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News

Vote delays prayer change

Monday, March 7, 2005 7:23 PM CST

Monty Kahlon

Capital News Service

During this year's legislative session, Del. Charles Carrico Sr., R-Independent, appeared to have a sure winner when the House voted 69-27 for his proposed constitutional amendment explicitly allowing people to pray in schools and other public buildings.

However, on Feb. 21, it took only 10 senators in a committee to reject the measure. Now, it will take several years before it is possible to change the Virginia Constitution this way.

"Our country is built upon the Christian principles of the Bible; our laws are formed after those biblical, moral principles," Carrico told the Senate Courts of Justice Committee, where House Joint Resolution 537 met its downfall.

The resolution would have added 80 words to Section 16 of Article I of the Constitution of Virginia.

That article already says that the commonwealth shall not establish a religion but that "all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience."

HJR 537 would have added this passage:

"To secure further the people's right to acknowledge God according to the dictates of conscience, neither the

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Commonwealth nor its political subdivisions shall establish any official religion, but the people's right to pray and to recognize their religious beliefs, heritage, and traditions on public property, including public schools, shall not be infringed; however, the Commonwealth and its political subdivisions, including public school divisions, shall not compose school prayers, nor require any person to join in prayer or other religious activity."

Carrico said the amendment was aimed at protecting the rights of citizens who want to practice their religion in public places. He said Christians are increasingly under pressure by others who do not want them to express their faith publicly.

A few members of the Senate Courts of Justice Committee spoke in favor of Carrico's proposal.

"When Thomas Jefferson was the president of the United States, he even went as far as to require Bible reading in Washington, D.C., public schools. This doesn't even come anything close to that," said Sen. Nick Rerras, R-Norfolk.

But Sen. Janet Howell, D-Reston, took a different view.

"I think most of us think the purpose of the Bill of Rights and our constitutional rights is to protect the rights of the minority and the individual-not the majority. The majority rarely needs protecting," Howell said.

In the end, the committee voted 5-10 against Carrico's proposed constitutional amendment.

The committee members who supported the amendment were: Sens. Harry B. Blevins, R-Chesapeake; Ken Cuccinelli, R-Centreville; Mark D. Obenshain, R-Harrisonburg; Rerras; and William Roscoe Reynolds, D-Martinsville.

The committee members who opposed the amendment were: Sens. John S. Edwards, D-Roanoke; Howell; Louise Lucas, D-Portsmouth; Henry L. Marsh III, D-Richmond; Bill Mims-Leesburg; Thomas K. Norment Jr., R-Williamsburg; Linda T. Puller, D-Mount Vernon; Frederick M. Quayle, R-Chesapeake; Richard L. Saslaw, D-Springfield; and Kenneth W. Stolle, R-Virginia Beach.

Because the proposed amendment failed, it will be a while before any such language is added to the Constitution.

In Virginia, such proposals must pass two General Assembly sessions separated by a House election. (House elections are held in even-numbered years.) Then the amendment must be approved by Virginia voters.

Charles Smith, who had asked Carrico to submit the proposal, said he was disappointed with the Senate committee's action.

"A few of our senators are saying, '69 delegates are wrong.' That's what they are really saying," he said after the committee's vote.

Smith, who lives in Hanover County, said it is important for students to pray in school because prayer will lead to a special bond.

"That would really cut down on the violence and all the problems that we are having in our schools today."

Before Carrico came along, Smith had written letters to all Virginia delegates, asking them to propose such a constitutional amendment in the Legislature.

What prompted Smith to go on such a crusade?

"One night when I was sleeping, God woke me up and told me that he had something for me to do."

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News

Mr. Jones goes to Richmond, with soda and M&Ms

By Holly Hobbs

Capital News Service

RICHMOND - Among the stacks of legislation on Del. S. Chris Jones' desk in the General Assembly Building are Mountain Dew cans, Gatorade bottles and an M&M dispenser.

The sodas and candy keep him going during the Assembly's long hours, but food is also a focus of his legislative agenda this session.

"I'm one of the chief patrons on accelerating the phase-out on the tax on food and groceries," said Jones, a 46-year-old Suffolk native who has served in the House since 1998. "It's been a goal for years to get rid of that because it affects everyone."

Virginians pay a tax of 4-percent on food -a total of about \$150 million a year. For years, many state officials and citizens voiced interest in eliminating the tax, Jones said. To do so, however, the General Assembly must find other sources to make up for the lost revenue.

Jones said he knows how difficult budget and tax issues can be. He served during the General Assembly's 2004 session, which lasted a record 113 days because of a budget impasse. The long session finally came to an end when Jones and 16 other Republican delegates defied the House GOP leadership by voting for a tax increase.

Jones said he's hoping this year's 46-day session will be short and sweet.



"I think this session is going to be a lot calmer than last year," he said, adding that the "overwhelming majority" of issues before the General Assembly are not partisan.

"We've got a lot of issues that go along regional lines. For the most part, we look at what's in the best interest for Virginia. That's what our challenge is - to come up with the best solution for Virginia," Jones said.

However, he has stocked up for the possibility of a longer session than anticipated.

His legislative aide, Susan Clark, points to the reserve of more than 50 cans of Mountain Dew in a corner of her office. She said the office consumes cases of the soda during the session.

"I don't mean we," Clark said. "He goes through the stuff ... I don't know how he drinks it. Yuk!"

The walls and cabinets of Jones' office sport pictures of his daughter, other relatives and retired Celtics forward Larry Byrd. Perched on top of a 6-foot high cupboard are various stuffed animals and Beanie Babies.

"The frog's name is Smoochy," the delegate said, pointing at the green and yellow frog atop the cupboard. "That's what I've always called my daughter. She doesn't really like it when I point that out, but yeah.

"You see all the elephants? And of course, I've got my little Beanie Baby bears."

A small purple bear, wearing a pink sash, sits between Smoochy and another large stuffed animal. It is a Relay For Life Beanie Bear, part of the American Cancer Society fund-raising campaign.

"My mother died of cancer," Jones said. "I always try to keep things that help out with cancer research."

His office contents might look whimsical, but Del. Jones is all about business. Serving on four committees and six subcommittees, he says he has a full plate.

"We rely on the committee system here, and we rely on each other," he said. "You can't understand all the issues and the intricate detail of how derivatives work or financing. So the committee system is something that works very well here, and I think it's served us well."

In Suffolk, Jones is a pharmacist, and he has put his occupation to work in the Legislature.

"I have some bills that I'm carrying for the Board of Pharmacy," he said. For example, one bill would help the board ensure the safety of prescriptions being filled by pharmacies outside Virginia.

Jones said it is important that legislators hear from their constituents to know what they like and dislike.

"You know it's always good hearing from back home," he said.

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