

Delegate Vivian Watts House of Delegate floor speech as delivered February 26, 2010

I heard some great floor speeches yesterday. I thought the last thing anyone needed was still another speech ... Especially, the one I wanted to give. Then, in the midst of our voting, I tried to find where K-12 re-benchmarking was restored. I tried and I tried.

I thought I knew, after all, being the nerd I am, I'd downloaded the amendments Sunday night and began trying to digest them immediately. Much later last night, I finally found the amendment. It was buried in the middle of the 33-page "Blob" of 65 distinct amendments all lumped together. Two lines saying A.4 was deleted ... No explanation (as there would have been if it had been on of the separate amendments) ... Not even an identifying word. No logic why the amendment for A.4 came after amendments for A.11, A. 15, A. 20, etc. No logic why after A.4, the next big amendment takes up what should have led off the whole list of 26 amendments controlling how we will fund local schools, which started 3 pages back and ends 5 pages later.

This (1) intentional obfuscation is but the most recent barrier facing all but a very few members of this House as we try to each represent a different part of this Commonwealth's diversity.

It is bad enough that the intricate, complex school funding formula that defines how our different needs are addressed appears only in the over 400 pages of budget fine print. It is (2) not written in the Virginia Code and whatever policy guidance may be in the Code can be - and increasingly is, as in so many other areas - summarily (3) over-ridden by a "notwithstanding" clause in the Budget.

Having complex policy control only in the budget and having laws that we have fully debated routinely over-ridden is a major obstacle in normal years. But, in this most crucial year, layer after layer of inclusive review and debate that normally precedes our floor action on education and other crucial issues was summarily cut out.

(4) No subcommittee reports meant no give and take between members who have built up expertise, who represent diverse views.

(5) Sub-committee meeting after sub-committee meeting cancelled meant that the public could not hear where delegates were on-point and where a member might benefit from additional information, much less, how (6) staff interpretation of policy would play out on the ground.

The Department of Education won't have impact sheets for us until sometime next week.

Producing those spreadsheets from words on paper is what revealed the major error in 2008 in the House Budget language. Outside review matters and the sooner concrete proposals can be critiqued, the better.

(7) Lack of detailed budget amendments from the Governor meant public input was cut in half from the get-go. Somehow we lost the discipline the Republican controlled Appropriations committee exercised in insisting that in-coming Democratic (8) governors get their budget amendments within the first ten days. Those detailed amendments allowed robust dialogue on competing methodologies. What were the un-intended consequences of one tweak versus another? So often, it is not what you do, it is how you do it. How can we use limited resources to get the best results - to effectively spend the investment of taxpayer dollars?

In my over 25-years of state service and 20 years of local citizen involvement, I have never felt so shut out and de-valued. Seasoned members and dedicated professionals should have been our representatives in open public debate. We needed them. The public needed them.

Mr. Speaker, Members of the House, let me close by quoting the first Speaker of this Assembly almost 400 years ago, John Pory, as he argued against dictates of martial law: "Peace is best preserved by giving information to the people." This budget process, this year, was a major break with that tradition. Many of you will be here long after I am gone. What you have witnessed ... what the public has been subjected to ... must not become precedent.