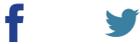


In the Virginia General Assembly session, a focus on the budget



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Expectation for 2017 General Assembly? "No fireworks, no rainbows."

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In the odd years in Virginia, look to the budget and the calendar when it comes to the [General Assembly](#) session.

The state budget, now up to some \$50 billion a year, is a big deal every session. The calendar bears more watching in the odd years because that's when Virginia holds state elections.

All 100 seats in the House of Delegates are up in 2017, and there's a governor's race. With elected officials barred from fundraising during the session, there can be an extra urgency to Virginia's odd-year sessions.

Which means less time and inclination toward controversial legislation or big shifts on major policy during the odd-year "short" session of 45 days.

"It is a big election year," said Charlie Davis, a longtime lobbyist at the statehouse. "I myself would be surprised if there is any cataclysmic legislative initiative."

"The budget, the budget, the budget," said Ben Dendy, another fixture in Richmond politics.

With the 2017 General Assembly session getting underway Jan. 11, the Daily Press reached out to lobbyists from different sectors and with more than 150 years' experience altogether in Virginia politics, gauging their expectations.

"I would think probably everyone's telling you the same thing," said Myles Louria, of Hunton and Williams. "The action's probably going to be with the budget."

Things often flare up unexpectedly. But so far the run-up to this session has been quiet.

There does seem to be a push to continue mental health reforms and to put new money toward that effort. Legislators may find enough common ground to strike a deal on Airbnb legislation, which would lay out new rules for people who use websites to list their homes for rent.

That issue is particularly pointed in James City County and at the beach, where there's conflict between the bed-and-breakfast industry, homeowner's associations and homeowners themselves over taxes, zoning and just how a growing online rental market ought to be regulated.

An off-session review ended without consensus on new regulations, but Virginia Municipal League general counsel Michelle Gowdy said she expects legislation to pass this session.

Just what it looks like remains to be seen, she said.

Dust-ups are almost guaranteed on Gov. [Terry McAuliffe](#)'s proposed cuts to GO Virginia, a new economic development grants program, his halving of funds for a genomics grants program and the changes he wants at the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, a longer-lived grant program that has seen recent controversy over missed job-growth metrics and questionable oversight.

State employees are hoping for raises instead of the one-time bonus McAuliffe has offered. Retailers are concerned with an Accelerated Sales Tax program that requires earlier payments into state coffers, and with an expansion of the state's online sales tax program.

But all these questions will be answered in the budget. There seems little momentum for major social bills, such as a ban on abortions after 20 weeks or legislation relitigating gay marriage. Bills are on offer, but with McAuliffe representing a guaranteed veto and statewide elections looming, longtime observers say they don't expect leadership in the Republican majority to push on these issues.

"I think they are more pragmatic," Davis said. "These social issues distract so much, suck so much oxygen out of the air that it obscures the focus on other things."

Locally, Hampton wants \$9 million toward its National Institute for Seafood and Aquaculture plans, a large request in a year when budget writers are looking for cuts to balance the budget following missed revenue estimates.

Newport News, like other localities, wants more funding for stormwater projects. Even so, the governor's proposed budget was pretty good to local government, avoiding cuts to state local aid, Newport News lobbyist Jerri Wilson said.

Newport News' legislative package is, for the most part, intensely local and noncontroversial, she said.

"No fireworks, no rainbows."

It is possible the legislature will take up massive hospital system reforms by tinkering with the state's Certificate of Public Need rules. These regulations limit hospital expansions, which many see stifling innovation and keeping medical care costs high. Hospitals generally oppose a COPN repeal, though, saying facilities must balance profitable services like imaging with money-losers like emergency rooms.

Reform advocates say they'll push the issue, but there doesn't seem to be momentum to make such major reforms in the short session, particularly with uncertainty surrounding health care at the federal level as President-elect [Donald Trump](#) prepares to take office.

McAuliffe still hopes to expand Medicaid in Virginia, providing billions in new funding for health care for the poor, but only if the expansion program survives Trump's reforms. House Republicans remain opposed, as they have for three years running.

"The uncertainty in Washington is likely to lead to a wait-and-see approach (on health care) in Richmond," said Doug Gray, who lobbies for the Virginia Association of Health Plans.

Of course, there are caveats to any prediction. You never know what's going to happen when 100 delegates, 40 senators and everyone else involved in a legislative session get together.

"One thing I've learned in 17 years now is you don't try to predict the outcome of a General Assembly session," said Josh Levi, lobbyist for the Northern Virginia Technology Council. "You just never know."

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