

November 3rd Legislative Updates

A quick update on various legislative items coming up that I will be voting on or working on!

Passed

Department Budget Transparency

In order to better evaluate the Mayor's proposed budget, Council will now have access to each department's budget requests. This will allow us to understand each department's allocation compared to their self-reported needs.

Vape Shop Restrictions

We recently updated our zoning to prevent any more new vape shops from being opened within a short distance from schools. These shops had been proliferating quickly so we were able to at least stop them from spreading further into the spaces around our children.

In Progress

Rental Inspection Districts

We are on the verge of approving the legislation to create the Rental Inspection Program! While renters already have the ability to request inspections from the city, many slumlords retaliate on those who report requests, by evicting them or withholding services. Creating proactive inspection districts around these unsafe properties helps the city keep the inspection pressure on these problematic landlords, without exposing the tenants to dangers or retaliation.

The legislation was delayed in order to craft some amendments to limit the program. One set of amendments prevented creating broad districts that might envelop good landlords. Another set of amendments require impact analysis by the city before creating a district, with the intent of predicting and mitigating any potential displacement that could arise should properties be deemed uninhabitable. The amended legislation will be formally introduced this week and voted on in November.

With these amendments in place, I am eager to approve the program to allow the city to create the administrative processes. The creation of the first actual inspection district(s) will come in a later vote, after any necessary impact analyses.

My major remaining concern with the final amended legislation is that it includes an automatic 5-year sunset on a district, which I feel is too short for effective enforcement. Fortunately, Council always has the option to renew a district, and we also have the opportunity to amend the legislation later to lengthen this sunset term. At the moment, I believe getting the program started is more important than delaying it again to amend the sunset term.

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Library

Some legislation is in the works to potentially create increased access to documents produced for FOIA requests. Transparency is critical to good governance and faith in government. In addition to the important work the Council's Offices of the Auditor and Inspector General do to shed light on the Administration's practices, many key discoveries are made by journalists and citizens who request information via FOIA to highlight major issues in the city.

The previous administration may have developed a reputation of poor compliance with FOIA standards. I've been told that at a hearing last month, journalists commented publicly that the new administration is performing much better - helping to get requests filled more quickly and affordably. Still, there may be more that we can and should do to ensure that good transparency outlives any particular administrator.

I am still only partially briefed on the proposals in play, but the concept is to create a "FOIA Library" where items from any FOIA request are posted online to be accessible to anyone else, free of charge. This could reduce the costs for people who could find what they need directly via the library without filing a costly redundant request. There are expected to be two versions of the proposal introduced, with different levels of publication requirements and opportunities for discretion.

There are many caveats and questions that remain about how to safely and responsibly define such a program. There are privacy concerns for certain types of documents, and opportunities for abuse if not administered properly. I will be attending the Government Operations subcommittee meeting next week to hear reports, ask questions, and vote on recommending these proposals before they are potentially sent to the full Council hearing in November.

General Assembly Legislative Agenda

We have a draft lobbying agenda in partnership with RPS and the Mayor's office. The top items include Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, Long-term Owner-Occupancy Program (for tax relief), and a sales tax option for School Construction. We are also lobbying for support for our Water Treatment investments, and our Combined Sewer Overflow transition project. Beyond this, the agenda contains dozens of policy positions related to affordable housing, public safety, school funding, safety net funding, and more.

In Development

Energy Efficiency Program

I have been working with Council Member Lynch and affordability advocates to craft legislation creating a city-administered Energy Efficiency program. This program, to fund home improvements such as better insulation, will have the dual benefit of reducing the rising energy expense for families in the city, and reducing emissions as well.

Green Space and Land Conservancy

Council Member Jordan and I have been discussing strategies with our policy team to increase the city's tree canopy and cultivate more public green spaces across the city. This is especially important as the city continues to develop more land for much-needed residential units.

Recently we had a meeting with the Central Virginia Land Conservancy to identify priorities. We began an inquiry with our administration into one strategy - enacting a tree canopy minimum for new developments and a tree-bank to fund reforestation efforts, and have since received word that the Mayor's administration will be incorporating this program into its proposed zoning code refresh ordinance.

Bike & Pedestrian Safety

Two weeks ago I convened a group of leading thinkers from transit and accessibility interest groups to discuss priorities and legislative strategies for increasing the number of trips our residents take via methods other than private automobiles. The discussion led to a number of top areas of focus, including improving the network of connected sidewalks around transit, legislating certain funding allocations, and more. Stay tuned for updates on the legislative strategies.