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## Pitching plan to streamline state bureaucracy, Gillespie tries sidestep a Trump bombshell

By GRAHAM MOOMAW Richmond Times-Dispatch 16 hrs ago



ALEXA WELCH EDLUND

GOP candidate for governor Ed Gillespie speaks at Goochland High School during a debate sponsored by The Virginia Tea Patriots Foundation on April 22.

While most of the political world was transfixed by the drama unfolding in Washington,

Republican gubernatorial front-runner Ed Gillespie sat at a kitchen table in Richmond on Wednesday talking about policies he acknowledged were “not the most scintillating topic in the world.”

The former Republican National Committee chairman and polished political communicator just released a detailed plan to streamline state government and make Virginia the “best managed state in the country,” a pitch laden with the 21st-century business lingo of innovation, automation and analytics.

What Gillespie didn't want to talk about was President Donald Trump's decision to fire FBI Director James Comey on Tuesday night amid ongoing FBI scrutiny of possible ties between Trump's campaign and Russian operatives. The stunning development plunged D.C. into chaos and served as an early example of how Trump's unpredictable behavior could upend Republican efforts to win back the Executive Mansion this year.

During a prescheduled conference call with reporters Wednesday morning, Gillespie said he hadn't had time to “focus” on the Comey news. Asked about Comey again around midday at his campaign event, Gillespie, a former political consultant, demurred a second time, saying he had been “running and gunning all day” on the governor's race.

“No one asked about that,” Gillespie said, referring to the dozen or so attendees at the roundtable event held in the home of former Richmond School Board member Dawson Boies. “They were asking about the opioid addiction crisis. They were asking about our schools.”

As Democrats began to pounce over the silence from one of the highest-profile Republicans running for election this year, the Gillespie campaign released a written statement that acknowledged the Comey controversy without taking sides.

“While it is any president's prerogative to hire or fire an FBI director, there have been many questions and concerns raised about this decision and I look forward to learning more about the timing and rationale as they're answered,” Gillespie said. “It's critical that the American people have faith in the bureau, its leadership and the administration.”

The statement didn't satisfy Gillespie's potential Democratic opponents in the governor's race, who took to Twitter to register their rapid-fire reproach.

"Huh?" said former U.S. Rep. Tom Perriello.

"What a BS statement," said Lt. Gov. Ralph S. Northam.

Northam and Perriello called for a special prosecutor to take up the investigation into the T campaign's possible foreign ties.

Gillespie's main rival for the GOP nomination for governor, Corey Stewart, chairman of the Prince William Board of County Supervisors, again accused Gillespie of being insufficiently loyal to Trump.

"As President Trump works to drain the swamp by firing FBI Director James Comey — a move I fully support — it's no surprise," Stewart said in a statement. "It's no surprise career lobbyist Gillespie is flip-flopping on whether or not the swamp needs to be drained."

In a phone interview, state Sen. Frank Wagner, a Virginia Beach Republican also in the run for the GOP gubernatorial nod, said Comey "interjected himself" into politics and said there was "enough there" for Trump to fire him.

"I think it was appropriate at this point," Wagner said of the firing.

A former political consultant and Bush White House aide who came close to upsetting popular U.S. Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., in 2014, Gillespie has sought to focus his campaign on business-friendly proposals anchored by a plan to cut the state's personal income tax rate for the first time since 1972 and push localities to scrap business taxes.

### Shrinking government

The highlight of Gillespie's new good-government push is a plan to shrink the size of government without layoffs by allowing 1,000 jobs to disappear from the state's roughly 105,000 full-time positions as a wave of state workers become eligible to retire, using half of the savings to boost pay for remaining workers.

Gillespie also said he'd create an "Office of Innovation and Efficiency" that would be tasked with finding \$200 million in savings, lead a "citizen experience redesign" to improve customer service

appeal to millennials to attract and keep them in public jobs, host a “good government hackathon” to gather ideas from the private sector, and appoint a chief operating officer to oversee performance and report to the governor.

“I actually enjoy the management side,” Gillespie said.

The public, Gillespie said, will be able to check the progress of his efficiency initiatives through an online dashboard.

“Ed’s going to be his own watchdog,” said House Majority Leader M. Kirkland Cox, R-Colonial Heights, adding that “state employees are going to like this plan.”

The Richmond region is home to about 30 percent of the state’s classified workforce, according to recent data from the Department of Human Resource Management.

Asked if he feels Trump’s presidency could overshadow his state-focused policy suggestions, Gillespie said, “at kitchen tables across Virginia,” he hears more about traffic congestion, the market for college graduates carrying expensive degrees, underemployment and gang violence.

“Those are the questions that I come across every single day,” Gillespie said. “And that’s where my focus will remain.”

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