

Comments by the Honorable Janet D. Howell
Joint Subcommittee on Public Safety
(Thursday, May 21, 2009)

Delegate Sherwood, I want to thank you for your hospitality this afternoon. The last time we met as a formal joint subcommittee, during the interim, was in 1997. This year, the language authorizing this study also includes the House and Senate Courts of Justice Committees, and that's very important. We have some very significant issues, and they cross the boundaries between the money committees and the courts committees.

In the money committees, we recognize that public safety ranks as one of our highest priorities. We also have to wrestle with the very difficult choices involved in balancing our spending requirements and our revenue resources.

In this regard, the House Appropriations and Senate Finance subcommittees on public safety have had some very heavy lifting to do over most of the past decade. Especially since I became chairman last year, the scope of the budget reductions have been staggering, to say the least. We've had to deal with major downsizing in corrections, especially.

Senator Stosch is not with us today, but if he were, he would advise us that for the next biennium, in 2010 through 2012, the gap between our current services budget – even with all of the budget cuts – and our projected revenues, will be measured in the **billions** of dollars.

Evie Whitley from Treasury is going to reiterate the point she made to us during the session – that we have very real limits on our debt capacity.

What this means -- very simply -- is that we have to put the credit card away. The credit card in this case is the Virginia Public Building Authority (VPBA bonds). For the next several biennia, we will only have a few hundred million dollars in debt capacity – to cover higher education, mental health, water quality improvement, **and** prisons and jails.

In public safety, this means we have to do business differently. At this point, given our current economic constraints, we can no longer continue to approve jail and prison capital projects as if there were no limits. We will have to set priorities.

Fortunately, as Barry Green is going to tell us, the growth in the offender population has slowed down, at least for the time being.

In January, I made the point that the process for approving jail projects is **broken**.

We don't have the funds to open the prison project at St. Brides that we've already built, and we don't have the money to open the new prison in Grayson County next spring. We certainly aren't in any position to approve any **new** projects.

I made the point in January - we need to stop approving any more **new** jail construction projects for the time being – **we need to close the door** – until we decide what our reimbursement policy should be in the future.

And I said then, the policy discussion of how we should reimburse jail projects – if at all – should be done as a **joint** study with our colleagues in the House. And so that's why we're here today.

Dick and Paul have been working together to put together a background briefing for us on jail finance, and that will fill out our agenda today.

They'll have some ideas for us to consider as to how we might go about approving jail projects in the future, and what some of the issues are.

In a subsequent meeting, we want to hear from the Sheriffs and the regional jails, Commonwealth's Attorneys, VML and VACO, and others with a stake in this discussion.

The good news is that serious crime remains very low in Virginia, compared to most other states, and the growth in the offender population has slowed down, for now.

And I don't want us to forget for one moment that a tremendous amount of good work is being done at the state and local level to achieve those good results, and to keep Virginians safe.

The men and women in our state and local corrections, law enforcement, and emergency services are doing yeoman's work, and they deserve our thanks for their dedication to public service.

These are serious times, and I look forward to serious discussion this afternoon.