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Sen. Herring's learning curve

By Craig Carper, Capital News Service
02/28/2006

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RICHMOND – Sen. Mark Herring (D) feels like he has "one hand tied behind his back" as he works his ways through a challenging first session that he joined in midstream.

Herring won a special election Jan. 31 in eastern Loudoun to fill the seat vacated by Republican Bill Mims, who resigned to accept a position as chief deputy to Attorney General Bob McDonnell.



Now Herring faces the dilemma of trying to address the issues that face his constituents without the ability to put forth legislation of his own.

"The time for filing bills has passed," Herring said. "But there are other procedures I am trying to work with."

Though senators may not submit legislation this late into the session, new bills may be introduced beyond that deadline at the governor's request. Herring said he will work with Gov. Tim Kaine's office on the Democratic chief executive's legislative agenda. One, Herring said, aims to help volunteers in fire and rescue departments.

"So though I somewhat have one hand tied behind my back coming into the session about halfway through, I'm doing the best I can to use the rules available to me to advance the interests of the citizens in the district."

Herring credits his landslide victory to addressing issues that his Republican opponent, Loudoun Supervisor Mick Staton, didn't focus on. Staton is the son-in-law of former Del. Dick Black, a staunch social conservative ousted last year.

"For me, it was an issues-based campaign," Herring said. "I campaigned on having the right priorities. I talked to voters about where I would spend my time and energy and the issues I would work hardest on."

During the campaign to represent Senate District 33, which includes parts of Loudoun and Fairfax counties, Herring pledged to work with Kaine to try to solve the state's transportation problems and to make improvements in public schools.

"I think that's what really gave me the edge, because those are not Democrat or Republican issues," Herring said. "If this had been a partisan campaign, Republican vs. Democrat, I probably wouldn't be here."

"My opponent had positioned himself as running on a conservative social agenda. Our area has had experience with a legislator who was focused on those issues and was really ineffective in working on trying to reduce people's commute time and things like that."

Herring's victory is also notable considering he had little time to campaign before the special election. No one knew Mims might resign until late November.

"We started the campaign in earnest on Jan. 3, which was the first business day after the New Year," Herring said. "It was truly a team effort."

"We started with zero money and zero volunteers and talked to people who cared about these issues: transportation, growth management and education, and how important this election was. People really pitched in, and we got a tremendous amount of volunteer support all across the district because these issues are so important and this race was so important."

Herring, a lawyer, began his political career in 1999 as a member of the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors.

"I ran for two reasons," Herring said. "One, because I thought growth was out of control and we needed some policies to better manage it; and second, to maintain and improve our system of public education."

Addressing Virginia's transportation crisis won't be easy. On Feb. 6, the House of Delegates killed Kaine's transportation funding plan, which called for increases in the sales tax on automobiles and the tax on auto insurance premiums.

The House Republican majority has refused to accept any plan that includes a tax increase, saying there is no reason to raise taxes when the state's general fund has a \$1 billion surplus.

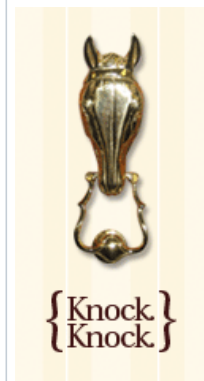
The House Republicans' transportation plan is woven into their budget, which the full House passed last week. Their plan would provide half as much revenue as Kaine's but would not raise taxes. Whether the plan will survive negotiations with the Senate remains to be seen. The Senate plan calls for more tax increases than the plan introduced by the governor.



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Herring, who voted for both the Senate budget and transportation plan after Kaine's plan was killed, says he will "continue to support the governor in his efforts to make sure that we don't go home empty-handed."

Herring said he is looking forward to working with his colleagues in the Senate and finding common ground.

"We need to get something done this session," Herring said. "It may not be everything, but we need to begin to tackle these problems."

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Herring on
transportation

Virginia's transportation problem involves two elements: inadequate money and inadequate planning – and any solution must address both, said new state Sen. Mark Herring.

"The fiscal element is that there are improvements that are desperately needed right now, and in my area, it would be widening Route 7 to Tysons Corner or it would be making sure that Route 50 in the South Riding and Fairfax areas moves more slowly. The Leesburg Bypass needs work. I have been a strong advocate for extending rail to Dulles and into Loudoun County. Those are some of the larger projects. There are also smaller ones that are within the network that we can do smaller type things to make traffic move smoother. So those are really a matter of fiscal challenges.

"I'm hopeful that working with the governor and the Senate and the House, we will come together on a package of addressing the backlog in transportation needs. But an important part of that is also addressing the planning element. I think people don't just want to throw money at the problem and find out after the money has been spent that our traffic is just as bad or worse. And so the only way we're going to have the transportation system turn around for the long run is not only to invest in some of the improvements needed now but also give localities the tools to better manage growth."

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