2.5 million dedicated to tank rehabilitation, among other priorities. He said that this information encompassed a high-level summary of the budget proposal that was before them.

Mr. Ashton said that as they moved forward from here, he aimed to establish a budget process that was both open and transparent. He said that after this presentation, the budget would be available on their OpenGov platform, which was accessible on the County's website at the URL displayed on the screen. He said that additionally, he would like to draw the public's attention to their budget calendar. He said that this presentation would be immediately followed by a series of work sessions, where Board members could ask questions and delve deeply into the numbers he had presented.

Mr. Ashton said that the public was encouraged to attend, although they would not be able to participate. He said that they could, however, attend and listen, and the sessions would be live-streamed. He said that the public was welcome to provide feedback at the public hearing, which would take place later that evening. He said that the Board would be asked to pass an action to authorize staff to advertise the public hearing, scheduled for March 25, at 6:30 p.m. in this room. He said that the budget would be the sole item on the agenda, providing an opportunity for all of them to listen to the public's perspectives on the proposal.

Mr. Ashton said that the legal advertisement for the public hearing would be published in advance, although it was often overlooked. He said that to ensure that they provided ample opportunity for public input, staff would publicize the proposed budget public hearing dates. He said that March 25 was not the only opportunity for the public to address this body on the budget proposal. He said that a second public hearing was scheduled for April 15, at which time the Board would adopt the budget.

Mr. Ashton said that however, he wanted to assure everyone that they would not adopt the budget without hearing from the public first. He said that staff had been presented with a series of difficult mandated increases that had to be incorporated into this budget proposal, including $5 million in additional debt service related to school construction and $11 million in additional tax relief, which they had to absorb. He said that between these mandatory increases and other legal, contractual, inflationary pressures, the task of controlling a proposed increase in the tax rate was highly difficult.

Mr. Ashton said that staff sought, at the very least, to control the impact that they would be asking the Board to consider. He said that they achieved this through a strategic review and targeted reductions, identifying opportunities to enhance efficiency without compromising the high-quality services the community relies on. He said that the approach they chose reflected the careful balance in fiscal responsibility that they attempted to strike in this budget proposal.

Mr. Ashton said that their strategic initiatives were moving forward by keeping school commitments while also finding a way to support staff. He said that each decision was taken strategically, ensuring that they would not take an approach that would be more costly or one that would cripple them in the years to come. He said that he would like to extend his gratitude to the budget team, led by their exceptional CFO, Andrea Light.

Mr. Ashton said that he also wanted to thank Andrew Spence, Chief Information Services Officer, for his work in ensuring that they were examining the various options through a strategic lens. He said that he would also like to recognize all department heads, constitutional officers, and other partners for their efforts in working through the difficult decisions that led to the proposal they had delivered. He said that he would like to express his appreciation to Dr. Smith, Stafford County School Superintendent, whose openness and candor had been invaluable since his arrival.

Mr. Ashton said that he also wanted to thank Deputy County Administrator Donna Krauss, who had been indispensable in these conversations, providing needed counsel during the process. He said that he would like to thank the Board for their indulgence this evening. He said that he looked forward to their discussions in the coming weeks, ensuring that they put together an adopted budget that met the will of the Board, balancing the many needs of the community with the limited resources they were provided.

PRESENTATIONS AND REPORTS BY AGENCIES

ITEM 16. R25-62; PLANNING AND ZONING; CONSIDER AUTHORIZING THE COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR TO EXECUTE A NEW MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING WITH NORTHERN VIRGINIA CONSERVATION TRUST REGARDING A LAND CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP; PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-62

Kathy Baker, Assistant Director of Planning and Zoning, said that she was accompanied tonight by three representatives from the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust (NVCT), including Matt Gerhart, Conservation Director, Laura Hassell, Land Conservation Specialist, and Alan Rowsome, Executive Director. She said that they would be available to answer any questions the Board may have.

Ms. Baker said that as the Board was aware, the County had a partnership agreement with Northern Virginia Conservation Trust, which was signed in late August 2022. She said that Laura Hassell joined NVCT in April 2023 as a dedicated position to Stafford County. She said that they had worked together to develop a work plan to guide their land conservation efforts and set future goals. She said that at this time, they were seeking the Board's consideration of renewing this partnership agreement, which expired in June of this year.

Ms. Baker said that as a reminder, they had previously presented an overview of their efforts to date in October, and most of that information was included in the background package the Board had received. She said that the Board had requested that they bring a revised version of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) back to the Board during the budget process, as they were seeking an increase in funding.

Ms. Baker said that to provide some additional context, NVCT and County staff had been working with landowners, individuals, and agencies to help achieve the goals outlined in the current MOU. She said that over the past couple of years, they had made significant progress, including the acquisition of new conserved lands, the establishment of easements, and an increase in outreach efforts, which had led to increased interest from landowners and other agencies and new opportunities.

Ms. Baker said that provided was an overview of the County's conserved lands to date, which totaled over 12,000 acres, acquired through the County's Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program, land trusts, and state agency acquisitions, including their state parks and natural area preserves. She said that among the protected lands in Northern Virginia, the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust had approximately 1,500 acres under protection, either through ownership or conservation easements. She said that they had also assisted in the acquisition of other lands by acting as an intermediary between partners, acquiring lands, and donating or conveying them to other agencies.

Ms. Baker said that at this time, they were seeking the Board's consideration of authorizing a four-year extension or renewal of this MOU prior to its expiration date. She said that currently, the County contributes $58,400 annually, which includes annual increases based on the CPI. She said that these funds support the salary of the full-time position hired by NVCT, as well as land or easement acquisition costs, property stewardship, and other incidental expenses such as property appraisals, environmental assessments, and attorney or title costs.

Ms. Baker said that the request for County funds for the new MOU totals $90,000, representing an estimated $31,600 annual increase. She said that this additional funding would enable a higher level of investment towards the end of the year, allowing them to continue the partnership. She said that the funding is included within the PDR land conservation budget item, which is funded through their land use rollback tax program.

Ms. Baker said that Proposed Resolution R25-62 would renew this MOU, effective July 1, 2025 and running through June 2029. She said that the MOU's structure relies on the Board applying these funds annually, but it was designed for a full four-year term. She said that this proposal aligned with the Board's strategic plan and the County's comprehensive plan regarding the conservation of open space and mitigation of development impacts.

Ms. Bohmke said that she was familiar with the NVCT’s work. She said that they were currently at $58,400. She asked if the Board approved, would they be increasing by $31,600, resulting in a total of $90,000, with the CPI indexes?

Ms. Baker said that was correct.

Ms. Bohmke said that was a significant increase. She said that given that they had just received their budget from the County Administrator, she was having a bit of difficulty catching her breath and wondering if it might be prudent for the Board to consider waiting until they had had a chance to review the budget more thoroughly. She asked if the increase was negotiable.

Ms. Baker said yes. She said that they wanted to present this to the Board alongside the overall County budget. She said that this was something they would be taking into consideration, and it was based on the overages that NVCT had contributed over the last two years, above and beyond their portion of the partnership agreement.

Ms. Bohmke said that she believed it would be prudent for them to take a brief pause until they had more information on the budget, and perhaps delved deeper into this matter as well, considering it was not the most opportune time at the moment. She said that that was just her opinion.

Ms. Gary asked if Ms. Baker could elaborate on her reference to NVCT going “over and above” their contributions.

Matt Gerhart said that he would like to acknowledge the NVCT’s expenditure last year was approximately $208,000 in the County. He said that he believed this was a sustainable demonstration of their efforts, as they had significantly ramped up their activities due to Ms. Hassell’s hard work. He said that the $58,000 was included in the overall $208,000.

Ms. Gary said that in her opinion, this was a good investment. She asked if staff could provide further detail about the requested increase and how the funds would be utilized.

Ms. Baker said that many of the opportunities that NVCT had this year involved individuals reaching out to them, saying they had a property in question that they would like to preserve, but also had another party offering them $500,000 for it. She said that in these situations, NVCT would take the opportunity to either provide upfront funding and then pursue matching funds through other sources they have available. She said that NVCT also had the ability to conduct fundraising efforts to raise the necessary funds.

Ms. Baker said that as a result, a significant portion of the money they were expending was going towards the costs associated with due diligence, including appraisals that could range from $5,000 to $20,000, and environmental assessments. She said that typically, these costs were incurred regardless of whether the property was acquired through a donated easement or a purchase. She said that therefore, NVCT was investing these funds in addition to the actual land or easement acquisition costs, which may also be incurred when a donated easement was received.

Ms. Gary asked if they knew what typical developments would be pursued on these lands if they were not preserved by NVCT.

Ms. Baker said that generally, in their agricultural and rural areas, the proposed developments were residential. She said that however, other types of applications were popping up in various areas. She said that it depended on the location.

Ms. Gary said that often, their community was concerned about urban sprawl, and she believed that mitigating it through partnerships with landowners who valued conservation was beneficial for their community. She said that by working together, they could conserve land and, in turn, benefit financially by avoiding uncontrolled housing development, which would ultimately benefit their community.

Mr. English said that he agreed with Ms. Bohmke; he thought that they needed to take a step back and examine this program, but it was an excellent initiative. He said that in the long run, it had saved them a significant amount of housing space, as they were able to preserve the acreage in the vault. He said that while he was not ready to shut the door on this program, he believed that they needed to revisit their budget to ensure it was feasible. He asked if the increases were negotiable.

Ms. baker said that this was what they had developed together to figure out how to sustain what they had been doing over the last two years and even ramp that up a little bit to potentially offset some of these new developments that may be coming in. She said that it was indeed a joint recommendation that they were working together on with NVCT.

Dr. Yeung said that she appreciated the idea of conserving land. She said that she had a couple of questions regarding it. She said that the salary increase was listed as $31,000, which brought the total salary to $90,000. She said that she wondered if this position had always been a full-time position.

Ms. Baker said that to clarify, the full $90,000 would also cover the acquisition of lands and all the associated due diligence costs, in addition to the salary.

Dr. Yeung asked how much the salaried position was paid.

Ms. Baker said that she would not delve into the specific amount, but it was for a full time equivalent (FTE) position.

Dr. Yeung said that she intended to support the proposal, but she said that she would like to know the estimated cost involved. She said that she was also willing to defer her decision, pending further information.

Alan Rowsome, Executive Director of Northern Virginia Conservation Trust, said that the current position was staffed at $75,000, so the proposal would help increase that number by a significant amount, he believed was warranted, but not unreasonable. He said that it would not be a $90,000 position right away; that would be years down the road. He said that he thought the remaining funding was crucial for their overall costs, which were rising substantially.

Dr. Yeung asked if any of their staff lived locally.

Mr. Rowsome said that they all commuted here, with Ms. Hassell being here regularly.

Dr. Yeung asked if there was a redlined version of the MOU.

Ms. Baker said that she did not believe it was included in the packet, but she could provide it to the Board.

Dr. Yeung said that she was wondering if the duties for the position were new or previously existing. She asked if the increase would include additional responsibilities.

Ms. Baker said that most of the responsibilities remained the same. She said that they would continue to perform the tasks that Ms. Hassell had been handling over the past two years. She said that she herself would be retiring soon, and in order to bridge the gap in land conservation between the County and their organization, Ms. Hassell would take on some of those duties in the interim until they had identified and appointed a replacement for that program from the County.

Ms. Vanuch said that to clarify, in the MOU, the document stated that the total cost of the increased support was $90,000, with a subsequent increase to $31,600 starting in Fiscal Year 26. She said that this would result in an annual cost of approximately $30,000 for three years.

Ms. Baker said that the initial cost was $30,000, and then it would be subject to an annual increase based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI). She said that as a result, the total cost from FY26 would be $90,000. She said that in FY27, with the expected CPI increase, the total would likely be around $91,000.

Ms. Vanuch said that she was confused about the increase being stated as $31,000, but right before that it said it was $90,000.

Ms. Baker said that the total request is increasing from $58,000 to $90,000, resulting in a $31,000 increase, effective this fiscal year.

Ms. Vanuch said that that answered her first question. She asked if the increase was $31,000, and inclusive of the CPI each year.

Ms. Baker said that a typical CPI increase was around 3%. She said that applying this increase to the $31,000 base, the total would then be approximately $91,000.

Ms. Vanuch said that she believed it would be extremely helpful, particularly as they navigated the budget process, to have a detailed breakdown of the requested funding for Fiscal Years 2026 through 2029, as well as an explanation of where the allocated funds were being directed. She said that Dr. Yeung's point about the specific allocations, such as $5,000 for salary increases or $10,000 for attorney's fees, was a valid concern. She said that she agreed with Dr. Yeung regarding the redlined version. She said that she would also like to clarify whether this position was subject to County pay raises or if it was solely based on the MOU.

Ms. Baker said that it was dependent on the MOU; they were an employee of NVCT.

Ms. Bohmke said that for rollback taxes, she would like to know if there were specific limitations on what rollback taxes could be used for.

Ms. Light said that their financial policies restricted funding to conservation practices and land conservation.

Ms. Baker said that they were not specifically requesting action today. She said that this was an opportunity to provide the Board with all the necessary information. She said that the current

Memorandum of Understanding was set to expire on June 30, so she wanted to bring it to the Board's attention in advance, allowing them to discuss it.

Mr. Diggs said that he agreed they needed to consider this program as they reviewed the budget, but he also saw the importance of the program and supported it. He said that the program had done a significant amount of positive work for the County, and as they reviewed the budget, they would take it into account.

ACTION ITEMS

ITEM 17. R25-26; BUDGET AND MANAGEMENT; AUTHORIZE ADVERTISEMENT FOR THE PUBLIC HEARING TO CONSIDER THE FY2026 COUNTY BUDGET; PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-26

Andrea Light, Chief Financial Officer, said that today, staff requested the Board to consider the advertisement for the Fiscal Year 2026 budget. She said that Proposed Resolution R25-26 requests the Board to consider the advertisement of the Fiscal Year 2026 budget. She said that the documents Mr. Dunn was handing out to the Supervisors now were draft resolutions of proposed resolution R25-27, which was the budget resolution, and R25-28, which would be the appropriation resolution.

Ms. Light said that the public hearing advertisement was typically based on the County Administrator's budget, which was a standard practice in Virginia. She said that this advertisement provided the Board with an opportunity to hear from constituents on the proposed budget. She said that Mr. Ashton had also provided this document, but they were here today, March 4, to request authorization for the budget public hearing, which would be held on March 25. She said that she was happy to answer any questions the Board may have.

Ms. Vanuch asked if R25-26 was an action item.

Ms. McClendon said she would like to provide some clarity regarding R25-26. She said that this resolution would authorize the public hearing, which was the same resolution that was included in the Board packet. She said that R25-27 would then approve the budget, and it was the one that will be sent to the public hearing. She said that R25-28 would be the appropriation resolution, where the actual funds for spending would be allocated, and it was not typically included in the public hearing process. She said that therefore, the action item before the Board now was R25-26, which would send R25-27 to the public hearing.

Ms. Vanuch said that regarding R2526, she had already spoken to the Chair and the County Administrator about this, and she was sure they were aware that she was very concerned about holding a public hearing on a work session day. She said that they had consistently told constituents that they had public comment periods on the first and third Tuesday of every month, and even with their new Board meeting schedule, it was still a day when they typically did not receive public comment.

Ms. Vanuch said that she had vetted this with staff to ensure there were no timing issues, and there were not. She said that she would strongly encourage the Board to advertise the public hearing for April 1, so they could hold the public hearing on a regular Board meeting day. She said that typically, they held public hearings at 6:30 p.m. on a regular agenda, and that was the only item on the agenda. She said that she knew it had been mentioned during the budget presentation that this would be the only thing discussed during the work session, but she had big concerns that it was on a work session day.

Ms. Vanuch said she had no issues attending a work session or opening up a work session to include public comment, but she did not think it should be the date for the big public hearing. She said that she also reviewed the calendar, and they had met on the first Tuesday three times recently, including this Tuesday, and they had a work session next Tuesday, followed by a meeting with the schools the day after that. She said that they had another Board meeting scheduled for March 18, where they would vote to advertise the tax rate, followed by a public hearing, and then they had a meeting on April 1, and then April 15.

Ms. Vanuch said that this was a significant amount of time to ask their constituents to be engaged and attend multiple meetings in a row. She said that the Board was having a meeting every Tuesday. She said that she thought by having a work session themselves, where the Board could discuss and make decisions, and allowing a certain period for public comment during that session, that would be a good opportunity. She said that however, she believed the public hearing for the budget should be held on April 1.

Ms. Vanuch motioned, seconded by Mr. English, to amend the public hearing date for R25-26 from March 25 to April 1.

Ms. Bohmke said that she would like to ask Ms. Light a question regarding the proposed April 1 meeting. She said that shifting dates could be confusing for the public, and she believed that everyone in the room shared this sentiment. She said that if they moved the deadline to April 1, they would still have sufficient time to advertise the tax rate, set the tax rate, and distribute the tax bills. She said that therefore, they were not facing a significant deadline, and they did have enough time to complete the necessary tasks.

Ms. Light said that yes, if the Board decided that April 1 was a more suitable date, they could still meet all of their requirements for advertisement and still meet the date of adoption of April 15, thereby ensuring that the tax bill was issued on time in May.

Ms. Bohmke said that this was her primary concern. She said that she did not believe they were facing a sudden deadline, as they had a buffer in place. She said that this also provided their constituents with an opportunity to thoroughly review the schools' budget, which was being presented across the street, and Mr. Ashton's budget, until April 1. She said that with spring break approaching, she believed this approach gave the community a bit more flexibility.

Ms. Bohmke said that it was essential that they avoid any perception that they were trying to hide something, even if it was simply a matter of their new calendar. She said that she would prefer that people focus their energy and comments on the budget and what mattered most to them, rather than debating a date.

Dr. Yeung said that although she did not vote in favor of the new meeting format, she acknowledged that it was the will of the Board. She said that one of her concerns was ensuring they remained fresh and attentive on these matters. She said that they had been meeting three times a month for the past few months, and she believed they needed to reassess the timeline, which they would now vote on, because she believed they needed sufficient time to think through the implications, discuss the issues, and work together as a team.

Dr. Yeung said that she valued the opportunity to meet with each of them individually, in their offices, to gather more information and hear their constituents' concerns firsthand. She said that when they met in person, they could better understand the community's needs and address the concerns that were not adequately represented through emails. She said that it was important to bring this into perspective and ensure they had enough time to make informed decisions. She said that cutting out one day may not be sufficient, but she was committed to the duration of this format.

Ms. Allen said that it was ironic that when they made the proposed changes to their schedule, the same arguments were used that the public could not adjust. She said that she had seen that the public had adjusted quite well so far. She said that one of the other arguments made was that they were not being transparent and needed to do a deep dive.

Ms. Allen said that she did not see how meeting an extra Tuesday would change the process. She said that in fact, during the County Administrator's budget presentation, she believed they still had ample opportunities for two-on-twos and one-on-ones with the public, and that had not changed. She said that having an extra day to thoroughly review the budget was, in her opinion, exactly what the public had asked them to do for the past few weeks.

Ms. Allen said that the public had repeatedly emphasized the importance of the Board doing their due diligence and taking a deep dive into the budget. She said that she did not think it was a big ask to have an extra day to ensure they were doing their due diligence. She said that the public had shown that they cared, and they would continue to express their opinions, whether in person or through written comments. She said that however, having an extra day would not change the outcome for her, and moving it to April 1 would not change it either. She said that she was not in favor of moving it to April 1; they would be fine on March 25.

Ms. Bohmke said that to ensure they were all on the same page, she would like to clarify a few points. She said that she would prefer to hold a work session on March 25, then have the public hearing on April 1. She said that by doing so, they could conduct their internal work, review the budget, and refine their plans before presenting them to the public. She said that this approach would allow them to provide a more comprehensive and informed discussion with the public, as many of the key decisions and two-on-two meetings would have already been made.

Ms. Bohmke said that this would enable them to present a more polished and well-prepared proposal to the public on April 1. She said that she wanted to bring this to their attention to ensure clarity and to find the best approach for all parties involved.

Mr. Diggs said that he did not support the motion. He said that there were a couple of concerns he would like to address. He said that firstly, they were discussing constituents attending multiple meetings, which could be exhausting. He said that adding another meeting to the schedule would only exacerbate this. He said that he believed staff had done their due diligence in creating the schedule, and while it was different from their past practices, they had voted on it, and he thought they should stick with it.

Mr. Diggs said however, he had noticed last year during the budget cycle that meetings were often lacking in intensity, with a sense of camaraderie that only developed towards the end of the process. He said that it was almost a laissez-faire approach throughout. He said that he still supported sticking with the March 25 date.

Ms. Gary said that she wanted to express her support for maintaining the current approach. She said that she also appreciated Mr. Diggs' comments. She said that she was confident that they would be able to successfully work through the budget process with the public. She said that as she had been in touch with her constituents and had conducted surveys, she felt well-informed about their needs and expectations. She said that given that many of them had been involved in this process for some time, she believed they had the necessary experience and knowledge to manage it effectively. She said that she was comfortable with sticking with the current schedule.

Mr. Diggs said that he agreed with staff as well; he had spoken with them and knew that they had mapped out the plan for the year. He said that all of the details were accounted for. He said that he believed it was also about supporting what they already had in place. He said that that was where he stood on the matter.

Ms. Vanuch asked if Mr. Diggs was requesting another meeting on April 1.

Mr. Diggs said that if he understood correctly, Ms. Vanuch had stated that they were expecting a large number of constituents to attend consecutive meetings. He said that regardless, they would still be present if they held a work session on March 28, and they would also be present in April.

Ms. Vanuch said that those were the opportunities for public hearing, where they could come and speak to the Board. She said that it was occurring during their regular meetings, which were on the first and third Tuesday of every month, April 1 and April 15.

Ms. Vanuch said that those were the ones that had been marked on calendars as the dates when constituents could provide public comment. She said that in the past, it was not even on the County calendars that they were going to have a budget public hearing, nor the time. She said that when she first reached out, County Administration did not know whether it would be at 5:00 p.m. or 6:30 p.m.

Ms. Vanuch said that subsequently, it had been placed on their calendars at 6:30 p.m. She said that as a member of the Board of Supervisors, she had only learned of this a week ago. She said that she thought this was part of the transparency issue. She said that they were introducing a new schedule and scheduling this public hearing on a date that they did not usually perceive as a public comment day.

Ms. Vanuch said that it appeared that they were trying to have it on a date where they did not want the public's input or comment because it was not a regular Board business day. She said that throughout her time on this Board, she had never seen them set up a special meeting to discuss the budget. She said that they had always held it on a regular Board day, with dedicated public comment time.

Ms. Vanuch said that their institutional approach had been to hold the budget public hearing on a day when they had a regular Board meeting, with a set time for public comment. She said that this was the first time they were going through the budget without a 3:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. public comment period. She said that this was why she suggested that they consider having a work session and earmarking 45 minutes for public comment after the work session, so they could hear their thought process. She said that then, they could have the full budget public hearing on April 1.

Mr. Diggs said that he understood her point, but he believed the public's perception of the Board's past actions was not relevant to their current situation, given the significant changes they had made to their schedule. He said that what he had observed in his community engagement efforts was that people were primarily concerned with the tax rate.

Mr. Diggs said that as long as they continued to effectively communicate through various social media channels and engage with their constituents, he believed the public would understand their intentions. He said that for example, if a citizen expressed concerns about transparency, he would take the time to explain their current process and demonstrate their commitment to openness. He said that he thought each of them had a responsibility to address these concerns and dispel misconceptions.

Mr. Diggs said that given the changes they were implementing, it was only natural that things would evolve. He said that he believe they should rely on tradition in light of those changes, because it would make it more difficult for staff to move forward with the agreed-upon processes they were trying to implement.

Ms. Vanuch said that she would like to revisit their initial discussion when they changed the meeting structure. She said that at the time, they only stated that the additional day of C-Day would be a work session, without indicating that it would also be a day for public hearings. She said that they never explicitly mentioned that public comment would not be allowed on those days, and in fact, they made it clear that those days would be reserved for in-depth discussions, as Ms. Bohmke often referred to it. She said that however, now they were deviating from that approach and had not formally agreed to this specific change.

Ms. Vanuch said that she later called Ms. Bohmke and expressed her surprise at the public hearing being scheduled on a work session day. She said that given the County's history of not using work session days for public comment, especially since they had emphasized that those days are not for public comment. She said that with only three weeks left before the scheduled date, she was concerned that they were trying to turn a message around that may be difficult to convey to the community.

Ms. Vanuch said that there was no state law or other external factor that requires them to hold the public hearing on March 25. She said that if they were facing a deadline, she would be more understanding. She said that there were no valid reasons to not hold the public hearing on April 1.

Ms. Vanuch said that April 1 was their normal Board day, so they can accommodate public comment at various times for the budget public hearing, allowing for greater transparency and providing an opportunity for the community to share their thoughts. She said that she vehemently disagreed with this approach and believed it minimized public participation. She said that she valued collaboration, but she was not comfortable with holding this on a work session day.

Mr. Diggs called the vote on the motion to change the advertised public hearing date for R25-26 to April 1.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (3) Bohmke, English, Vanuch
No: (4) Allen, Diggs, Gary, Yeung

Ms. Allen motioned, seconded by Ms. Gary, to approve R25-26.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (4) Allen, Diggs, Gary, Yeung
No: (3) Bohmke, English, Vanuch

Ms. Vanuch said that as they approached budget season, as they talked about trying to work together, this was the first step in dividing the Board.

ITEM 18. R25-47; COUNTY ATTORNEY, CONSIDER ADOPTING AMENDED BY-LAWS TO PROVIDE INVESTIGATORY PROCESS FOR THE REMOVAL OF BACC APPOINTEES OF THE BOARD; PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-47

Rysheda McClendon, County Attorney, said that the Board considered a first read of the proposed bylaws amendment at their last meeting on February 18 and requested additional guidance to provide further delineation of the removal process. She said that specifically, the Board asked that the bylaws be amended to require a minimum of 24 hours' notice to the BACC member being considered for removal.

Ms. McClendon said that the Board also requested that the bylaws be updated to allow the member to present evidence and documentation during the closed session. She said that furthermore, the Board asked that written notice be provided to the BACC appointee regarding the outcome of the investigation. She said that in the Board package and at the dais, the Supervisors would find a flow chart outlining the process the Board would follow if it were to consider removing a BACC member. She said that if the Board was ready to move forward with the proposed revisions, R25-47 could be adopted.

Dr. Yeung said that the affected constituent spoke before the Board today and requested to have the five business days of notice, which she had previously mentioned as well. She said that it did not seem like the Board was supportive of that request. She said that the constituent also requested they consider allowing the appointee to bring a witness with them to the closed session. She said that if this ever happened again, she hoped the Board would allowing those requests.

Dr. Yeung motioned, seconded by Ms. Allen, to approve R25-47.

Mr. Diggs said that this was establishing a minimum of 24 hours' notice, but there could be more time provided.

Ms. Vanuch said that there was no maximum limit. She said that they could even give a 30-day timeframe; it was mostly just to prevent the Board from requesting the appointee to immediately attend a closed session.

Ms. Gary said that she was generally supportive of the motion, but she felt like she must abstain. She said that she would not vote against it, but she felt compelled to abstain because it feels like lip service to her. She said that while she believed this was a good thing to implement, she thought what had stemmed from it was not being resolved through this legislation. She said that what had happened was not a policy issue, but rather a law that their Board had violated, which was an integrity issue. She said she would abstain from this vote, but she would like to thank Dr. Yeung for her work on this issue.

Dr. Yeung said that she did not want this to end like this. She said that the Board would not be here today if it had not happened to someone on the Library Board. She said that if Ms. Gary wanted to abstain, she could, but they were trying to create a beautiful process out of something that was ugly.

Ms. Gary said that it was not beautiful to violate the law and then blame on Supervisor in order to shirk one's own responsibility.

Mr. Diggs called the vote on R25-47.

The Voting Board tally was:

Yea: (6) Allen, Bohmke, Diggs, English, Vanuch, Yeung
No: (0)
Abstain: (1) Gary

ITEM 19. R25-54; R25-55; R25-56; R25-57; R25-59; COUNTY ADMINISTRATION; AUTHORIZE THE COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR TO RANK AND SUBMIT CONGRESSIONALLY-DIRECTED SPENDING APPLICATIONS TO THE UNITED STATES SENATORS AND CONGRESSIONAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR STAFFORD COUNTY FOR THE REFERENCED PROJECTS FOR FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2026; PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-54; PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-55; PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-56; PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-57; PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-59

Anthony Toigo, Intergovernmental Affairs Manager, said that Congress would accept congressionally-directed spending, as defined by the Senate, and community project funding, as defined by the House. He said that he would refer to it as CDS. He said that projects would be submitted or accepted by Congress imminently. He said that some members were already accepting projects and opening their portals.

Mr. Toigo said that their staff began the process in December to review and determine which projects could be brought to them for support, taking into consideration what could realistically be supported by Congress and included in the federal budget. He said that the five resolutions presented tonight were all projects that were within their approved Capital Improvement Plan for the most recent year.

Mr. Toigo said that two of them were resubmissions from last year's round, one of which had been partially funded, and the other had been submitted in response to a member's request but not included in the federal budget. He said that the others were projects from the secondary six-year plan (SSYP). He said that he would be brief, open the floor for questions, and he had run this through Merchant McIntyre, their consultants, who believed all had a good chance. He said that he was working to arrange a meeting with Merchant McIntyre in the next month to discuss the federal process with them.

Ms. Vanuch said that to clarify, they were not taking away any previously allocated funding for the Shelton Shop project.

Mr. Toigo said that was correct. He said that all these projects had an 80-20 match ratio, meaning that whatever was already allocated to the project would be used as match funds.

Ms. Vanuch said that she was concerned that if they did not secure the congressionally directed spending, it would be a much more challenging task this year. She said that as a result, they may then be facing a shortage on one of their projects.

Matthew Lehane, Transportation Planning and Funding Manager, said that was correct. He said that the goal of this project was to replace any existing funds if they secured the necessary funding. He said that if they did not secure funding, the project would remain as is. He said that from a technical standpoint, the cost of this project was approximately $1,000,000 to $1,500,000 more than what was currently shown in their budget. He said that VDOT was working to reduce this cost, which could also help fund any additional overruns they had on the project.

Ms. Bohmke said that she had a question regarding the I-95 to US-1 water main. She asked if there was a connection between the I-95 to US-1 water main project and the STC data center project.

Mr. Toigo said no; it was capacity for a new water line identified by Utilities as part of their Capital Improvement Plan, which was several years out. He said that this addition would provide capacity to the north end of the County and also support the Quantico facility. He said that the Board had authorized the application for this project last year, and Quantico had provided a letter of support, as well.

Ms. Allen motioned, seconded by Ms. Vanuch, to approve Proposed Resolution R25-24.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (7) Allen, Bohmke, Diggs, English, Gary, Vanuch, Yeung
No: (0)

Ms. Allen motioned, seconded by Mr. English, to approve R25-55.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (7) Allen, Bohmke, Diggs, English, Gary, Vanuch, Yeung
No: (0)

Ms. Allen motioned, seconded by Ms. Bohmke, to approve R25-56.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (7) Allen, Bohmke, Diggs, English, Gary, Vanuch, Yeung
No: (0)

Ms. Allen motioned, seconded by Ms. Vanuch, to approve R25-57.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (7) Allen, Bohmke, Diggs, English, Gary, Vanuch, Yeung
No: (0)

Ms. Allen motioned, seconded by Ms. Bohmke, to approve R25-59.

The Voting Board tally was:
Yea: (7) Allen, Bohmke, Diggs, English, Gary, Vanuch, Yeung
No: (0)

ITEM 20. R25-60; CAPITAL PROJECTS TRANSPORTATION; CONSIDER AUTHORIZING THE COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR TO EXECUTE A CONTRACT WITH SAGRES CONSTRUCTION CORPORATION FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE US 1 COURTHOUSE ROAD (ROUTE 630) PROJECT AND BUDGETING AND APPROPRIATING ADDITIONAL FUNDING FOR THE PROJECT; PROPOSED RESOLUTION R25-60

Bryon Counsell, Chief Director of Infrastructure, said that he would like to provide a brief historical context and background on this project before the Board considered awarding the contract to the most responsible bidder and appropriating additional funds. He said that this project began in the early 2010s and was initially intended to improve the stretch of Route 1 between the courthouse, hospital, and Hope Road.

Mr. Counsell said that however, it faced numerous design challenges, funding issues, cost increases, and was also impacted by the larger Fredericksburg Express extension project and Courthouse Road widening. He said that to avoid competing efforts, this project was delayed until recently. He said that despite some additional design challenges, the project was now complete and had been approved by VDOT. He said that staff had worked diligently to ensure compliance with all applicable regulations and requirements.

Mr. Counsell said that with this in mind, staff recommended placing the contract on an action item to allow for public input and explanation of the project details and to bring the Board up to speed on the current status. He said that with that, he would proceed with a brief presentation outlining the improvements to be made at the Hope Road and Courthouse Road intersections. He said that Sagres was the recommended contractor, having demonstrated a strong track record of responsible and responsive work in the County and other localities.

Mr. Counsell said that staff recommended approving the contract, as they believe the contractor will deliver a satisfactory outcome. He said that there was a budget deficit of approximately $2.5 million, but they had sufficient funds in the balance to cover this. He said that Mr. Lehane was available to address any questions regarding the impact of this deficit. He said that as previously mentioned, the project will be located on Route 1, primarily between the hospital and Hope Road.

Mr. Counsell said that this project would be extremely challenging due to the high volume of daily traffic through the area. He said that additionally, the numerous cut-throughs on Old Courthouse Road and Courthouse Road, as well as the phased construction, will add to the complexity. He said that the project would involve extensive nighttime work, which may result in lane shifts during the day, causing further disruptions. He said that they anticipate discovering unexpected items under the road that they were currently unable to identify; they would only know about them once they were dug up.

Mr. Counsell said that to prepare everyone, he wanted to emphasize that this project would be difficult and pose significant challenges to the traveling public, including those who worked in this building. He said that they were committed to working closely with their community engagement team and the public to provide as much information as possible and minimize disruptions.

Ms. Bohmke asked why the bids increased. She said that $2.3 million was a lot of money.

Mr. Counsell said that the contractor they were recommending for award was the sole bidder for this project.

Ms. Bohmke asked why they were the sole bidder.

Mr. Counsell said that determining the outcome was challenging, but Spotsylvania and Prince William Counties had larger projects on the horizon. He said that they had submitted their bid during the peak bidding season; typically, the winter was when contractors aimed to secure all their work for the upcoming year. He said that they had met all of their bid timing goals and received only one bid.

Mr. Counsell said that unfortunately, the cost exceeded their budget, but their cost estimating could sometimes be inaccurate. He said that rather than risking a potentially higher response rate or even no bids, they had evaluated the project closely and consulted with the County Administrator, VDOT, and other officials, who agreed that they should proceed with the project.

Ms. Gary said that she appreciated everyone's work on this project. She said that it had been a long time coming, with many complex negotiations regarding property and other issues, so she was very thankful to staff for getting them to this point.

Mr. English said that Bells Hill Road would be a challenge, because it would certainly would be used as a cut-through during this work. He said that this road would likely need to be repaved and he would like to know if that had been considered.

Mr. Counsell said that yes, VDOT had the obligation to maintain two lanes open at all times during the day. He said that they could temporarily close lanes during off-peak hours for permanent traffic, but during the day, they must keep two lanes open. He said that as long as two lanes remained open, especially during peak hours when people were traveling home or to work, this should not be a significant issue, theoretically.

Mr. Counsell said that people may slow down, so the backups may become more congested in the afternoons when traveling south, but they would always have four lanes available at peak travel times. He said that this why they were performing the work at night.

Mr. English said that they should not begin this project until after the Falmouth Bridge had been repaired. He asked if it would be opened again before this project began.

Mr. Counsell said that VDOT had communicated that it would be completed in the next month or so.

Dr. Yeung said that this project had begun in 2013. She said that she had tried to find why Paul Milde had opposed it, but could not find out why. She asked what section of road this project would be fixing.

Mr. Counsell said that the project limits included some modifications on the hospital property, extending to where the wayside ends and Route 1 splits.

Dr. Yeung asked if the left turns were down where the School Board building was located.

Mr. Counsell said that the project that extended up to Hope Road for approximately 200 feet, as well as up to Bells Hill Road for 200 feet, and similarly on Courthouse Road, extending on both sides of the road.

Ms. Gary motioned, seconded by Ms. Allen, to approve R25-60.

Ms. Allen said that she had forgotten to ask about something during their work session last week. She asked how schools planned to mitigate the impacts of the project, considering that Brooke Point and Stafford Middle School, as well as Colonial Forge, would be experiencing the effects. She said that she wanted to bring this to the attention of parents, as most of the work would be taking place at night, but the high schools would be affected in the morning, with buses arriving early to accommodate the early start times for their high school students.

Mr. Counsell said that he worked closely with local schools, learning their bus schedules for all schools in the area. He said that this collaboration was one of the reasons they were required by VDOT to implement this project. He said that as the governing agency, they mandated night work for this project.

Mr. Counsell said that as a result, during the day, they would only have lane closures, with periodic one-lane closures that allowed for specific types of work to be performed. He said that however, during peak travel times, which included when school buses were arriving and departing, they were required to maintain four lanes. He said that the existing lanes open to traffic would need to be maintained at this level of capacity during peak travel periods.

Ms. Allen said that as daylight saving time began this weekend, people would have increased travel, summer plans, and extended evening hours. She said that with the upcoming equinox, the evening hours would be significantly longer, approaching 9:00 p.m. She said that she was unclear about the specific designated evening hours that would be in effect.

Mr. Counsell said that he believed it was scheduled to begin at 7:00 p.m. until 4:30 a.m., and then they would start breaking it down and opening the road up again by 5:30 p.m.

Ms. Allen said that she thought it would be helpful if they could continue to work with the schools to ensure that people were aware of the schedules. She said that she believed it would be beneficial if Mr. Spence and his team could push the communications out to the public, especially during the summer months. She said that there would be a significant number of people using that road to access Aquia Beach.

Ms. Allen said that she believed it was essential to make sure that people were aware of the limitations in place, especially when coming from the I-95 express lanes on Courthouse Road. She said that summertime would likely be the most challenging time for commuters, so she wanted to ensure that their communication effectively informed the public about these limitations.

Mr. Diggs called the vote on approval of Proposed Resolution R25-60.

Mr. Diggs said that before they closed out their meeting, he would like to address the public. He said that the Supervisors were passionate about their work and felt strongly about the issues, but ultimately, they were a team. He said that at the end of the day, they were committed to helping each other succeed. He said that he wished everyone safe travels and to call him tomorrow.

The Voting Board tally was:

Yea: (7) Allen, Bohmke, Diggs, English, Gary, Vanuch, Yeung
No: (0)

<u>ADJOURNMENT</u>

The Board adjourned its meeting at 8:42 p.m.

William H Ashton, II
County Administrator