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## Sen. John Watkins defends impact fee bill

By Greg Pearson STAFF WRITER



Watkins

State Sen. John Watkins defended the concept of his Senate Bill 768 on impact fees last week, calling the current proffer system "a backdoor tax increase." County supervisors may approve a nominal increase in proffers at this week's board meeting.

"Cash proffers are untenable in some Virginia jurisdictions," Watkins told citizens at Midlothian Supervisor Dan Gecker's monthly meeting last week.

He specifically named the counties of Loudoun, Stafford, Spotsylvania and Prince William - all considered to be part of northern Virginia. According to Watkins, proffers are at least \$32,000 per home in those jurisdictions. The Republican senator linked high proffers and large mortgage payments, saying 60 percent of the foreclosures in the state have occurred in those four counties.

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State law requires proffers paid by developers to be "voluntary," but no one actually believes they are. Watkins said his plan "would spread out the impact of proffers" to properties that were rezoned before proffers were enacted in Chesterfield in 1991. That number is reported to be as high as 48,000 lots.

Initially, SB768 called for builders to pay a \$5,000 per home impact fee plus a grantors tax, but the latter was dropped when the realtor associations complained. Before it was tabled for the 2009 General Assembly session, the impact fee was increased to \$7,500.



Gecker

The Chesterfield board finds that fee too low, but some members have indicated a higher number might be acceptable. Watkins said the fee could escalate annually.

"It could be negotiated to a reasonable cap...using a construction index," he explained.

Watkins also talked briefly about two of the other 22 bills he introduced during the last session. One bill was a rewrite of state law that limits textbook approval and purchasing, costing \$120 per student annually. Watkins thinks educators should be allowed to consider digital and electronic media as textbooks.

He also proposed Senate legislation that would realign the Richmond Metropolitan Authority, which controls most of the toll roads in the Richmond area. It would have increased county membership on its board and reduced the number of Richmond representatives. "It was rejected summarily," he commented.

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Much of the meeting focused on transportation issues and how to pay for improvements. He reported that maintaining existing roads in the state is increasing at \$50 million annually.

"Transportation is in dire straits," he said. "It will eat us alive if we don't address it."

Watkins seemed to endorse the concept of a gas tax, saying it wouldn't increase the cost of gas at the pump and could be enacted regionally. He noted that the North Carolina gas tax is 12 cents higher than Virginia's, but the cost per gallon is about the same.

Though Gecker strongly opposed Watkins' impact fee bill, the supervisor let Watkins argue his case. The two elected officials have had a rocky relationship, including opposition over the Watkins Centre and the two recent supervisor races when Watkins supported fellow Republican Don Sowder. Gecker told the citizens he admired Watkins for speaking his mind on controversial issues. Last month, Gecker's featured speaker was Republican Manoli Loupassi, who won the 68th District race for the House of Delegates last November. The two fellow attorneys are friends, though they take different stands on some issues. In his race for supervisor last year, Gecker ran as an Independent and won after losing the previous year as a Democrat in the heavily Republican Midlothian district.