

42nd Delegate Race: War of the Words

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Byline: Julia O'Donoghue

Body

Mike DeLoose is chair of the Springfield District Council, a collective of community associations and homeowners groups across southern Fairfax County from Centreville to Lorton.

Several local elected officials rely on the council, particularly DeLoose, to serve as the citizens' voice in on issues as varied as West Springfield High School's facility shortfalls to the completion of the Fairfax County Parkway.

But DeLoose might never have gotten as heavily involved in civic engagement or citizen advocacy had it not been for a knock at his door from Del. Dave Albo (R-42), who has represented the 42nd District in the Virginia House of Delegates since 1994.

"About 15 years ago, Dave came knocking at my door, telling me I ought to join the West Springfield Civic Association. I said 'Fine, I will. But who are you?' Then, he told me he was president of the organization," said DeLoose.

DeLoose eventually took over as president of the West Springfield Civic Association and has gotten to work with the delegate, who now lives in Fairfax Station, on many community problems. DeLoose called Albo, who grew up in the area and graduated from West Springfield High School, a pragmatic and effective politician, who wants to get things accomplished for the local community.

"I've known Dave Albo a long time and he has been in this community for decades. When you talk to him about school facilities or roads, he gets it because he knows what you are talking about immediately," said DeLoose, who typically votes in Republican primary elections but also works with several Democratic elected officials, he said.

With the exception of Albo's time as an undergraduate at the University of Virginia and year in law school at the University of Richmond, the Republican has lived and worked in the Springfield and Fairfax Station area his whole life.

"It is not that Dave is a Republican delegate. It is that he is an effective guy. I put him in the same class of public servant as [Democratic state Sen.] George Barker and [Democratic Fairfax County chairman] Sharon Bulova. They are obviously partisan, but they regularly reach across party lines. They are interested in getting things done," said DeLoose.

A SIMILAR LEVEL of praise has been heaped on Democrat Greg Werkheiser, Albo's challenger in the upcoming delegate election Nov. 3. Werkheiser, who ran against Albo in 2005, is hoping to unseat the incumbent in the 42nd Delegate seat, which spans parts of Burke, Fairfax Station, Lorton and Springfield.

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The Democrat has a compelling life story. Born and raised in rural Pennsylvania, Werkheiser's parents worked multiple jobs, including custodial and domestic positions, to make ends meet.

The candidate first came to the Commonwealth to attend the College of William & Mary, his "dream school," as an undergraduate student.

But Werkheiser almost did not make it to Virginia, since former Republican Gov. George Allen, in the midst of a budget deficit, cut funding to higher education in the early 1990s, resulting in the elimination of the financial assistance Werkheiser was supposed to receive for college tuition, said the candidate.

Luckily, a man overheard the candidate's grandmother complaining about the tuition situation over breakfast in a local Pennsylvania diner at the time and he offered to put up the money for Werkheiser's college tuition, according to the candidate.

As a result of his good fortune, Werkheiser has spent a significant amount of his time and resources trying to give back to the community.

In 2006, Werkheiser and his wife Marion left their jobs at law firms behind and founded The Phoenix Project, which, in part, seeks to pair high-achieving undergraduate and graduate students in Virginia with organizations and groups that work in areas of the Commonwealth with low-income populations for community improvement projects.

By bringing students and at-risk populations together in Virginia, The Phoenix Project has taken on local issues including developing a marketing strategy for a local non-profit organization that promotes literacy, performing an architectural survey in a low-income neighborhood seeking a historic designation and providing information on best practices for combating lead poisoning to an underserved community in Virginia, according to the organization's Web site.

"What he has done with his time, I have been very impressed with that. His organization ... has helped people living along the Route 1 corridor. Greg has lived in this area long enough to know that no one in Northern Virginia is wealthy," said Sheena Forester, who lives in West Springfield and considers herself a Democrat.

LOCAL RESIDENTS are getting their fill of Albo and Werkheiser through their television sets, over their radios and especially in their mailboxes.

This year's contest in the 42nd District is the most expensive delegate race in the history of Virginia, with the campaigns spending a total \$1.46 million combined as of Oct. 21 to woo supporters. The final dollar figure spent on the district with approximately 55,000 potential voters is likely to be significantly higher, since campaigns tend to spend the most money in the final two weeks of the election, according to several political party leaders.

In 2005, Albo beat Werkheiser in a fairly close election, winning 51.2 percent of the vote to Werkheiser's 47.7 percent of the vote. The Republican won by considerably larger margins in 2001 (61 percent) and 1996 (76 percent), the only other competitive elections he has participated in over the past decade.

According to the Virginia Public Access Project, the 42nd District has started to lean Democratic in recent years. In 2004, U.S. Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) barely edged out former President George W. Bush in the 42nd District, winning 50 percent to Bush's 49 percent.

But by the next year, and in the same cycle when Albo beat Werkheiser the first time, Gov. Tim Kaine (D) beat his Republican opponent Jerry Kilgore 55 percent to 43 percent.

During last year's presidential campaign, Barack Obama won the 42nd District with 57 percent of the vote.

Werkheiser said some of the new housing developments that have cropped up in the district moved the delegate seat substantially to the left politically.

"There are neighborhoods that didn't exist in 2005 that exist now," said the Democratic candidate.

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But Albo maintains the 42nd delegate seat has always been a moderate, swing district. When he goes door-to-door, constituents appear to have a much more friendly attitude to Republicans than they have had in recent years, said Albo.

"Bush is no longer the fact the Republican Party and people are discovering they don't like either party very much. People don't feel like either party has it together enough to govern on its own. We have gotten nothing done on transportation, even though we have had a Democratic governor for eight years," said former U.S. Rep. Tom Davis (R-11), who believes Albo will prevail in the delegate race.

WHAT THE CAMPAIGNS are choosing to highlight is not always as positive as Albo's deep roots in the community or Werkheiser's dedication to public service. Both campaigns are engaging in a significant amount of negative campaigning in an effort to distinguish themselves from each other.

Far from talking about his deep roots in West Springfield or DeLoose's depiction of a pragmatic legislator, the Werkheiser campaign has accused Albo of siding with the House Republican leadership and against the interest of his constituents.

Albo is the chair of the Judiciary Committee, a powerful position awarded to him by the Republican leadership in the House of Delegates. He is also the most senior Republican representing Fairfax County in the Virginia General Assembly but Werkheiser said the 42nd District does not seem to have benefited from Albo's influence.

"The Republicans are now in control [in the House of Delegates] and what has that gotten Dave Albo's constituents? We haven't gotten a single penny more for transportation and schools. People want results and if that seniority doesn't translate to results, then they should elect someone else," said Werkheiser.

WERKHEISER does not support a statewide tax increase, as has been advocated by several members of his own political party and local business groups, to help relieve traffic congestion and help funding transportation adequately.

Instead, the Democrat said the state transportation funding formula, along with Virginia's education funding formula, need to be reconfigured so that Northern Virginia receives a larger share of entire package of funding in both cases.

"We pay enough in taxes. We pay more than enough in taxes. We need to recover a fairer portion of what we pay," said the Democrat.

Currently, the state transportation funding formula disproportionately favors rural districts and the state education funding formula tends to punish those localities with high property values, according to several incumbent delegates.

ALBO also favors changing the state funding formulas for transportation and education but said, in practical terms, both proposals are near legislative impossibilities. Currently, too many delegate districts benefit from the current structures of the formulas and would not be willing to make an adjustment that would result in decreased funding for their own constituencies, he said.

From a pragmatic perspective, Albo said the Fairfax County delegation must look at a transportation plan that circumvents the state transportation formula altogether.

The Republican suggested increases on regional taxes or fees that are exclusive to Northern Virginia. If the fees or taxes are only applied locally, then they would not have to run through the state transportation funding formula and Northern Virginia would get to keep all of the extra revenue raised through the new taxes and fees for its own projects.

"I am one of the few Republicans on this issue that doesn't have their head buried in the sand, saying there is not a problem and there is no need for new revenue," said Albo.

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But the delegate did say he would not support a statewide tax increase, such as bump in the gas tax, because any taxes or fees that apply across the Commonwealth would automatically run through the state transportation funding formula, which shortchanges Northern Virginia.

Albo said, on average, Northern Virginia pays for 40 percent of the state transportation funding, primarily through gas and car taxes, and only receives 14 percent of that money back in transportation services and projects.

"I agree we need to raise revenue but we need to agree not to send more of our money down state," said Albo.

THE TRANSPORTATION ISSUE and Albo's support of imposing new taxes, fees or tolls also serves as a primary example of how he breaks with Republicans when his constituents' best interests are not aligned with the wishes of his party's political leadership.

"Anybody who knows what is going on down there knows that Tom Rust and I took on our own caucus when it came to transportation funding. We thought raising new money for transportation was a good idea and the caucus was not behind that," said Albo.

Albo said it is also untrue that he has "not delivered" with regards to district projects.

The Republican, along with state Sen. George Barker (D-37), helped secure just under \$2 million for the South County Middle School.

When the Lorton prison was closed and the county had planned new development for the area, Albo was instrumental in getting Virginia to help fund the widening of Route 123, which was essential for the project.

He was also instrumental in getting the Fairfax County Parkway completion project, including some improvements for the Rolling Road area, fully funded, said Mike Everett, the head of homeowners association group that represented communities impacted by the project.

"After what he did in getting the money to help finish that project, I am absolutely going to vote for [Albo], even though I vote Democratic," said Everett.

Albo also helped write one of the small parts of the General Assembly 2007 transportation bill that was not thrown out by the Virginia court system. According to Albo, he is responsible for the legislation that gave Fairfax County the power to impose an extra charge on commercial real estate. The revenue from the surcharge is now going to fund improvements at Lorton and Hooes roads as well as new sidewalks around South County Secondary School, said the delegate.

BUT WERKHEISER also reminded voters that Albo was the author of the much hated abusive drivers' fees, in which Virginia residents would have been subjected to extremely high fines for some basic traffic offenses. The fees would not have applied to out-of-state residents, because to do so would required that the revenue be used for Virginia's literacy fund, not transportation projects, said Albo and other delegates.

The abusive driver fees, which initially passed in 2007, proved so unpopular that they were repealed only a few weeks after they were implemented.

According to Werkheiser, they are one example of the failed ways in which Albo has tried to address the Commonwealth's transportation funding shortage, without getting to the route of the problem, which is Virginia's transportation funding formula.

The Democrat also disagreed that an adjustment to the transportation funding formula would be a legislative impossibility, stating that local delegates simply have to start working with a larger definition of Northern Virginia that includes places like Stafford County. If the transportation formula could be adjusted to benefit the outer regions of the Washington suburbs as well as areas closer in to the city, then it might be able to garner more delegate support and stand a chance of passing, said Werkheiser.

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Several critics from the Democratic Party have also said the abusive driver fees are also a prime example of one way in which he uses his legislative post to benefit his personal law practice.

Albo, like many other members of the General Assembly, defends citizens appearing for drunken driving charges and other traffic violations. If the abusive driver fees had stayed in place, Virginia residents would have been faced with fee increases of several hundred dollars for some traffic offenses and that might have made them more willing to hire a lawyer like Albo for traffic court.

In his defense, Albo has always said that the abusive driver fees would not have directly benefited his or any other law practice because people would have been far less willing to risk a traffic violation, given the stiff consequences.

"That is a strange issue to bring up since the abusive driver fees are repealed," said Albo.

ALBO and some of his supporters have made their own accusations about Werkheiser's personal behavior.

They have said that Werkheiser is a political opportunist, who moved away from the 42nd District after losing against Albo in 2005 and only moved back to the area after he decided to run against Albo again this year.

The Republican likes to cite the fact that Werkheiser and his wife bought a house in Petersburg, just South of Richmond, in between the campaigns. They also note that Werkheiser's non-profit organization work with the Petersburg community.

But Werkheiser said he has lived in and paid property taxes on his West Springfield home since well before his 2005 campaign. He and his wife did buy a house in Petersburg for Werkheiser's parents, a property that they could not have purchased on their own, he said.

Werkheiser's organization may have done some work in the Petersburg area and other parts of the Commonwealth, but the offices are based on Little River Turnpike in the Alexandria area of Fairfax County, he said.

"That would have been a very, very long commute everyday," said Werkheiser.

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