

Budget reduces local transportation funds

Sen. Reynolds: Expect 40% cut

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Virginia localities will receive 40 percent less money for transportation under the state budget approved by the 2008 General Assembly, state Sen. Roscoe Reynolds said Saturday.

That formal announcement will be made in a few weeks, he told the Piedmont Democratic Women's Club at its annual legislative breakfast at Forest Park Country Club.

Henry County Administrator Benny Summerlin said he was aware of the cut that will affect projects in the county's six-year road plan. The money does not go directly to Henry County but is used for secondary road improvements, he said.

Reached at the Martinsville Speedway on Saturday, Summerlin was not certain exactly how much Henry County receives in transportation funds from the state but estimated it is a couple of million dollars a year.

With less money, "there will be less road improvements if they don't do something to fix transportation," Summerlin said.

Reynolds, D-Ridgeway, made the same point Saturday to the 75-80 people at the breakfast.

"I was saddened" that the transportation issue was not resolved before the assembly adjourned earlier this month, he said. "If they don't come up with something quick, it won't get done."

Reynolds said there are no funds available to finish widening and straightening U.S. 58 once the Hillsville bypass is done, and there will be no funds available for the proposed Interstate 73 unless new sources of revenue are found.

In addition, maintenance funds are declining, he said. Six months ago, it was projected that \$1.8 billion was available. Now, that estimate is \$1.4 billion he said, due to declining tax revenues and increasing maintenance costs.

"Every day it is unresolved means when we finally" get to projects, they will be more expensive due to rising land and construction costs, he said.

A year ago, state lawmakers approved a transportation plan that included so-called abusive driver fees and regional taxing authorities to raise funds for roadwork. However, the driver fees were repealed after a public outcry, and the court ruled the taxing authorities were illegal because they were not elected.

The Republican House leadership has rejected the idea of a statewide solution, Reynolds said, but added that “we can’t afford that” if a regional solution does not include funding for U.S. 58 and I-73.

“I will continue to fight” for funds for those roads, he said.

On other issues, Reynolds said economic growth in the state has slowed to 1 percent a year, compared with the 7 percent annual rate of the past 30 years.

That toughened the fight for funds for the New College Institute, he said. Gov. Tim Kaine had included a \$1 million increase for the institute, but the House “cut that to zero,” Reynolds said. “The Senate overcame that” and the institute ended up with a \$750,000 increase.

“Without the hard work Democrats have done to get a majority in the Senate that wouldn’t have happened,” he said.

He also endorsed Kaine’s pre-kindergarten program, which did not get as much funding as the governor had sought. Reynolds said the Martinsville schools can document the benefits of such a program, which he called an important investment “that will produce substantial benefits. It’s the right way to go.”

Reynolds praised Kaine’s announcement last week that the Martinsville and Danville Virginia Employment Commission offices will be spared closure or cuts resulting from the latest round of federal funding cuts to the commission. He said the state is being hurt by decisions made in Washington, D.C., to return less employer-paid tax money to Virginia to fund the VEC services.

The options, Reynolds said, are to cut services or raise taxes. Employers already are paying the tax and since the House leadership has rejected any tax increases, a reduction in services is more likely, he said.

“It’s not that we want to do it; it’s because of the decisions being made in Washington, D.C.,” he said.

Del. Ward Armstrong, D-Collinsville, was unable to attend the breakfast but he sent a letter that club President Wanda Green read. It noted that in the last six years, the state had made record investments in public education, higher education, public safety and transportation in the state.

“But the Republicans in the General Assembly have consistently stood in the way of progress,” he wrote. “They have opposed our investments in Virginia’s schools and in our economy every step of the way. And rather than investing in our commonwealth’s future, they have worked to advance an ideological, right-wing agenda.

“I believe, however, that our best days are yet to come,” he added, noting that Democrats now control the Senate and five new Democrats joined the House in February. “We are now just six seats away from gaining a strong majority in the House”

In the 2008 assembly session, House Democrats opposed a House Republican proposal that would have cut future funding for K-12 education, cutting \$78 million from this year’s budget and nearly \$250 million in the next budget, Armstrong wrote. But they could not reverse House Republicans’ limits on the Governor’s Opportunity Fund, which that is used to close economic development deals, he wrote.

Also at the breakfast, the Mary Sue Terry Scholarship was presented to Bassett High School senior Brandon Wayne Hylton, son of Deborah Keifer of Bassett and Wayne Hylton of Martinsville. At BHS, he is vice president of the Beta Club, a member of the National Honor Society and secretary-treasurer of the International Club. He attends the Governor’s School and has a 3.8 grade point average.

He runs cross country, was a Boys State representative, is a member of CHILL and the Valley Drive Baptist Church youth group and choir, and hopes to attend the University of Virginia.

It also was announced that Kathy Rice is succeeding Green as president of the club.