

Legislators find more good than bad as assembly ends

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By DEBBIE HALL - Bulletin Staff Writer

State lawmakers representing Martinsville and Henry County emerged from a short session of the General Assembly with a sense of accomplishment.

“It was a big day for us,” said Del. Robert Hurt, R-Chatham, at the end of the session Saturday.

In addition to the election of Del. Ward Armstrong, D-Collinsville, as House Minority Leader, several important pieces of legislation were approved.

An eminent domain amendment sailed through both chambers and “was one of the most important bills of the session,” Hurt said. “It was a huge bill.”

Aimed at protecting property rights, the bill squares off against a 2005 U.S. Supreme Court ruling which allows the government to take personal property in cases when it would raise revenue.

“Property owners across this country were outraged” at that ruling, Hurt said.

With the passage of the state eminent domain bill to protect property rights, “we’ve taken a very strong stand, a very strong stand” against the court’s ruling, Hurt said.

Armstrong also supported the measure and said he is “a strong supporter of personal property rights.”

State Senator Roscoe Reynolds, D-Ridgeway, and Del. Danny Marshall, R-Danville, also voted for the bill.

Marshall said he had more calls from constituents on that issue than any other.

Passing the bill “is a win for people The government should not be allowed take property for unspecified” reasons, he said.

Hammering out a budget proposal which includes increased funding for K-12 and higher education, as well as increases for public safety and health care, also was an accomplishment, Hurt said.

The transportation package approved on Saturday drew enthusiasm from some and sharp criticism from others.

Hurt said he was pleased at the passage of the transportation package, which includes funds for the U.S. 58 bypass at Hillsville and money to jumpstart Interstate 73.

Calling the package “a comprehensive, politically viable transportation compromise,” Hurt admits the bill “is not what everyone wants, but what we can be proud of.”

He also was pleased that the bill includes a proposal to match \$7.5 million in federal funds for Interstate 73 that were secured by 5th District U.S. Rep. Virgil Goode, R-Rocky Mount.

The funds are earmarked for planning and right-of-way acquisition for the route of I-73 through Henry County, Hurt said.

The Hillsville bypass money is in the package “because that project is ready to go. As soon as the money is appropriated” work can begin, Marshall said.

When work on the Hillsville bypass is complete and work on I-73 begins, Marshall said “we need to keep moving forward” and get to work on completing U.S. 58 to I-77.

Hurt and Marshall hope those improvements survive any changes Gov. Tim Kaine makes to the transportation plan.

On the other hand, Armstrong and Reynolds say Kaine’s intervention is the only way the bill will benefit this area.

“There is nothing in it for the people I represent,” Reynolds said of the transportation package which Senators first saw Saturday morning.

The transportation package also “was a disappointment” to Armstrong. “I had hoped it would be much better than it was. It does virtually nothing for rural Virginia. It woefully neglects rural Virginia,” he said.

Also, taking “big chunks of money from the general fund” which also pays for education, law enforcement and other areas, is not appropriate, Armstrong said of the long-term draws on the general fund to pay some transportation costs.

Like Reynolds, Armstrong said he hopes Kaine will make the bill more palatable.

Kaine “is pleased he has something to work with,” Armstrong said, referring to last year when legislators failed to approve a transportation bill.

“This piece of legislation needs a major overhaul,” Armstrong said.

When the General Assembly reconvenes on April 4, Kaine “will be able to offer amendments. We’ll see what they are and take up one at a time,” Marshall said.

Overall, he too is pleased at the achievements of this assembly session.

“For a short session, there was a lot accomplished,” Marshall said.

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