

ARTICLES OF INTEREST

GLOUCESTER-MATHEWS GAZETTE-JOURNAL

County opts against issuing bounties for coyotes

by Quinton Sheppard - Posted on Feb 16, 2011 - 01:58 PM

Gloucester County will not be issuing bounties to hunters who kill or trap coyotes. The decision followed an update and discussion among animal control staff and the Gloucester County Board of Supervisors Tuesday night in the colonial courthouse about the growing concern of coyotes harming livestock in areas of the county.

Steve Baranek, senior deputy control officer, also reported to supervisors that there had been another attack at Gordon Llewellyn's farm in Glens Saturday during the day, resulting in the loss of one calf.

The matter came to the attention of the board at its Feb. 1 meeting. At that time, Llewellyn had lost 23 cattle, all believed to have been victims of coyote attacks.

At that meeting, it was the consensus of the board to be educated on coyotes and safety issues regarding the animals. The idea was also tossed around about issuing a county ordinance that would allow the payment of a bounty to hunters if they kill coyotes, in hopes of reducing the coyote population.

According to Baranek's research, a majority of the counties in Virginia that have tried to issue bounties stopped either because of budget constraints or because the process proved ineffective in cutting down on the coyote population.

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Caroline Crossroads

Budget

Caroline County Administrator Percy Ashcraft proposed a county budget that will raise the real estate tax rate by 22 cents and the utility rate by five percent.

Ashcraft, who will be leaving his position next month, presented a \$40.3 million general fund spending plan to the Board of Supervisors tonight, which is a 15 percent increase compared to this year's budget.

In his proposal for the fiscal year that begins July 1, Ashcraft suggests increasing the real estate tax to 75 cents per \$100 of assessed value. The current rate of 53 cents per \$100 of assessed value has been in place for four years, and is one of the lowest in the region.

In his presentation, Ashcraft said recent reassessments of real property reduced estimated revenues by \$2.7 million, or 16 percent. So, he said the tax rate had to be raised in order to restore those funds.

Each penny added to the property tax rate would produce about \$269,000 in county revenue, he said.

Ashcraft broke down what the 22 cents would pay for:

- 10 cents: equalization of the tax rate based on the reassessment
- 6 cents: increase in debt service
- 3 cents: increase in contribution to the school system
- 3 cents: establishment of a debt reserve fund for fiscal year 2013 and beyond. Included in this proposal is \$744,387 to begin to build that fund.

Ashcraft said an increase in collection of machinery and tool taxes and public service corporation taxes last year prevented the tax rate from being any higher.

The proposal also calls for a five percent increase in user rates to all utility customers, which would create an additional \$235,669 in revenue.

The proposed budget would fund 180 full-time employees and 50 part-time employees. This calls for three new full-time positions worth \$121,906, which would cover a business license clerk in the commissioner of revenue's office, a purchasing manager in the finance department and a law enforcement planner in the sheriff's office.

There is no plan to increase employee salaries, which were reduced this year. **Tags**

Schools would get 11.75 million from the county-

About

About Portisia Smith:



Portisia Smith covers Caroline County government and schools.

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About this blog:

This is a news blog providing extra information, links and documents for the Caroline County community. It serves as supplemental coverage for The Free Lance-Star newspaper. Comments are welcome!

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\$750,000 more than they received in this year's budget and \$1.9 million less than the School Board plans to ask for.

Superintendent Greg Killough is expected to present the school budget to supervisors next month.

Proposed in the fiscal year 2012 Caroline budget is about \$3 million in debt retirement payments from the general fund, or a total of about 10.9 million from the \$159.1 million overall budget.

The county's Social Services Department, which has seen a huge increase in demand over the past two years, would receive \$540,281 under Ashcraft's plan. That's about \$133,00 more than was budgeted for this year.

Ashcraft said the increased need for assistance is related to the 29 percent increase in the county's population since 2000 and the county's 9 percent unemployment rate.

Also, there are about \$23.1 million in capital projects, which include two new fire stations, installation of a new public safety radio system and construction of a new YMCA site in Ladysmith.

Ashcraft, who has been the county administrator for 11 years, was recently hired to serve in the same position in Prince George County, just south of Richmond. His last day is March 12.

No comments. Be the first to post! By psmith on February 10th, 2011 9:29 pm

Tags: BOS, budget, Percy Ashcraft, Public Utilities, taxes

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News

Green View building launch celebrated

02/14/11 - 8:35 am

A "construction launching" of the new Green View Advanced Manufacturing Center is set for Tuesday, at 10:30 a.m. at the site of the former Daystrom facility at 20 Greens Folly...

Farm living seen as tourist magnet, moneymaker

02/14/11 - 8:33 am

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There's no more need to separate items for recycling

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Sports

Lady Comets sweep WVD

02/08/11 - 10:26 pm

The HCHS girls basketball team got past Franklin County Tuesday night to sweep the Western Valley District regular season. The Lady Comets are now 19-0 with their final regular season...

- Lady Comets sweep WVD
- Long signs with Bluefield
- Top seed gets job done in Industrial League
- Lady Comets had clear path to title
- Comets finish fourth in WVD after loss to FC

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News

Weather | Virginia News | Halifax | Mecklenburg

Supes told to brace for \$3.8 million budget

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SoVaNow.com / February 10, 2011

Halifax County Supervisors on Monday night received the bleak financial news that Halifax County faces a \$3.8 million gap in the upcoming 2012 budget unless major spending cuts can be found.

County Finance Director Stephanie Jackson advised supervisors that the Finance Committee had held its first meeting of the new year earlier in the day and learned of the shortfall after conferring with department heads.

Jackson explained that each penny of real estate taxes raises \$388,000 — consequently, a tax increase of 10 cents per \$100 value on real estate will be needed to close the gap unless cuts are made to the budget.

Jackson later explained that the gap was created by several increased department requests, as well as the new mandated \$250,000 "Line of Duty" premiums which Halifax County is responsible for paying for the first time for its 400 volunteers who work with local fire and emergency medical services departments.

She also pointed out that the Blue Ridge Regional Jail Authority is asking for \$317,000 more than last year; the Southside Community Services Board is seeking an additional \$140,000; the Southern Virginia Higher Education Center is asking for \$160,000 more and Southside Virginia Community College is seeking an additional \$43,000.

The Department of Social Services, Jackson said, is asking for a \$120,000 increase and the county has committed \$55,000 to support the new Visitors Center.

"In addition to that," Jackson said, she expects "a drop in the collection of personal property and real estate taxes due to current economic conditions. People simply don't have the money to pay their taxes right now," she said.

Finance Committee Chairman Doug Bowman termed the budget situation "not pretty." He explained that for the past two or three years Halifax County has been "dipping into its fund balance," a possibility that soon will not exist. "We have to find a way to close this \$3.8 million gap," Bowman said, adding that "any new or higher requests by departments will not be considered. This is not business as usual," he added.

Davis lambasts state, asks for tax

ED1 Supervisor J. T. Davis blasted funding cuts by the state and asked for support from county citizens for passage of meals and lodging taxes.

"We have got to have additional streams of revenue," Davis said, arguing that a meals tax is nothing more than a user fee — paid for by those who eat out.

"Your support is needed" in enacting a county meals and lodging tax rather than placing all the burden on real estate taxes, said Davis.

Ahead of the dire financial forecast, supervisors held a public hearing on applications for the inclusion of 49 additional properties in the County's Ag/Forestral Districts. While no one spoke for or against the applications, supervisors took no action on the requests until another public hearing is held.

If approved, the new designation will result in reduced property tax collections on some 29,970 acres of land.

Jackson said Tuesday that she has not yet calculated the amount of revenue that will be lost due to the inclusion of the additional land in the Ag/Forestral Districts.

Last year under the new policy, supervisors accepted 69 parcels into the special tax districts. Bowman said he believes the loss of revenue from the two year's inclusion in Ag/Forestral Districts will be around \$150,000.

Other business

During another public hearing held on Monday night, supervisors approved the transfer of certain deeds and easements (rights of way) to the Halifax County Service Authority (HCSA), which it needs for its operation of water and sewer services. The County had agreed to convey the deeds to the Authority in its Comprehensive Agreement of June 30, 2007. (Bowman, who also chairs the HCSA, abstained from the vote.)

In other business, supervisors approved a resolution put forth by Animal Control Officer Todd Moser to set up rabies clinics across the county for residents to use in getting rabies shots for their cats and dogs. Moser said the clinics will be operated in conjunction with the local Health Department which will offer its services for \$5 a shot and which will be conveniently located for residents' use. The service will cost the county nothing, Moser said.

"This will help our animals and our residents," said ED7 Supervisor Lottie Nunn in moving for approval.

Supervisors took no action on a request from the Halifax County Industrial Development Authority to approve a change in their by-laws which called for members to be paid \$50 for each meeting they attend. Bowman asked that the matter be postponed for further study.

Supervisors, except for Bowman, each named a resident of their respective district to serve on the redistricting committee to draw the lines for the next year's elections.

They are: Vickie Barker from ED#1, Jeff Franscico from ED2; Janie Luck, ED3, Donald Throckmorton, ED5; Dillard McDowell, ED6; Garland Ricketts, ED7 and Cliff Somerville, ED#8. Bowman said he will name his member by the next meeting.

In other appointments, Michael Terry was named to the Improvement Council from ED2 and Mary Dixon will serve from ED3.

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Ray Owen was reappointed to another four year term on the County Planning Commission and Jason Parker, Bruce Pearce, Tabitha Burton and Frank Perkins Jr. were reappointed to new two year terms on the Recreation Commission.

Energy improvements eyed for Bethune

Bowman also moved to authorize the County Administrator to prepare an application to the Virginia Resource Authority for a \$1.1 million loan application to carry out the recommendations of the performance contractor for the energy improvements to be made at the Mary Bethune Building, the Farm Services Building, the County Administration Building and the Courthouse. The motion was seconded by Supervisor Wayne Conner. All members voted to approve the motion as presented.

Conner moved to authorize the County Administrator to proceed with purchase from C. J. Bales of a 1.5 acre tract of land located in Cluster Spring, presently leased for a Recycling and Convenience Center for the amount of \$15,000. The motion was seconded by Supervisor Lottie Nunn. All members voted to approve the motion as presented.

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Halifax News

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- Town Council to discuss long range plan, appointments
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- The wins keep coming
- Edmunds to run county fair

Mecklenburg News

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- LET THE SHOW(S) BEGIN
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- Clarksville man faces child porn charges

ACCOMACK: Draft county budget has no tax increase

By Carol Vaughn • Staff writer • February 14, 2011

By Carol Vaughn
Staff Writer

ACCOMACK — Accomack County's operating budget for Fiscal Year 2012 will have its first airing Wednesday when County Administrator Steve Miner presents his recommended budget to the Accomack County Board of Supervisors.

The proposed budget does not include a tax increase or pay raises for county employees but does include an average 2 percent performance-based bonus, Miner said.

The county expects to take in about \$900,000 more revenue next year, of which one half would go towards meeting Accomack County Public Schools' request for \$1.2 million in additional local funding.

The remaining \$450,000 is allocated for transfer station operating funds, proposed human resource and finance positions, secure data storage and debt service, if needed, for the first phase of development at Wallops Research Park.

Also on the agenda to speak are representatives of two volunteer fire departments, Parksley and Bloxom. Jody Bagwell of Bloxom and Freddie Matthews of Parksley will discuss their departments' participation in the diminished funding program.

John C. Culp, Executive Director of the American Red Cross Lower Shore Chapter, will give a presentation about the chapter's recent assumption of responsibility for Accomack and Northampton counties. The Salisbury, Md.,-based chapter already has assisted three families in Accomack County after their houses burned since the chapter recently took over Red Cross services for Virginia's Eastern Shore.

Supervisors also will consider a request to use \$8,000 from Electoral District 1 funds to assist the town of Chincoteague with drainage projects and a request to use \$8,500 from Electoral District 2 funds to perform maintenance dredging within 25 feet of Hammocks boat ramp, along with considering renewal of the county's contracts with Draper Aden Associates and Olver, Inc. to perform

engineering services for solid waste activities.

Finance Director Mike Mason will give a report about the county's financial standing halfway through the 2011 fiscal year.

Data for the first six months show 52 percent of real estate taxes, or over \$8.6 million, and 54 percent of personal property taxes, or nearly \$3.7 million, were collected during the period.

Mason will recommend a \$60,000 reduction in the budgeted revenue from building permits, saying in his report that the 2010 amount included about \$70,000 received from Walmart alone for construction of its new store in Onley. Of \$260,000 in revenue from building permits targeted in the 2011 budget, the county has only received \$99,000 so far.

Among positive trends noted in the report is the fact that billable tons of waste at the county's landfills were up 2.2 percent over the same period last year.

Public Service Corporation property tax revenue also was up due to a 1 percent increase in the taxable value of that type of property in the county, resulting in Mason's recommendation to adjust the current budget upwards by \$153,000 in that category. The county has collected \$1.4 million, or 112 percent of the annual amount targeted in the budget, in the first six months of the fiscal year.

The board of supervisors also is scheduled to go into executive session before adjournment to discuss acquisition of real estate for a public

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Localities face budget bite for 'duty' benefits

2/7/11

Until now, the state has picked up the tab for employees covered by the law

BY MICHAEL MARTZ
Richmond Times-Dispatch

Local governments are about to take a big hit in their budgets in the line of duty.

Unless the General Assembly changes the state budget, localities will have to pay the Virginia Retirement System next year

for benefits for every local law-enforcement officer, firefighter and rescue worker killed or injured in the line of their duties.

The Virginia Line of Duty Act is almost 40 years old, but the state always has picked up the full bill for death, disability and life-insurance benefits that it has mandated — until July 1.

It's an obligation that could add up fast with an estimated first-year premium of \$233 each for 75,000 full-time state and local employees covered by the law, and a quarter of that fee for volunteer firefighters

and rescue workers. By 2015, the bill is expected to rise above \$642 per capita. About two-thirds of those covered are local employees.

"It's going to be a burden," said John Jones, executive director of the Virginia Sheriff's Association. "It will put more pressure on (local) public-safety budgets."

The change occurred during budget deliberations last year as the state Senate and the House of Delegates hammered out changes to a two-year budget that had been

BENEFITS, Page A10

2/7/11

Benefits

From Page A1

proposed by outgoing Gov. Timothy M. Kaine.

Kaine had proposed to create a Line of Duty Trust Fund that would be administered by the VRS and financed by an 18-cent surcharge on the state telecommunications fee for E-911 services.

The proposed fee came out of the budget along with \$9.5 million a year in state general funds to pay for death, disability and health insurance benefits to covered employees, their spouses and children.

"We didn't even see it until it came out in the budget," said Dean Lynch, lobbyist for the Virginia Association of Counties.

Mary Jo Fields, director of research at the Virginia Municipal League, called the funding change a "classic cost shift" by the state, which extended the benefits and promised to pay for them.

"When times get tough and things get tight, they stop paying for it," Fields said.

The VRS is lending the system money from its group-insurance program to cover expenses this year but will begin collecting premiums next year from the state and localities. The premiums will include repayment of the VRS loan.

Local governments have until June 30 to decide whether to participate in the fund or create their own, providing the same level of benefits to all eligible employees, as determined by the Virginia Department of Accounts.

That's a problem for local gov-

ernments.

"Right now, we don't even know who we (would) cover," said John A. Vithoulkas, finance director in Henrico County.

Currently, Henrico pays about \$300,000 a year in Line of Duty benefits, which the state Department of Accounts reimburses.

County Manager Virgil R. Hazelett said he does not object to paying for benefits to the widowed and their families, but he questions how the state has calculated its premium.

"I don't think any locality is going to shirk its obligations to Line of Duty," he said.

Hazelett said localities need more time and information from the state before they can decide whether to join the program or fund one of their own.

The VRS is just beginning a survey of local governments to determine exactly who would be covered by each locality. The survey should be done by late spring.

"I don't think there's ever been an analysis of this program," said Trish Bishop, director of policy, planning and compliance at VRS.

Del. John M. O'Bannon III, R-Henrico, a member of the House Appropriations Committee, said he's trying to restore the state funding or at least buy time for the localities to decide about how to pay for the benefits.

"If this goes through, the state basically has authority over a lot of decisions but tells the localities they have to pay for it," O'Bannon said.

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Budget plans offered

2/7/2011

Proposals would spare state employees from retirement contributions

BY TYLER WHITLEY AND JIM NOLAN
Richmond Times-Dispatch

House and Senate money committees Sunday unanimously approved their respective budget plans for 2011-2012, differing in education funding but effectively sparing state employees from having to contribute to their retirement plans.



Capitol Talk
The House and the Senate exchange bills. Visit TimesDispatch.com, search: video.

In reversing a proposal by Gov. Bob McDonnell to end a 27-year practice of the state paying the 5 percent employee contribution, the House Appropriations Committee and the Senate Finance Committee approached the compensation matter in different ways.

The House panel voted to require

GENERAL ASSEMBLY



the employees to pay the money into the retirement system, but it would give them a 5 percent salary increase to offset it.

The Senate committee rejected the McDonnell proposal that employees pay 5 percent into the plan, partly offset by a 3 percent raise. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Charles J. Colgan, D-Prince William,

BUDGET, Page A8

A8 MONDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2011

Budget

From Page A1

said it is not appropriate to ask employees to absorb a 2 percent reduction in their pay.

Sen. John Watkins, R-Powhatan, a Finance Committee member,



Colgan

cautioned against the decision not to bite the bullet on changing how the system is funded.

"It seems like we're moving in the wrong direction with respect to the retirement system," he said, right before the panel voted to approve its version of the budget.

"We're just digging ourselves a bigger and bigger hole."

Legislators are considering amendments to the state's two-year, \$31.7 billion general fund budget, which pays for services such as education, public safety and health care.

The Senate Finance Committee's amendments would spend \$175 million above

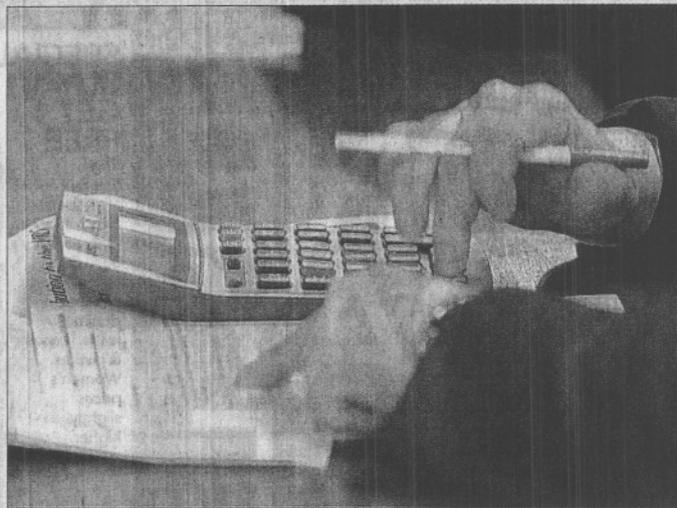


Watkins

McDonnell's recommendations. The House panel would spend \$104 million more than the governor recommended.

Both budget bills will be debated Thursday in the House and the Senate. Each body is expected to reject the other's spending plan, and the differences will be resolved by a conference committee, meeting in the closing days of the 46-day session, which is scheduled to end on Feb. 26.

Anxious lobbyists lined the hallways and conference rooms to hear budget proposals by both committees, meeting on



JOE MAHONEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

A House Appropriations Committee staff member checked figures on that chamber's version of the budget bill during a committee hearing Sunday.

Super Bowl Sunday.

There were wide variations between the two bills in transportation, education and health care.



Saslaw

The House version follows McDonnell's recommendation and would take \$150 million from the general fund to pay for transportation improvements. The Senate stripped that general-fund money from McDonnell's transportation plan and would spend it on education, health care and public safety.

"The benefits are far greater than plugging a pothole," said Sen. Richard L. Saslaw, D-Fairfax, the Senate majority leader and a foe of McDonnell's plan.

In total, the Senate plan would increase K-12 funding by \$100 million over the governor's budget and effectively restore cuts to funding for local school systems that were axed for the upcoming year.

The House would cut about \$56 million from K-12 funding but set aside money for systems to give teachers a 2 percent bonus or spend the money on textbooks or buses.

It would put about \$100 million into higher education, indirectly restoring about \$17 million that McDonnell proposed cutting from Virginia Commonwealth University.

McDonnell recommended withholding \$17 million in state funds from VCU in 2012 to signal his displeasure with the school's 24 percent increase in tuition and fees. The \$17 million equals about half the revenue that the tuition increase will raise.

The Senate committee would restore roughly \$105 million in general-fund monies for Medicaid providers to fully fund inpatient hospital services, nursing homes, doctors and dentists who were

facing a 4 percent reduction in July.

The House would cut nearly \$22 million out of general-fund spending in the Department of Medical Assistance services for children's health.

The Senate spending plan also would allocate \$732,000 for arts grants as well as roughly \$2.6 million that McDonnell had proposed cutting from public television. The House plan would not restore funding for public television.

Colgan and Del. Lacey E. Putney, I-Bedford, the House Appropriations chairman, stressed the frugal nature of the budget.

"The reality is that we will need to continue to show restraint if we are to match our budget to the constraints of our ongoing revenue stream," Putney said.



Putney

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Embattled Goochland treasurer resigns

State had started
steps to remove her
in embezzlement case

BY BILL MCKELWAY
Richmond Times-Dispatch

Goochland County's treasurer of seven years ended her career Friday just as the governor and attorney general started formal steps to oust her.

In a lightning-fast buzz of activity over the course of a few minutes late Friday afternoon, Brenda S. Grubbs resigned, sending a one-sentence faxed letter to County Administrator Rebecca Dickson and addressed to the chairman of the county Board of Supervisors.



Grubbs

"Effective immediately I resign my office of treasurer for the county of Goochland," it reads. A fax number indicates the letter was sent from the Goochland Pharmacy. She closed the letter "sincerely" and signed it.

Dickson said the letter arrived just before 5 p.m., which would mean that it arrived almost simultaneously with an announcement from the governor's office that he had agreed to set in motion ouster proceedings.

"We just sent this" to the office of the attorney general, Tucker Martin, a spokesman for Gov. Bob McDonnell, wrote in an e-mail to the media at 4:59 p.m. that included a copy of McDonnell's letter to Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli.

The letter instructed Cuccinelli to take action to remove Grubbs.

Grubbs was arrested Feb. 2 on a single count of embezzlement after she made admissions to Sheriff James L. Agnew that she had transferred by wire as much as \$135,000 in county funds to contacts in Dubai and to a man in Nigeria

GOOCHLAND, Page B8

Goochland

From Page B1

identified as Bobby Johnson, according to search warrants.

Investigators uncovered evidence of the transfers in one of Grubbs' socks, according to a search warrant. Wachovia bank security personnel had alerted county officials that Grubbs was attempting to cash a \$14,000 check made out to herself from county funds, according to court documents.

On Friday night, Board of Supervisors Chairman William Quarles Jr. said he welcomed Grubbs' decision to resign rather than to force a complex procedure for her removal that had been approved by the board Wednesday.

"I'd have to say I commend her so the county can move forward," Quarles said.

Some board members have advocated doing away with the treasurer's office as an elected position in the wake of years of what officials describe as difficulties in getting

Grubbs had worked in the office since 1988.

Grubbs to conform to standard auditing recommendations and calls for better internal controls.

Virginia State Police and the state auditor of public accounts are continuing investigations into the treasurer's office. Grubbs had worked in the office since 1988.

Supervisor Andrew Pryor, a 40-year veteran of the board, said the Grubbs affair has been perhaps the most heart-breaking event in his career on the board. He said he has known Grubbs and her family since she was a child and that they attend the same church.

"It's a sad day for the county and a sad day for her family," Pryor said.

Grubbs has been free on \$20,000 bond since her arrest but is scheduled to make a court appearance Monday to establish to the court that she has retained a lawyer to represent her.

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(804) 649-6601

Goochland could recover much of money believed embezzled

BY BILL McKELWAY
Richmond Times-Dispatch

Goochland County's treasurer, charged last week with embezzlement, is bonded for up to \$400,000 by the state, and the county also could recover significant sums of money through existing insurance policies and a risk-management pool maintained by the Virginia Association of Counties.

Deputy County Administrator John Wack said Tuesday that the \$400,000 bond is the amount established by the state for treasurers.

Brenda S. Grubbs, according to court documents in Goochland, has acknowledged to Sheriff James L. Agnew embezzling as much as \$135,000 since August. But a multi-pronged investigation is continuing,



Brenda S. Grubbs was elected treasurer of Goochland County in 2003 and 2007.

and estimates of actual losses are not expected for months.

Grubbs' next scheduled court appearance is in March.

County Administrator Rebecca Dickson said the county's Board of Supervisors will meet in a special session this morning that is open to the public and will focus on developments in the case. There has been no estimate of when investigations by Virginia State Police, state auditors and insurance investigators will be completed.

The county treasurer's office

has been closed to public access to preserve what has essentially become a crime scene, and Grubbs has agreed not to take part in the operation of her office. The public is being served, and treasurer's office functions are being performed in the commissioner of the revenue's office by non-treasury personnel, Dickson said.

Search warrants show that electronic equipment and other items have been recovered from Grubbs' truck and home, a 68-acre property in Othma where her husband raises chickens and cattle. Some of the recovered items show that Grubbs allegedly was communicating with unidentified people or firms in Dubai and Nigeria.

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The embezzlement allegations came to light when a Wachovia bank employee notified authorities that Grubbs was trying to cash a \$14,000 check made out to herself from county funds.

"I'm shocked," said Ann Davis, president of the Treasurers' Association of Virginia, which lists Grubbs as district chair of the Richmond district.

Grubbs, 53, is among a diminishing number of popularly elected treasurers across the state who do not possess a college degree; nor is Grubbs asserting that she is certified through a voluntary program designed to upgrade financial controls and abilities among elected treasur-

ers and their employees.

Grubbs indicated on state forms submitted to the state Compensation Board last month that she is not claiming certification for the 2011 fiscal year.

Completion of the certification process through the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia can mean a 9.3 percent pay raise. Grubbs was certified for fiscal 2010 but has not kept up course work to keep the certification active, according to Albert W. Spengler, who oversees the certification program.

"All that is required now to run for the office of treasurer is to be a registered voter," said Davis, adding that the treasurers' organization has been working years to better educate treasurers about financial matters and internal controls through

certification.

About 80 percent of treasurers across the state are certified, Spengler said.

Grubbs' \$73,000 salary has remained unchanged since the 2009 fiscal year and is not scheduled to change in the coming fiscal year, according to the state Compensation Board, which sets base salary levels.

Grubbs has not resigned, and no formal effort to remove her from her constitutional office, a process that can be initiated by petitioning a circuit judge, has begun. Grubbs was elected by wide margins to the office in 2003 and 2007, running as an independent. She joined the office as a clerk in 1988.

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County seeks to remove treasurer

Goochland board asks governor to begin ouster proceedings

BY BILL McKELWAY
Richmond Times-Dispatch

Goochland County's Board of Supervisors initiated efforts Wednesday to remove from office the county treasurer, who has declined to formally resign despite admissions she funneled tens of thousands of dollars in county funds to foreign contacts.

The bizarre scenario began unfolding publicly last week when Goochland Sheriff James L. Agnew arrested



Grubbs

Brenda S. Grubbs, the county's elected treasurer for the past seven years, on a single charge of embezzlement.

Grubbs, according to search warrants filed in Goochland Circuit Court, acknowledged to Agnew that she had sent as much as \$135,000 to contacts in Dubai and to a man identified as Bobby Johnson in Nigeria.

"Mr. Johnson requested that Mrs. Grubbs send him large sums of cash via wire transfer to Nigeria on several occasions," according to a search warrant. Grubbs provided Johnson her business e-mail address, but

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there has been no public explanation of what the money was for.

On Wednesday, in a special meeting with the Board of Supervisors, County Administrator Rebecca Dickson used forceful language to describe to board members and an audience of more than 100 people years of frustration in dealing with treasurer's office deficiencies.



Dickson

She said Grubbs has been a failure on numerous fronts and that the county must act to remove her. "It doesn't appear the treasurer is required to have any specific training or qualifications as a condition of holding office," Dickson said, citing a list of shortcomings ranging from errors in newspaper advertising placed by Grubbs' office to a lack of internal controls and unsatisfactory efforts to collect delinquent taxes.

"The treasurer has made no progress on financial improvements, to the point that we were attempting to alleviate her of whatever financial duties we could convince her to let go of," Dickson said. "She was never willing to let go of much of anything."

Grubbs is no longer involved in the operation of her office but legally remains treasurer and receives installments of her \$73,000 salary.

The Richmond Times-Dispatch reported Wednesday that Grubbs has a high school education and has lost certification, a voluntary process designed to boost treasurers' qualifications.

Dickson's five-page assessment of Grubbs' office was followed by a unanimous vote by the five-member board asking the governor to begin ouster proceedings against Grubbs for failing to perform her statutory duties and to appoint an interim treasurer.

Gov. Bob McDonnell's office said Wednesday night that it is working with the state attorney general's office on the resolution. Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli issued a statement urging Grubbs to resign and therefore avoid unnecessary costs to judicially remove her.

"We stand ready to defend the taxpayers of Goochland County," Cuccinelli said in a statement. Cuccinelli will petition the Goochland Circuit Court to remove or suspend Grubbs if he gets approval from McDonnell. A petition to

remove Grubbs also is being circulated among county residents and could be presented to the Circuit Court.

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When office workers began noticing in mid-2010 that "an individual name Bobby with a foreign accent" would be asking to speak with Brenda Grubbs, Grubbs had technicians equip his phone with Caller ID and voice mail according to a search warrant affidavit.

A Google search of Johnson's alleged e-mail address, which is listed in court records, produced a warning of a dating scam associated with the address. County officials declined comment. Search warrants describe a situation in which Grubbs allegedly recruited others to act as go-betweens in shipping out money orders; some of those people have come forward to investigators according to court documents.

The court documents state that Grubbs was arrested after security personnel at Wachovia Bank became aware that Grubbs was attempting to withdraw \$14,000 of county funds in her name. Dickson was called, and Dickson then called in Agnew.

Court documents show that Grubbs after being interviewed in her office by the sheriff, surrendered at the Sheriff's Office on Feb. 2 and was arrested. Hours later she was ordered released on \$20,000 bond by a magistrate.

Grubbs, 53, appeared in court Monday and told a judge that she had obtained a lawyer, but Agnew now has served a subpoena on Grubbs ordering her to appear in court again next week to reaffirm any representation she has.

Grubbs told General District Judge Edward K. Carpenter on Monday that she had hired Richmond lawyer James Maloney. Maloney declined Wednesday to make any comment about the case or about any client he may have.

Grubbs could not be reached for comment.

Dickson said Wednesday that it could take weeks or months before a clear understanding is reached of conditions within the treasurer's office. In a letter Wednesday to the attorney general's office, she said the county "desperately needs" the attorney general's help in removing or suspending Grubbs while her criminal case is pending.

"The county has taken as many administrative steps that we legally can to protect county funds from further embezzlement," she wrote.

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Southside Virginians back biomass plant

The wood-fueled plant
would mean jobs, they say

BY PETER BACQUÉ

Richmond Times-Dispatch

A proposed biomass-burning power plant drew strong backing from officials and residents from economically distressed Southside Virginia speaking before the Virginia State Corporation Commission on Tuesday.

The wood-fueled plant would mean jobs for the economically depressed region, said Kenneth Hodges, a landowner and logger from South Boston.

"It'll help my business," Hodges said, "and it will help other businesses."

Virginia's highest unemployment rates are concentrated in the state's southern tier of rural localities.

With unemployment of 11.5 percent in November, Halifax County desperately needs jobs, Del. James E. Edmunds II, R-Halifax, told the SCC.

Northern Virginia Electric Cooperative wants to build a 49.95-megawatt "green" power plant at South Boston. "This will be a great opportunity" for Halifax, Edmunds said.

The \$175-million plant would burn waste wood that would otherwise decay and produce methane, a greenhouse gas, co-op officials said.

"It's a natural fit for us," said Mike Sexton, executive director of the Industri-

al Development Authority of Halifax County. "We're in the wood basket."

If the SCC approves the new power station, the Manassas-based electric cooperative hopes to have the plant generating electricity in 2013 for its 145,000 customer-owners.

The plant's construction would employ 300 to 400 workers, co-op officials said, and need up to 40 full-time employees to operate it.

"What we need is good-paying, reliable jobs," said Chris A. Lumsden, CEO of Halifax Regional Health System. "There's not such thing as a 'small business.' This is an important business" for the county.

The plant would provide more than \$700,000 in tax revenue for the locality, Halifax Supervisor Doug V. Bowman told the commission.

The biomass power plant would supply 6.5 percent of Northern Virginia Electric Cooperative's energy requirements by 2014, enough to serve the equivalent of 10,000 customers.

The renewable-energy plant will rely on the wood waste — or "slash" — on forest floors for fuel, which is abundant in the region.

Meanwhile, Northern Virginia Electric's members want to get their energy from renewable resources, said the co-op's CEO, Stan Feuerberg.

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Rural areas of Va. hit hard by foreclosures

They have doubled since 2008, an advocacy group reports

BY CAROL HAZARD
Richmond Times-Dispatch

The largest increase in foreclosures in Virginia last year occurred in the rural areas of the state, according to a report released Monday by a housing advocacy, research and counseling group in Richmond.

Foreclosures rates in rural areas have doubled since 2008, as people lost their jobs and were unable to make their house payments, according to the report by Housing Opportunities Made Equal of Virginia Inc.

More than 200,000 foreclosure notices have been filed in Virginia since 2006, including 60,000 notices of default or repossessions in 2010.

Virginia would have recorded the highest number of foreclosure filings since the Great Depression had it not been for moratoriums imposed by lenders during the last three months of 2010 to review possible flaws in their foreclosure processes, the report stated.

The crisis started in Northern Virginia with speculation in real estate that led to a sharp rise in subprime lending and a subsequent rise in foreclosures, said Will Sanford, a housing policy analyst with HOME.

But rising unemployment and

underemployment issues have taken a toll, especially in hard-hit area of rural Virginia, he said.

Virginia's unemployment rate rose from 3 percent in 2007 to 6.6 percent in November 2010. But unemployment in rural Virginia rose from 3.3 percent to 7.3 percent in the same time period, according to the report.

Foreclosures in rural Virginia increased nearly 100 percent from 2008 to 2009, while rising 13 percent in other parts of the state, Sanford said. From 2009 to 2010, foreclosures in rural Virginia increased 16 percent, while rising 4 percent elsewhere in the state, he said.

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Wal-Mart case opens in Orange

County attorney says the case is about land use, not the Civil War

BY ALLISON BROPHY CHAMPION
Media General News Service

ORANGE — A full courtroom heard one side of the argument Tuesday over building a Wal-Mart near the Civil War battlefield at Wilderness before Judge Daniel Bouton recessed the high-profile case until this morning at 9 a.m.

Orange County Attorney Sharon Pandak argued for the defense, saying in hourlong remarks that the Orange County Board of Supervisors acted appropriately and thoroughly in approving a conditional-use permit for the supercenter at State Routes 3 and 20 on private land zoned commercially for 30-plus years.

"This case is not about the Civil War or whether one likes Wal-

Mart," she said. "Very simply, this is a land-use case."

The Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield does not agree and filed suit against the board for approving the development, claiming the decision was arbitrary and capricious and would threaten hallowed ground. Washington attorney Robert Rosenbaum is lead attorney for the plaintiffs; he did not offer testimony Tuesday.

Bouton did not offer details for his break in the hearings, saying only, "based on what has developed with the arguments thus far the court has made an independent judgment to recess this case." The judge said Pandak "brought up a number of matters" he needed to look into before continuing.

Bouton originally called for a 15-minute break after Pandak spoke, and that turned into an hour as both legal teams converged in the judge's chambers. About noon,

the court resumed, but at 2 p.m., he called for the longer recess.

On Tuesday morning, the judge announced that the case was not ready to go to trial as he had at least 16 motions to consider and possibly 25 separate judgments to make. "The material simply kept coming in," he said, numerous boxes and color-coded files stacked up around him and behind the bench.

"This case has a lot of meaning to a lot of people," Bouton said. "These are important matters, and I am going to take whatever time I need." He said no more motions would be accepted in the case before Pandak offered opening statements.

Joined by a team of four attorneys — including two for Wal-Mart — Pandak argued that the Board of Supervisors was justified in its approval of the project.

Allison Brophy Champion writes for the Star-Exponent of Culpeper.

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Land incentive may cause tax headache in Richmond County, VA

By Lee Francis Northern Neck News
2/1/2011 1:55:29 PM

While land values across Richmond County have skyrocketed, the increase won't be felt by one subset of landowners - those enrolled in a land use taxation program, which taxes owners of active agricultural or timberland based on a set value regardless of increases in real estate assessment.

The measure was implemented in 1990 to serve as an incentive to maintain Richmond County's agrarian heritage while discouraging development. But increasing enrollment in the program has now locked away nearly 10 percent of the county's taxable real estate, effectively shifting the tax burden to citizens who aren't eligible for similar relief.

According to Bill Duncanson, county administrator, approximately 450 parcels of land are currently assessed under the program. Those parcels' deferred value - the difference between the full assessed value and how they are assessed through the program - currently totals \$71,982,939, or 7.6 percent of Richmond County's total real estate assessment, based on the most current estimates. Another 180 applications received by the county in the last tax year have yet to be processed, but stands to add significantly to that figure.

Under the program, woodlands are assessed at \$500 per acre while agricultural lands are valued at \$800 per acre, figures are determined by the commissioner of the revenue and based on the value of the land use. If the use of the land changes - a landowner rezones their property, for example - the last five years of deferred value will have to be repaid.

"It's an incentive to landowners to keep productive lands in production," Duncanson said.

The figures set by the county for farm and forestlands have remained unchanged since the program's implementation and Duncanson, who participates in the program, recently estimated that under the new assessed values, timberland is worth an average \$1,400 per acre while an average acre of farmland is worth \$5,000.

With a sudden rise in property assessments across the county, some supervisors question whether Richmond County can still afford the program.

"Not as it is today," said Randy Phelps, District 2 supervisor. "It's not fair to have deferred values based on 1990 numbers."

Phelps, who represents the Warsaw area, worries that small landowners could bear the brunt of the tax burden if land use values remain unchanged. He plans to push for a change to reflect the rise in land value over the past two decades.

"We can't expect the non-acreage-owning citizens, who own small parcels, to [pay more to offset the land use program], Phelps said.

Board chairman Randy Packett, District 3 supervisor, whose land holdings constitute approximately \$243,000 of deferred value under the program according to land records, said that land use taxation helps maintain Richmond County's rural identity.

"All of our citizens say they like Richmond County because of the open space and woods," Packett said. "This program ensures that."

Fellow board members and farmers F. Lee Sanders, District 5, and Richard Thomas, District 1, join Packett in their participation in the land use program.

Although he is a supporter of the program, Packett recognized the recent change in reassessment could result in an unfair distribution of the tax burden.

"If there's an argument to be made it is: are we deferring the burden onto someone else?" Packett said. "We have to decide whether the benefit is worth it."

"Farmland and woodland requires nothing from the county," he added, referring to those government services funded by tax revenues.

Packett, like Phelps, said that he would support revisiting the program with the board as it begins to look at next year's budget.

"I happen to support it, but I'm willing to hear other [views]," Packett said.

While the board can recommend a change, the commissioner of the revenue is responsible for setting the final numbers. Vickie Lewis, now in her second full term as commissioner but who has worked in the office since the 1970s, has accumulated \$554,491 of deferred value for farmland listed under her name in public records.

According to Duncanson, who was the county land use administrator at the time the program was approved, the first two times the measure came before the board, supervisors rejected moving forward. The program received unanimous approval on May 10, 1990, according to minutes from that meeting. An article published in the Northern Neck News on May 17, 1990 pointed out that among the six speakers at the public hearing, none opposed it.

Similar programs exist across the Northern Neck counties. Of those, Lancaster is the only locality that doesn't assess timberland at a reduced rate. According to Duncanson, land use taxation in Accomack County on the eastern shore was recently abolished following citizen complaints concerning an unfair distribution of the tax burden.

It's unknown whether a similar change will come to Richmond County, which faces a tough budget year on top of hard decisions concerning construction of major capital projects.

"It's up to the citizens to decide if it's a worthwhile program," Duncanson said. "Would you rather see them grow trees and corn or would you rather see them grow houses?"