



Nett files Federal lawsuit—alleges political retaliation over reform agenda

BY VALERIE CURY

Purcellville Vice Mayor Carl Benjamin “Ben” Nett filed a federal lawsuit Tuesday, Jan. 28, alleging that town officials and law enforcement leaders violated his constitutional rights and engaged in a coordinated campaign to remove him from his job as a police officer and undermine his political career. Nett is seeking approximately \$42.4 million in

damages.

The 51-page complaint, filed in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, stems from events that unfolded while Nett was simultaneously serving as a sworn Purcellville police officer and campaigning for, and later serving on, the Town Council.

Nett alleges that town officials misused internal disciplinary systems, ethics rules, and external investigations for political purposes, ultimately leading to his termination, public stigmatization, and prolonged efforts to block his reinstatement despite a unanimous Grievance Panel ruling in his favor.

The complaint names multiple current town officials and law enforcement leaders, as well as Loudoun County Commonwealth’s Attorney R.D. “Bob”

Anderson, as defendants. They include Councilmembers Erin Rayner, Caleb Stought, and Kevin Wright, Interim Police Chief Sara Lombrana, Police Lieutenant Michael Holman, Acting Town Manager Diana Hays, and Human Resources Director LaDonna Snellbaker—each sued in both their individual and official capacities.

Nett joined the Purcellville Police Department in 2022. According to the filing, he graduated first in his class from the Northern Virginia Criminal Justice Training Academy, received the Sheriff’s Meritorious Action Award in 2023, and was named Purcellville Police Officer of the Year in 2024.

In early 2024, Nett announced his candidacy for Town Council in a non-partisan election. He ran as part of an

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informal slate with Christopher Bertaut, who sought the mayor’s seat, and Susan Khalil. The slate campaigned on reforming town government, including lowering utility costs, opposing certain commercial and industrial annexations, and streamlining municipal operations.

According to the complaint, the platform also included proposed changes to the Police Department, which Nett and

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State Bills would destroy local governance in Purcellville

BY VALERIE CURY

Two bills currently in the Virginia General Assembly could reshape governance in Purcellville, potentially restricting council votes, suspending officials facing charges, and mandating costly studies—raising questions about local autonomy, transparency, and the balance of power between state and town.

Purcellville Vice Mayor Ben Nett says he has been the target of a politically motivated campaign since announcing his candidacy for Town Council in 2024—a

campaign he says has included false allegations, internal investigations, criminal charges, and coordinated efforts by political rivals to remove him from office.

Nett, a former Purcellville police officer, was terminated following an internal investigation but was later exonerated by the Town of Purcellville’s independent Grievance Panel. In June 2025, the Panel unanimously ordered his reinstatement with back pay and reimbursement of attorney fees, consistent with the relief granted in the Town’s Grievance Policy. As of publication, the

town has not implemented the Panel’s decision, despite a 14-day compliance period outlined in the Grievance Panel policy.

Nett had also followed the advice of the Town Attorney and the Virginia Conflict of Interest and Ethics Advisory Council, recusing himself from council votes that could present potential conflicts related to his employment.

Now, two bills introduced during the 2026 session of the Virginia General Assembly—House Bill 505 and

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BRMS art teacher wins Northern Region Art Education Award

Elizabeth O'Neill, an art educator at Blue Ridge Middle School, has earned the prestigious Northern Virginia Art Education Association Middle Level Award in recognition of her exceptional contributions to visual arts education across the Commonwealth.

In addition, O'Neill has been elected as the newest middle level director of VAEA, a role that will allow her to leverage her expertise to advance and enrich the quality of art education statewide.

COMMUNITY

O'Neill teaches sixth and seventh-grade art as well as 3D art courses. She has long been known for her innovative approach to fostering creativity among her students. Her classroom is a hub of imagination, where young artists explore diverse materials, techniques, and cultural perspectives.

The northern region VAEA Award for the middle level recognizes educators who demonstrate excellence in teaching, leadership, and advocacy for the arts. O'Neill's commitment to her students and her passion for art education exemplify these qualities. Her work inspires creativity and builds confidence and problem-solving skills that extend beyond the art room.

Sixth grade student, Will Bocek said, "Ms. O'Neill is a good teacher, makes learning art fun, and gets students to really use their imaginations."

Eighth grade 3D Art student, Margaret Pinkston said, "I feel that Ms. O'Neill is very good with helping students expand their thinking on other ways to use their creativity in their pieces of art, rather than staying with the techniques you like. Ms. O'Neill helps push your creativity to another level using different techniques."

When reflecting on her career as an art teacher, O'Neill stated, "Teaching art to middle school students is my happy place. They inspire me with their creativity every single day. For me, they are the perfect age—they are in the process of developing their own identity and something I introduce to them at this level, whether it be a concept, project, technique or medium, could develop



into a continued interest or a life-long passion."

As O'Neill extends her leadership beyond the classroom as the newly elected middle level director for VAEA, she will guide the organization's mission to support and advance visual arts education across Virginia. The association provides professional development, advocacy, and resources for art educators statewide.

"My vision for this new role is to provide a connection point for middle level educators throughout the year but mainly at our state conference. Oftentimes as middle level educators we feel isolated and "lost in the middle" between elementary and high school. We deal with a unique population of students that can, at times, present challenges. When we meet as a middle level at VAEA conference, it's important that we make connections and form working relationships. We are each other's greatest resource," said O'Neill.

Blue Ridge Middle School Principal, Brion Bell expressed pride in O'Neill's achievement, "Ms. O'Neill brings out the hidden artist in every student. Whether it's a sixth grader new to art or an experienced eighth grader on the potter's wheel, she opens the door to meaningful creative opportunities. Many future artists, designers, architects, engineers, and animators begin their journeys in her classroom, guided by her vision

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Rayner cites nonexistent Tourism Zone in council debate

BY VALERIE CURY

At the Jan. 13 Purcellville Town Council meeting, Council Member Erin Rayner argued for retaining—and expanding—the

GOVERNMENT

Town's Tourism Zone, calling it a valuable marketing and economic-development tool. In support of her position, Rayner cited what she said was the Tourism Zone adopted by the Town of Leesburg “a couple years ago.”

While the benefits of tourism are not in dispute, the Tourism Zone is an ordinance that includes tax waivers and regulatory flexibility—issues that raise zoning and fiscal accountability concerns.

At the meeting, Rayner said, “It’s a great marketing tool. Leesburg came in and adopted one a couple years ago. So, I did some research and I called down to Leesburg’s Town Council and asked them, ‘Why did you feel it was important to bring in a Tourism Zone to Leesburg?’”

Rayner said she was told that tourism “brings opportunity” and “makes our economy grow,” adding, “It’s all the reasons we should keep it in Purcellville.”

Despite Rayner’s claim, Leesburg does not have a Tourism Zone. The Purcellville Town Council is scheduled to vote on the future of the Tourism Zone at its Feb. 10 meeting.

During the same meeting, Mayor Chris Bertaut asked Rayner to clarify the details of Leesburg’s Tourism Zone at the Feb. 10 meeting, emphasizing the importance of accurate information. Rayner responded, saying, “It’s a shame you didn’t come prepared knowing that Leesburg has one,” and added, “Why should I do your work for you?”

Purcellville’s Tourism Zone is applied to a limited number of parcels within the C-4 Historic Downtown District, and was enacted May 8, 2012, under the Lazaro administration.

It encompasses five contiguous properties along North 21st Street—130 to 144 N. 21st Street—managed by Casey Chapman, along with several rear lots under the same ownership, collectively referred to as the “Old Town Tourism Zone.”

The Tourism Zone was enacted for a single, narrowly defined redevelopment concept—a boutique hotel proposed as part of the initial Vineyard Square plan. The ordinance granted unusual regulatory and

zoning flexibility and authorized substantial economic incentives, including the potential waiver of utility hookup fees, real estate taxes, meals taxes and occupancy taxes—for up to nine years.

All incentives were explicitly tied to the hotel concept and to a required minimum private investment of \$250,000. However, the hotel was never built. The hotel concept was abandoned and the Vineyard Square plan was replaced with a six-story mixed-use project featuring ground-floor commercial space and 40 residential condominiums on 21st Street, a narrow, one-way street considered ill-suited for such density.

That project was approved despite the fact that multi-family housing—defined as three or more apartments per building—is not permitted in the C-4 District, which is intended to function as one of the Town’s primary business districts.

A few years ago, Chapman proposed reducing the number of residential units from 40 to 36 and divided the project into multiple residential buildings. The changes would have required new approvals and conflicted with the Town’s Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance.

According to the Purcellville Planning Department, the Vineyard Square site plan (TP-14-13) expired on July 1, 2025, after 15 years during which some extensions were allowed under temporary statewide COVID-19 legislation. The site plan approval has since expired. No additional extension of Vineyard Square was approved in 2025 after the election of the current Council, whose majority campaigned on platforms opposing large-scale development inconsistent with current zoning.

Any future redevelopment of the property would require a new application and compliance with all current zoning requirements, including the C-4 District’s prohibition on multi-family housing under the Town’s Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance.

Despite the expiration of the project for which the Tourism Zone was created, Council members Erin Rayner, Kevin Wright, and Caleb Stought support retaining and expanding the Zone to the entire C-4 District. Other businesses in town, meanwhile, have renovated and invested

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— View from the Ridge —

When competence is mocked in public service

BY VALERIE CURY

Using modern tools to explore options, gather insight, and shape decisions is not controversial—it's essential. Tens of millions of people rely on AI, colleagues, advisors, English professors, attorneys, friends, and consultants every day to test ideas, challenge assumptions, and strengthen outcomes. Public servants are no different. Rarely does anyone work in a bubble.

Yet in Purcellville, the use of such tools by Town Manager Kwasi Fraser has been treated as something worthy of

mockery—and that is deeply troubling. Hundreds of pages of routine work product—questions asked, drafts refined, policies reviewed—were publicly aired, not as examples of diligence, but as fodder for ridicule. The intent was clear: preparation is portrayed as weakness, thoughtful questioning as uncertainty, and professionalism as something to be sneered at.

Some of Fraser's inquiries explored ways to refine communication or express ideas more effectively. Asking AI for suggestions, examples, or styles is no different than consulting a

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Purcellville's Problem

What follows is a personal reflection that gradually gives way to satire—a speculative look at where current civic habits, if left unchecked, could lead.

Our farm is about equidistant from Leesburg and Purcellville so I'll talk about both, then and now.

Leesburg

BY CHARLIE HOUSTON

Retrospection can bring warm memories or cold anger. I've experienced both since moving here thirty years ago. Memory is generous; the present, less so—and often deserving of a raised eyebrow. The warm feelings started immediately, the anger more recently—I'm not happy about sprawl, traffic and taxes.

Thirty years ago, it was a wonderful small town but, oh has it grown. Groan! When I was a newcomer there were many antique shops downtown. Antique stores generally need low rents, so their predominance was a measure of a slow downtown economy. Now we see restaurants and specialty shops, so downtown is relatively booming. I miss the antique shops, though. The nearest

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SB 648 Is Not Reform—It's Government by Exception

BY RON RISE SR.

When government is healthy, its laws are simple: general rules, openly debated, applied evenly, and restrained by due process. When government is sick, its laws grow clever: written for a moment, for a place, for a conflict—and

OPINION

justified by urgency. Senate Bill 648 looks like the second kind.

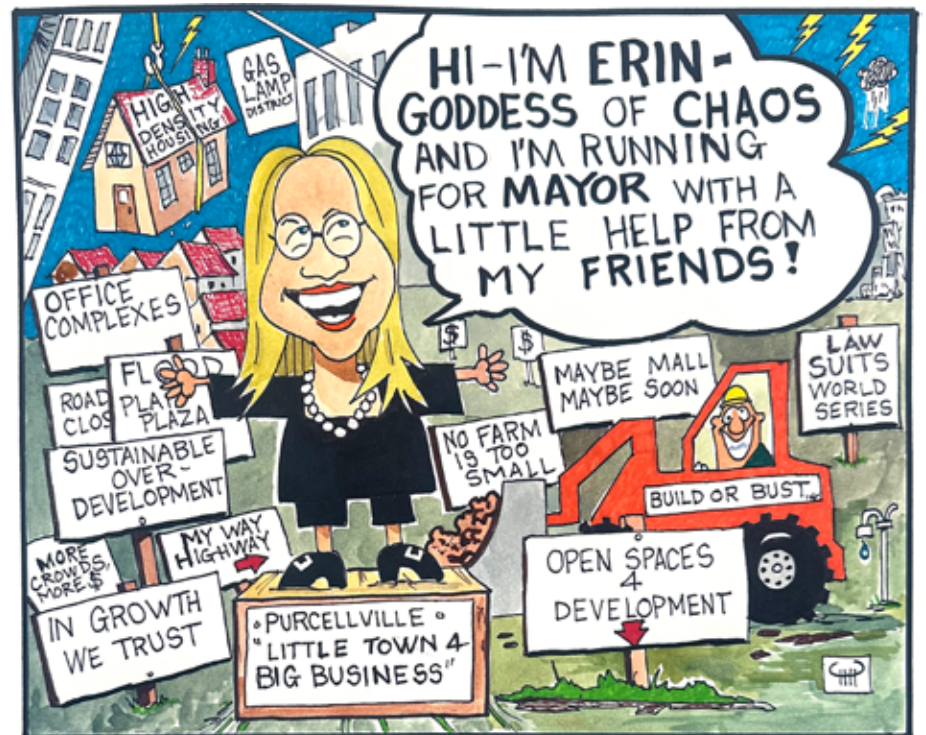
Thomas Paine would recognize the danger immediately. A free people do not fix turmoil by granting new powers that bypass the people's choice. Thomas Jefferson would add the deeper warning: if you must expand power,

bind it tightly—because power, once given, rarely returns unused.

SB648 is offered as a remedy for a town's disorder. Yet it is written as a law of exception—defined by planning district and a narrow population band. If a reform is just, it should stand as a general

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KILJOY BY CHIP BECK



Right? The verbal tick that's eating our sentences

BY KEN FALKE

Over the last several years, I have noticed a peculiar verbal habit spreading through meetings, podcasts, classrooms, and news studios across America. It sneaks in quietly, usually at the end of an otherwise complete thought. It sounds harmless. Even friendly. But it's not. It's the reflexive, unnecessary, credibility-eroding habit of ending sentences with the word

OPINION

“right.”

You know it when you hear it. “We need to improve communication across teams, right?”

“This policy is about accountability, right?”

“I worked really hard on this project, right?”

No. Not right. And here's why.

Language is how we signal confidence, competence, and clarity. When someone finishes a statement

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Lombrana files defamation lawsuit against Purcellville and Vice Mayor

BY VALERIE CURY

Purcellville Acting Police Chief Sara Lombrana has filed a defamation lawsuit against Vice Mayor Carl “Ben” Nett and the Town of Purcellville, alleging that Nett made false public statements that harmed her professional reputation.

The lawsuit was filed Jan. 28, the same day Nett filed a separate federal lawsuit against the town. Lombrana is represented by Westlake Legal Group attorneys Thomas K. Plofchan Jr. and Jacqueline A. Kramer, who previously represented former Purcellville Police Chief Cindy McAlister in her lawsuit against the town.

GOVERNMENT

The complaint includes two claims and seeks \$20 million in consequential damages, as well as \$350,000 in punitive damages. Nett is named as a defendant both individually and in his official capacity as vice mayor.

According to the lawsuit, the first claim alleges that Nett made false and misleading statements about Lombrana over the past year that damaged her reputation and jeopardized her employment.

The second claim alleges that Nett used his position as a town official to further those statements, causing professional harm while Lombrana was serving as

interim police chief.

The lawsuit states that Nett publicly accused Lombrana of misconduct, leaking confidential information and acting with political bias against him. The complaint contends that those statements falsely implied criminal or ethical wrongdoing.

The filing also alleges that Nett made the statements while acting in his role as vice mayor, which the lawsuit says lent authority to the claims and increased their impact. It further alleges that Nett used his public position to encourage media coverage of the accusations, amplifying their effect.

The complaint references several internal matters cited in Nett’s statements, including his attendance at meetings and use of sick leave. According to the lawsuit, those matters were mischaracterized and misrepresented Lombrana’s actions and decisions as interim chief.

Nett’s federal lawsuit addresses disciplinary action taken against him and the town’s failure to implement the Grievance Panel’s unanimous decision clearing him of all charges, while Lombrana’s two-count defamation lawsuit against the town and Nett focuses on public statements she alleges were false and damaging. Lombrana’s case will proceed through Loudoun County courts with dates to be determined.

Purcellville budget vote lawsuit dismissed, council members refile

BY VALERIE CURY

Council members Erin Rayner, Kevin Wright and Caleb Stought filed the civil action in October, asking the court to determine whether the Town Council must meet a supermajority voting threshold when approving a budget. The lawsuit was filed after the three members were outvoted on a tax-rate vote that would have significantly increased taxes, and ahead of upcoming budget deliberations for fiscal year 2027.

GOVERNMENT

The legal challenge followed a 4-3 vote last spring in which the council adopted a tax rate by simple majority. At the time, then-Town Attorney John Cafferky advised the council that state law requires a two-thirds vote only to impose a new tax, not to change an existing tax rate. That interpretation was consistent with guidance previously provided by the town’s former attorney.

Despite that advice, Rayner, Wright and Stought sought judicial intervention, asking the court to override the town’s legal interpretation and clarify how many votes are required for future tax-related actions.

During a Jan. 23 hearing, Loudoun County Circuit Court Judge Stephen E. Sincavage granted the town’s motion to dismiss the case, finding that the complaint

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New tax laws for 2026 that you should know

SUBMITTED BY JOSHUA WOLINSKI,
EDWARD JONES FINANCIAL ADVISOR

The new year brings more than resolutions and fresh starts; it also ushers in several tax changes that could affect your wallet. Whether you're saving for retirement, funding your child's education or supporting your favorite charity, here's are a few things you need to know about the tax landscape in 2026.



JOSHUA
WOLINSKI

More room to save for retirement and healthcare. There's good news for savers: Contribution limits for retirement accounts are going up. If you're under 50, you can now contribute up to \$7,500 to an IRA, which is up from \$7,000 in 2025. Those 50 and older can contribute an additional \$1,100, for a total of \$8,600.

The limits for 401(k), 403(b) and governmental 457(b) plans are also increasing, with workers younger than 50 able to defer up to \$24,500. Visit IRS.gov and search "401k limit increases" for an article outlining the details.

Health savings account limits are rising too. In 2026, individual coverage increased to \$4,400 and family coverage to \$8,750. If you are age 55 or older and are not enrolled in Medicare, you can contribute an additional \$1,000 as a catch-up contribution.

The start of the year is an ideal time to review your contributions and consider increasing them, even by small amounts which can add up over time.

A catch-up rule for high earners. If you're 50 or older and earned more than \$150,000 last year, there's a new wrinkle in your retirement planning. You can still make catch-up contributions to your workplace retirement plan, but they must now be Roth contributions rather than traditional pre-tax contributions. This includes 401(k), 403(b) and 457(b) plans.

While you won't get an immediate tax break, Roth contributions offer tax-free income in retirement and can provide a tax-free legacy for your heirs.

Expanded benefits for 529 education plans. Families using 529 plans to cover K-12 expenses will see the annual

federal distribution limit double from \$10,000 to \$20,000 per student. The definition of qualifying expenses has also expanded to include curriculum, books, certain tutoring expenses and testing fees.

This change provides more flexibility for families with overfunded plans and increases options for managing education costs across multiple children or beneficiaries.

New charitable giving provisions. The rules around charitable deductions are shifting in two directions. Taxpayers who take the standard deduction can now deduct up to \$1,000 in cash donations (\$2,000 for joint filers) to qualified organizations.

However, those who itemize deductions face a new threshold: only charitable contributions exceeding 0.5% of adjusted gross income are now deductible. Donors may want to consider bunching strategies or using donor-advised funds to maximize their tax benefits.

Getting help. Navigating these tax changes can be challenging, but you

don't have to go it them alone. A qualified financial advisor and tax professional can help you understand how these and other changes affect your specific situation. Together, you can develop strategies to make the most of new opportunities while minimizing your tax burden.

Remember, your individual financial goals and questions deserve individual attention. If you think you might need specific financial advice, please reach out to a local financial advisor.

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Just Like Nothing (else) on Earth: Mount Gilead

BY TIM JON

With few exceptions I've always been a person who's obeyed the laws of the land; I find life is just—generally speaking—much easier that way—probably for everyone concerned. This adherence to our social conventions keeps me from doing certain things and—in today's instance—from going to the wrong places.



TIM JON

I believe the first time I drove along Mount Gilead Road in south-central Loudoun County—was professionally, anyway—in the fall of the year 2008—in delivering mail for the US Postal Service; in fact, it was my first day on the job.

Now I'd been on rural roads before, and I've always enjoyed drives in 'the country;' some of the dirt and gravel corridors in our locality would make the rocks in your head rattle—and if you happen to be driving a mail truck on them, you could lose a filling—or worse.

I don't recall how rough Mount Gilead Road was on that first day, but I'll never forget the scenery along the last section of the way; you see County Road 797 runs right along the top of the Catocin Mountains—running north to south pretty much through the middle of Loudoun.



I had had the good fortune to enjoy some of the spectacular views of the western valley of our County from the property of a friend who formerly lived along that stretch, and I'll always remember watching the sky change as the evening progressed and the stars eventually started to balance the effects of the man-made lights sprinkled throughout the many square miles of that valley. Sense memory recall is an amazing—if profitless—endeavor.

But for today's story I stuck to the road's right of way and enjoyed the memories; I also had to dig into the

personal history vaults for the character of the roadway itself, as the latter portion—that running right along the spine of the Catocin range, is now, for better or for worse, almost perfectly smooth, having been paved over.

This practice usually pleases some of the local residents and motorists along the way, and makes others unhappy, as they feel—so I've heard at many government meetings, that they're losing the 'rural character' of the gravel or dirt road.

I can say from 18 years' experience driving a mail truck on both gravel and paved surfaces, that gravel produces dust and a washboard effect of bumpy surfaces—which can lead to loss of control of vehicles, while they can provide a much better source of traction during freezing or even rainy conditions.

The paved surfaces—to my finding—can be dangerously slippery when icy or wet—but they do cut down on dust. If you've never driven a freshly gravel-covered road in the midst of a dry spell in Loudoun County, you've missed an experience. And, if you've never driven a mail delivery truck uphill, on a paved road, on glare ice—well, your heart probably beats steadier than mine.

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— Remembering —
Janet “Jan” Trout Broaddus

Janet Trout Broaddus of Leesburg, Virginia passed away in the comfort of her home with family on January 12, 2026.

Janet (Jan) was born in Arlington, Virginia in 1937. The second youngest of ten children. She grew up helping on the family farm and honing her ice and roller skating skills.

After high school, following in the footsteps of her family, she started her career with the government working at the Pentagon. She married Jeff Broadus in 1956.

In 1962, their first child Katherine Ann was born. In 1964 the family moved to McLean and built their home. Shortly thereafter they acquired ponies, a cat and a dog. When her daughter was in third grade, she gave up her job at the Pentagon to start her husband’s excavation business which served the equestrian community and local builders. She single handedly ran the office until the late two thousands.

In 1971, their son Randall was born. In the seventies she could be seen totting her children and ponies to horse shows all over Virginia and Maryland and was heavily involved in the 4-H horse program in Fairfax County.

In 1986 she helped launch her daughter’s veterinary practice and

was the voice on the phone. In 1989 the family moved to a farm Leesburg, Virginia where she and her son started an herb, flower and produce business. Antiques though were her lifelong passion and soon she began a full-time business as an antique dealer.

She is survived by her daughter Katherine Broaddus DVM of Purcellville, a son Randall Broaddus of Leesburg, Virginia, a grandson Chase Broaddus and a daughter in law Julia Fahl. Her husband of 69 years preceded her in death.

Janet will be remembered for her unselfish personal sacrifices she made for her husband and children. Always dressed to the nines she was the pillar of the family and instilled in her children the value of a good education and professionalism. The ultimate horse show mom—she enjoyed horses and competition that came with high expectations. Her husband in his last days said “she was the smartest woman he ever knew.”

In lieu of flowers, the family has asked donations to be made to Capital Caring. A celebration of life for her and her late husband is planned for the future.

Online condolences may be made to the family at www.loudounfuneral-chapel.com.

OBITUARY

PURCELLVILLE BUDGET VOTE, CON’T. FROM PAGE 8

did not meet the legal standard necessary for a declaratory judgment. The court concluded that the filing failed to demonstrate how the plaintiffs’ legal rights had been denied or infringed.

Town Attorney Robert Sproul argued that the court could not rule on a past tax vote or issue guidance on future council actions. While acknowledging there was disagreement over the interpretation of state law, Sproul said the court was being asked to issue an advisory opinion, which is not permitted.

Attorney Sarah Bruns, representing the three council members, said clarification was needed with another tax-rate vote expected as soon as March. She argued that setting tax rates is one of the most significant responsibilities of local government and should be

resolved definitively before future votes take place.

Sincavage sustained the town’s demurrer but granted the plaintiffs leave to amend their filing. The council members have until Feb. 13 to submit a revised complaint addressing the deficiencies identified by the court.

Their lawsuit has been refiled on Jan. 30, and will proceed. A trial is currently scheduled for April 15. Attorneys for both sides indicated the matter could potentially be resolved through written briefs, a process that could result in a ruling before the next scheduled tax vote.

While state law is widely understood to require a two-thirds vote to impose a new tax, localities have operated under the interpretation that changes to existing tax rates can be approved by a simple majority vote.

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Ask Dr. Mike

Dr. Mike,

I think my 16 year old daughter hates me. She's constantly grumpy and critical about tiny things like how I breathe, chew food, or yawn or even the things I say. She demands Starbucks or Chipotle runs and calls me a horrible mom if I don't jump immediately to do whatever she wants or needs.

On paper, she's great kid. She's an A/B student, socially active, a competitive athlete, kind and giving to others, does her chores, but nothing seems good enough for her, and she puts a huge amount of pressure on herself. I feel lost, worn down, and I can't remember our last real laugh together.

When I try to offer her support or try to help, she gets defensive and says that I don't get her or understand her. We've had some big blowups lately, and I've snapped in anger when I'm at my wits end, which has made things worse. So, how do I manage my temper, find calm in the storm, and start rebuilding our bond without pretending the answer is in a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon?

—Overwhelmed Mom in Loudoun

Dear Overwhelmed Mom,

Parenting teens has never been easy; and these days, it can sometimes feel like trying to assemble IKEA furniture with no instructions while standing in quicksand. And parenting in Loudoun County, where the pressures and demands on teens can be high, adds even more stress to the mix.

For teens, there's the social maze, the academic grind, and the sports competition that arguably seems to start in diapers in Loudoun County. On top of that,

Ask Dr. Mike



DR. MIKE

so many teens now see a future full of uncertainty and stress—there's college stress, career stress, and high costs, and those added pressures can be daunting.

As parents, it's easy to react by answering a slammed door with a lecture, or by ping ponging snarky and sarcastic statements with your own snarky and sarcastic returns. But when both you and your teen are dysregulated, it's like two pianos slightly out of tune; no amount of volume will make the song sound right.

So, start with a deep and mindful breath. Then take another one, and another one, and another one. Before you

respond to your daughter, inhale deeply enough to remind your nervous system who's in charge. You can't help her find calm if you're standing in the center of your own storm.

Also, I recommend that you focus on self-care; self-care isn't indulgence, it's parenting armor. Go for that walk and call a good friend who lets you be honest without immediately giving you a TED Talk on grounding techniques. And go easy on the wine because a buzzed heart-to-heart most often feels wiser than it actually is; your daughter could become more defensive if she thinks you've been drinking.

Keep in mind that what your daughter needs most from you isn't a motivational speech but your steady presence. She's going through a developmentally intense time, living in an era where identity is curated, grades are weighted, and futures can feel auctioned off to whoever tolerates the most pressure. Changing brain rewiring, hormone surges, and a push for independence in our social media-saturated world, makes solidifying a solid identity in the world as a young lady even more difficult.

And remember that relating to her doesn't mean fixing everything or

insisting you "get it" because you were once her age. It means showing up, staying curious, and remembering that your calm gives her permission to find her own.

Think of it like coaching someone through really bad turbulence from the seat beside them where you can't fly the plane to ease their anxiety, but you can remind them it will level out eventually. So, keep your oxygen mask on, use humor where you can, and adjust to the ever changing moments—love her loudly when she needs it and gently when she needs it; that's better than perfect advice.

In the end, what your daughter needs most from you is love, patience, space, and reassurance that her missteps and problems are survivable. And on that less frequent occasion where she needs a hug or a shoulder to cry on, be there. She won't be a teenager forever, and with time and a few small shifts on your part, your connection can absolutely grow stronger again.

Michael Oberschneider, Psy.D. "Dr. Mike" is a clinical psychologist in private practice. He can be reached at 703-723-2999, and is located at 44095 Pipeline Plaza, Suite 240, Ashburn.

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Court examines whether recall claims match voter petition

BY VALERIE CURY

A recall effort targeting Purcellville's Vice Mayor Ben Nett is now focused on whether the case being pursued in court aligns with the allegations voters approved when they signed the recall petition.

On Dec. 22, 2025, Stafford Commonwealth's Attorney Eric L. Olsen filed a Bill of Particulars listing seven grounds for pursuing Nett's removal. According to Nett's attorney, Jennifer L. McGovern, who represents him through counsel retained by the Town's insurance carrier, says none of these grounds correspond directly to the claims included in the petition circulated among Purcellville voters.

On Jan. 12, McGovern filed a Respondent's Motion to Strike and Demurrer on Nett's behalf. A demurrer is a legal motion arguing that the claims as stated are legally insufficient for the court to proceed. The motion contends that the recall cannot move forward based on allegations that were never presented to or approved by voters.

Under Virginia law, a recall petition must clearly state the acts or omissions that form the basis for removal. Prosecutors can

clarify those allegations in a Bill of Particulars but they may not introduce entirely new claims after signatures have been gathered. McGovern told the court that Olsen's filing introduces allegations not included in the petition.

"The Bill of Particulars ignores the allegations made in the Removal Petition and asserts entirely new grounds which have not been verified under oath by the qualified voters of the Town of Purcellville," McGovern wrote. She said many of the claims are vague and fail to give Nett adequate notice of the accusations against him.

The recall petition signed by voters alleges that Nett engaged in misconduct, including violations of Virginia's Freedom of Information Act, misuse of office, incompetence, neglect of duty, and conflicts of interest. The petition specifically references Nett conducting Town business using personal email and phone accounts and his involvement in the termination of former Town Manager Rick Bremseth and the hiring of Kwasi Fraser without adequate public process. These allegations have not been adjudicated or proven in any

CONTINUED ON PAGE 23 »

BOS assigns \$194M FY25 budget surplus to one-time priorities

BY SOPHIA CLIFTON

On Jan. 6, the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors approved a detailed plan for using nearly \$194 million in unassigned Fiscal Year 2025 General Fund balance, directing the surplus toward one-time needs, reserve strengthening, capital contingencies, and a slate of supervisor priorities.

The action, taken during the Board's regular business meeting, reflects the county's long-standing fiscal policy of avoiding recurring spending commitments when allocating prior-year fund balance.

According to county staff, the FY 2025 surplus totaled \$194,392,805, a figure lower than the balances realized in the two preceding fiscal years but consistent with revenue forecasts. As the staff report explained, "The amount of

unassigned General Fund balance at the end of FY 2025 is lower than the ending balance in FY 2023 and FY 2024, which is consistent with staff's forecasts about revenue growth."

The surplus was driven largely by higher-than-expected tax revenues on data center equipment, a revenue stream that continues to outperform conservative projections. By comparison, the FY 2024 surplus reached \$259 million.

Staff emphasized that Loudoun's fiscal policies strictly limit how unassigned fund balance may be used. The Jan. 6 staff memorandum stated that "Prior year General Fund balance should only be used for one-time purposes and be aligned to existing projects and priorities of the Board." That principle framed the entire allocation package ultimately adopted by supervisors.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18 »



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Cabin Fever Film Fest Raised the Temperature in Purcellville

BY VALERIE CURY

Winter chills didn't stand a chance last weekend as filmmakers and film lovers packed the Franklin Park Visual and Performing Arts Center for the ninth annual Purcellville Cabin Fever Film Festival, held Friday, Jan. 30, and Saturday, Jan. 31.

The two-day festival showcased 12 short films created by Loudoun County residents or filmmakers

with strong ties to the area, offering audiences a mix of documentaries, narratives and experimental works.

This year's theme, "Independence," was selected in recognition of the nation's upcoming 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Awards were presented in several categories, including Best in Theme, Festival Favorite and Most Likely to Break Cabin Fever. Festival organizers partnered with Loudoun VA250 to present the Best

in Theme award, while an additional honor—Best Friend to Nature—was sponsored by the Friends of Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve.

Four films were screened Friday evening, Jan. 30, followed by a small reception. The festival continued Saturday, Jan. 31, with eight additional

films and concluded with an awards presentation after the final screening.

"Bandida," by Rikki Elizabeth Stinnette and Drew Broadhurst, was awarded first prize for Most likely to Break Cabin Fever. The award was sponsored by the Purcellville Arts Council.

The Best in Theme award was to be presented by Loudoun VA250 representatives, who were unable to attend due to snow. In a statement, Loudoun VA250 said, "Congratulations to all the filmmakers this year. This was a difficult decision, as each film presented a unique interpretation of the theme 'Independence,' but we would like to congratulate Jonathan Wymer for his film "But Did It Happen."

For the first time in the festival's history, the Audience Favorite award resulted in a tie between "Treasure Hunt - Misfortune" by Josh Ryan and "The Impossible Stitch" by Phil Erickson and Penny Hauffe. A newly added fourth award, Best Friend to Nature, was presented to "Just Driving," also by Ryan.

Elizabeth Bracey, managing director of the Franklin Park Visual and Performing Arts Center, said, "You have artists that are trying things for the first time, and you have artists that do this as a job and to be able to feature all of those

types of film makers in this festival there together, to be able to make connections with the filmmaking community is really what inspires Amy and Liz and I and everybody else to keep this going."

Amy Ware is the Town of Purcellville Parks and Recreation Division Manager and oversees the planning and coordination of the Cabin Film Festival. Liz Jarvis originated the idea for the Cabin Film Festival while serving on the Purcellville Arts Council and remains involved with the festival.

Bracey said the Cabin Fever Film Festival is a wonderful opportunity and "we are just so thrilled to be to be able to continue to encourage it."

Films shown Friday centered on the environmental theme Best Friend to Nature. Those selections included:

- "Blue Between Us," Evan Jackson
- "John Muir's Story," Tara Roberts Zabriskie
- "Just Driving," Josh Ryan
- "Treasure Hunt - Misfortune," Josh Ryan

Saturday's lineup focused largely on interpretations of the festival's Independence theme, with filmmakers approaching the concept from a variety of personal,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 23 »



Franklin Park Arts Center

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Lunar New Year Celebration

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Music for Dessert Concert Series

Wednesdays at 7:00pm Tickets: \$15 per performance

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- 2/4 Loud 'N Clear, classic rock
- 2/11 Brandon Kennedy, Irish folk & rock
- 2/18 Scott Ainslie, blues artist
- 2/25 Junwen Liang, classical piano

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Michelangelo - Love and Death

Thurs., February 6 at 5:00pm Tickets: \$10

Michelangelo - Love and Death takes a cinematic journey through the print and drawing rooms of Europe through the great chapels and museums of Florence, Rome and the Vatican to seek out a deeper understanding of this legendary figure's tempestuous life, his relationship with his contemporaries and his incredible legacy. After the film enjoy refreshments and post-film discussion while you take in the exhibit "Freedom" in our gallery. Sponsored by Friends of Franklin Park Arts Center.

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Middleburg celebrates America's 250th Anniversary

The Town of Middleburg will hold a year full of great events celebrating America's Semiquincentennial, its 250th Anniversary. America's declaration of independence from Great Britain in 1776 will be marked throughout the country in 2026, and Middleburg will host numerous events in celebration.

The Town of Middleburg and its partners kicked-off the celebration on Jan. 23, at the Middleburg Community Center. This initial event was a community celebration of our spirit of independence, key tenets of the American form of government, and the history of Middleburg.

The event included patriotic songs by local groups, remarks by Mayor Bridge Littleton, and comments from members of the community.

Prior to the event, an official raising of the ceremonial Town of Middleburg America 250 flag was held at the Town Hall, with a performance of the National Anthem. Participants paraded to the Middleburg



CONTINUED ON PAGE 25 »

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FY25 BUDGET SURPLUS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

Of the \$194 million total, \$34 million was dedicated to one-time needs in FY 2027, including capital projects, the Capital Asset Preservation Program, and debt service funds. Staff noted that setting aside funding for future capital years can help smooth local tax funding requirements and reduce reliance on borrowing as projects advance.

A significant portion of the surplus was directed toward strengthening county reserves and internal funds. Supervisors approved \$25 million for the county's Fiscal Reserve, maintaining compliance with Board-adopted policy targets.

Additional allocations included \$11.7 million to the county's self-insurance fund, intended to rebuild health insurance claim reserves that had declined in recent years. The staff report noted that the county's health insurance actuary

recommends maintaining a claims reserve equal to 18 percent of annual expenditures.

The Board also approved \$45 million to replenish Capital Improvement Plan contingencies, restoring flexibility for land acquisition, project cost escalation, and other unforeseen capital needs.

Other internal investments included \$10 million for cybersecurity expenses and \$3.5 million for vehicle replacements, both framed as one-time capital or infrastructure needs rather than ongoing operational expansions.

The funding plan also included \$17.5 million for Loudoun County Public Schools, directed primarily toward school system health insurance costs. Staff outlined how rising claims and past premium holidays during the pandemic had drawn down reserves in the LCPS self-insurance fund, making a one-time infusion appropriate.

Beyond reserves and capital contingencies, supervisors allocated funding for several Board-identified priorities, including \$5.8 million for pilot transit projects, \$10.5 million for the county's Housing Fund, \$12 million for general services facilities design, \$950,000 for a crosswalk safety study at Whitfield Place, and \$2 million for invasive species removal.

Some of the FY 2025 fund balance was initially directed toward establishing a Federal Impacts Contingency Fund, amid concerns that federal funding or programs could be reduced. Under the staff recommendation, \$16.4 million was to be allocated to that contingency.

However, during the January 6 meeting, Supervisor Laura A. TeKrony (D-Little River) successfully proposed redirecting \$750,000 from the federal impacts fund to support design work for the Goose Creek Stone Bridge

rehabilitation project, planned by NOVA Parks.

TeKrony described the bridge as a significant historic asset and emphasized the urgency of addressing its condition. "The recent engineering report recommends an extensive rebuild that would involve disassembly of much of the bridge and reassembly to bring it back to the condition like it was 200 years ago," she said. "Such a repair would secure the future of this iconic structure for generations."

The Goose Creek Stone Bridge, which spans four arches and dates back more than two centuries, played a role in the Battle of Upperville. The full rehabilitation project is estimated to cost between \$4.5 million and \$6.5 million, with TeKrony's motion covering only the design phase.

While a majority of supervisors

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20 »

OPINION: PURCELLVILLE'S PROBLEMS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

Home Depot back then was in Sterling—an inconvenience when you're renovating an old, worn-out farm. I don't remember any shops selling men's clothing. I also don't remember much traffic.

In truth, some change has been good. I hate to admit it, but I sometimes visit the Outlet Mall. We have our own Home Depot and more places to eat.

Back then I read the community newspapers but remained generally unaware of local government and politics. That's the way it should be and still is in Leesburg—a government that functions with little tumult.

Purcellville

When I was new to Loudoun I loved this little town. Down-home restaurants serving blue plate specials. Antique shops. Some great businesses like Browning Equipment and Nichols Hardware. Now? Pretty farms south of town desecrated with banal subdivisions. Horrid traffic. And constant squabbles at the Town Council, Lordy, featuring loud political venom and personal attacks. It's puerile, infantile and irksome.

From eight crow-miles away I can hear the yawping and yelling when its Town Council meets. A knowledgeable friend summed it up, "Lord knows they need some sanity in that town."

Congress is generally held in low regard, and has some razor-thin

decisions but generally avoids the name calling and personal attacks (and lawsuits) that characterize Purcellville politics. In other words, it's possible for governing bodies to have a modicum of respectfulness. So why not in Purcellville?

Sometimes it's difficult to figure out what sets Purcellville's Council to nasty one-sided attacks. As near as I can tell, there are two camps on the Council, the good guys and the bad guys. The good guys are leery of growth. The bad guys love it. They also indulge in sleazy, personal attacks.

With bushels of developer money, if a mythical Council member and mayoral candidate whom I call "Eris" and her slate carry the fall elections, be prepared for more taxes, more growth and more traffic. And more homegrown puerility.

The Town Council is generally divided by one seat so many contentious decisions regarding growth and spending are decided by a single vote. There's much arguing about annexations, taxes, the police department and Town government in general. Many pro-growth land use ideas were not supported by the town's Comprehensive Plan or its Zoning Ordinance, so if Eris becomes mayor, she could push her lackeys on a new Town Council to change both foundational documents to suit her growth agenda.

Dramatis Personae

That term means the people in the play, and I'll name three of them:

Former mayor Kwasi Fraser who seems honest, innovative and a victim of dirty politics that would impress the ghost of Richard Nixon. Ben Nett, though I don't know him but believe the favorable opinions of people whose judgement I trust. Those are among the good guys.

There are three slick and well-connected bad guys and gals.

I already mentioned the third name, "Eris." (As I said, much of this is fantasy. Or perhaps a bad dream.) Her parents may have gotten "Eris" from a book on Greek mythology but they should have read it more carefully: Eris was the goddess of strife and discord. That given name is very appropriate now. She's likely the puppet-master behind a lot of Council shenanigans and already has a posse that disrupts meetings and slings mud.

Mythical Eris is running for mayor. If elected, that could be the end of Purcellville as we know it.

A Bad Dream: Purcellville in 2033

After eight years of Eris's reign the Council has expanded to 23 members following a 6 -3 vote on her motion in 2032. The fourteen new members were selected by unanimous acclamation of the Council, and include Eris' brother and sister, eight local developers and her four children.

A combination of new debt and higher taxes let this Town Council ram through massive construction projects. Two were aimed at traffic problems. Using its power of eminent domain, the

Town condemned slices of front lawns to widen Main Street to four lanes.

Eris had the town complete the Northern Collector, now at four lanes and expandable to six. (Due to new residential growth under his leadership, both roads are now clogged with cars after only about six months of smooth flow.) She led the Council to a unanimous vote to annex the Valley Commerce Center, approve the demolition of its low-rise commercial buildings and welcome 2.5 million square feet of data center space there.

Eminent domain let the Town condemn the country club, where a Walmart has just opened and a Costco is under construction.

A new landmark is also underway. It's the ballyhooed Eris Tower, a shiny twenty-story office and apartment tower on 21st Street. To kickstart its marketing the developer has just signed a lease for four floors; the space will be the new Town Hall.

Eris will get a corner office on the top floor. Some wags speculate that she might be a silent partner in the Tower's ownership.

Satire aside, I have a wan hope that Purcellville's future returns to the pleasant and civil past it used to enjoy.

A native Georgian, Charles Houston often notes that his home state has less than ten pretty towns and villages, while Loudoun itself has at least fifty. Or forty-nine if Purcellville is lost.

OPINION: VIEW FROM THE RIDGE CON'T. FROM PAGE 6
 colleague, a mentor, an attorney, or an English professor. It's curiosity. It's education. It's the responsible pursuit of clarity and good governance. This is part of a larger environment of political tension and strategic targeting.

Fraser's ChatGPT records from his account were allegedly first obtained through a Freedom of Information request, initiated months ago by a well-connected sitting council member who has played a role to lawsuits and political disputes involving town leadership. That council member is not acting alone, but as part of a minority voting block on council.

That same faction is currently suing the Town of Purcellville over a claimed supermajority requirement for budget approval—despite no such requirement existing. This is part of a broader pattern of litigating and publicizing internal disputes while skirting their own voting records on substantive debates over annexation, tax increases, and large-scale development, all of which are supported by this faction—who has turned governance into a battlefield of distraction.

What followed was predictable. A media account amplified the material not to inform residents about how their town is run, but to trivialize and demean. Routine administrative questions were presented as punchlines. The message was clear—using tools to excel should be laughed at.

Framing is powerful—it determines whether preparation looks like diligence or weakness. Ridicule is an effective political weapon because it doesn't require proof. Preparation becomes uncertainty. Asking questions becomes weakness. Thoughtfulness becomes something to sneer at. The goal isn't accountability—it's to make someone look unqualified without ever having to prove it.

In any organization, especially one with a large, established bureaucracy, change often meets resistance because existing systems, roles, and routines

are comfortable, familiar—and tied to existing interests.

And this isn't just about one town manager. It's about anyone who challenges the status quo—leaders who advocate for right-sized government, fiscal restraint, slow growth, or the preservation of a community's character. When these arguments succeed on substance, the response is often not reasoned debate—it's delegitimization, ridicule, and distraction.

Kwasi Fraser was elected mayor four times, and is the first Black mayor and town manager of Purcellville. He has championed policies that protect small-town character, prioritize responsible spending, and promote manageable growth. Those positions naturally draw political opposition. In that context, turning routine, professional behavior into public mockery appears less like oversight and more like a deliberate strategy.

Here is the reality most people recognize—no serious leader governs alone. They ask questions. They seek input. They test ideas. They use every available resource to make better decisions—because the stakes are high and the responsibility to protect Purcellville is real.

If using modern tools is treated as a flaw, then what gets rewarded isn't real leadership—it's showmanship. Not skill, but confidence for show. Not results, but appearances. In many professions—law, academia, business, and public service—it's standard to seek guidance, check ideas, or use tools to make better decisions. AI is simply one of the latest ways to do that.

If mocking Fraser for using a common professional tool is justified, then we're mocking anyone who strives to do their job well.

Communities deserve better than governance by ridicule. They deserve leaders who prepare, who think, and who use the tools available to them to serve well—and a public conversation that values substance over spectacle.

Purcellville—and towns like it—deserve nothing less.

BRMS ART TEACHER, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

and expertise. She is a bright presence on our staff and an example to her colleagues, making her VAEA award and her selection as regional representative truly well deserved."

The Virginia Art Education Association, which promotes and advances visual arts education across the state, formally presented this award during its annual conference in Norfolk this past November.



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OPINION: RIGHT? THE VERBAL TICK,
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

and then immediately asks for validation, they're not communicating—they're outsourcing their authority. Adding "right?" to the end of declarative sentences turns statements into soft apologies, ideas into tentative guesses, and leaders into people seeking approval in real time.

At its core, this habit is linguistic insecurity dressed up as conversation.

A statement is meant to stand on its own. When you say, "This is the best course of action," you are taking responsibility for the thought. When you say, "This is the best course of action, right?"—you are quietly asking the room to rescue you if you're wrong. You've shifted from leadership to polling. From conviction to consensus-seeking.

And before anyone says, "But it's just conversational," let's be honest: habits shape perception. Repeated behaviors become identity signals. The more often someone punctuates their thoughts

with "right?"—the more they train their audience to hear uncertainty, even when none was intended.

Worse, it's contagious.

One person starts doing it, and suddenly the entire meeting sounds like a chorus of verbal shoulder shrugs. Ideas trail off instead of landing. Sentences wobble instead of concluding. Nobody seems quite sure who believes what—only that everyone would like everyone else to agree.

This is not how strong ideas are built.

There are times to ask questions. Real questions. Honest ones. "Do you agree?" "What do you think?" "Am I missing something?" These invite dialogue and respect the intelligence of the room. But "right?" isn't a question. It's a verbal crutch. A filler word masquerading as collaboration.

It's also lazy.

Ending a sentence with "right?" often replaces the harder work of being precise. If you're unsure whether something is correct, clarify it. If you want input, ask directly. If you believe what

you're saying, say it—and stop talking. Periods exist for a reason.

The irony is that people who overuse "right?" often believe it makes them sound approachable or inclusive. In reality, it does the opposite. It puts subtle pressure on listeners to nod along, to affirm, to keep the conversational peace. Disagreeing suddenly feels rude, like contradicting someone mid-thought. True collaboration requires space for disagreement, not gentle coercion through verbal tics.

There's also a generational and professional cost. In high-stakes environments—leadership, the military, medicine, business, education—clarity matters. When decisions carry consequences, confidence in communication isn't arrogance; it's responsibility. Leaders don't ask the room to finish their sentences for them. They state, listen, and adjust if needed.

That doesn't mean being rigid. It means being clear.

So how do we break the habit?

First, notice it! Most people don't

realize how often they say "right?" until it's pointed out—or recorded. Second, replace it. If you're seeking agreement, ask for it explicitly. If you're making a statement, let it land. Silence at the end of a sentence is not a failure; it's punctuation.

Finally, remember this: confidence is not about being correct all the time. It's about being willing to stand behind your words long enough for them to be evaluated.

Say what you mean. Mean what you say. And then stop talking.

Right?

No. Just stop.

Ken Falke, the former CEO of A-T Solutions and a 21-year veteran of the US Navy Special Operations Explosive Ordnance Disposal community. Falke is chairman and founder of Boulder Crest Foundation, an organization focused on the teachings of posttraumatic growth. He is also the author of "Struggle Well: Thriving in the Aftermath of Trauma" and "Lead Well: 10 Steps to Successful and Sustainable Leadership."

OPINION: SB 648, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

law. If it must be aimed by classification so that it hits one target without naming it, citizens will not trust it, and other localities will resist it. In a republic, we do not govern by dart; we govern by principle.

The first and most serious problem is Section 1. It compels suspension of a town officer during a felony proceeding—before any conviction—by automatic command. Supporters will say, "It's only temporary," or "The courts will handle it." But in free government, accusation is not verdict, and "temporary" is how precedents are born. If the mere existence of a case is enough to force suspension, then the people's vote becomes a conditional privilege rather than a right.

Accountability is necessary. But it must be achieved in a way that does not convert charge into punishment. Jefferson's remedy would be process: a prompt hearing, written findings of necessity, and periodic review. Paine's remedy would be legitimacy: never replace a public choice with an unelected one under vague authority.

That brings us to the phrase "some suitable person." Suitable to whom? By what standard? Under what limits? An appointed substitute in an elected seat is not a small thing. It moves power away from the people and into the hands of a few. If an interim replacement is truly needed, it should occur through chartered, locally legitimate procedures—not a broad invitation for appointment.

Section 2 and Section 3 carry a different risk. An independent study of debt, infrastructure,

utilities, and major liabilities can be healthy—indeed, many towns could benefit from a clear baseline.

But the bill provides no funding and demands a study broad enough to become expensive and distracting if not tightly scoped. If the goal is truth, then the deliverable must be more than a narrative report: an asset condition baseline, a ten-year capital plan, a utility rate and debt stress test, a prioritization rubric, and clear options for charter governance—with tradeoffs stated plainly.

Finally, Section 4 risks turning town government into a courtroom routine. Restricting votes to items published days in advance may sound like transparency, but pairing it with resident standing, priority docket treatment, and attorney-fee awards invites procedural lawsuits as a political weapon. This is not common sense. It is faction by design. Neighbors will pay the bill in legal fees, delays, and paralysis.

Paine would ask a simple question: does this law strengthen the people's control over their government, or does it weaken it? Jefferson would ask: if it must be done, are the safeguards strong enough to prevent abuse by the next person with power?

Purcellville—and every town—deserves accountable government. But we should not purchase order by weakening representation, and we should not trade liberty for the convenience of a shortcut. In the end, the best remedy for disorder is not a clever statute aimed at one place. It is a principled law, applied generally, restrained by process, and anchored in the consent of the governed.

FY25 BUDGET SURPLUS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

supported the amendment, Supervisor Matthew F. Letourneau (R-Dulles) raised concerns about the budgeting process itself.

"This is not how you should budget," Letourneau said during the meeting. "You should see the scope of what the requests are and then if you want to fund this, you can fund it. We don't have to move this contingency funding today. This federal contingency is sitting there the entire year."

Letourneau continued, arguing, "This motion would be appropriate really at any time to just transfer, and then we could actually look at the budget and decide what year it goes into, and then you would have a decision that you could actually make with all the facts in front of you."

Supervisor Kristen C. Umstadd (D-Leesburg) also expressed reservations, noting that the full impact of potential federal funding reductions remained uncertain and that it might be premature to reduce the contingency fund.

Despite those concerns, TeKrony's amendment passed on a 7-2 vote, with Letourneau and Umstadd opposed.

With the amendment incorporated, the Board approved the overall fund balance allocation package by a wide margin. The decision capped a process that began with staff analysis and committee review before reaching the full Board.

County officials emphasized that the FY 2025 surplus, while substantial, reflects conservative budgeting assumptions rather than unexpected windfalls. The use of the funds for one-time purposes aligns with Loudoun's broader strategy of maintaining strong reserves, supporting capital needs, and avoiding structural imbalances in future budgets.

As staff noted in the Jan. 6 report, aligning surplus funds with existing priorities allows the county to advance projects and mitigate risk without increasing ongoing tax or spending commitments.

RAYNER CITES, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

in their properties without receiving comparable benefits.

Nothing in Purcellville's zoning code prevents businesses from pursuing redevelopment that complies with existing regulations. The Tourism Zone does not create opportunity where none exists; rather, it creates exceptions to rules that apply to everyone else.

Campaign-finance disclosures show that one of Rayner's largest sources of contributions came from affiliates of Casey Chapman, manager of the only properties in the Tourism Zone.

Additional contributions came from a relative of Chapman with two of that relative's employees, each contributing \$10,000. Chapman has also proposed a conceptual development on property near Rt. 7 that would require annexation—an idea residents have publicly opposed.

During citizen comment, Stephanie

Marut said there would not be a cost to taxpayers because the Town doesn't have to apply for reimbursement for monies lost in any potential tax relief voted on by a Town Council for properties located in the Tourism Zone. She said that the incentives are optional and have to be approved on a case-by-case basis.

Paul McCray, who is running for Town Council, said the Tourism Zone is "one of the tools we have to attract reasonable development to an area 21st Street—which is empty and unattractive." He said the tax incentives are worth it.

Joan Lehr, who served on the Purcellville Town Council alongside former Mayor Bob Lazaro, said she was on the council when the Tourism Zone was enacted. "It was put in place very specifically to allow any council to make decisions. It specifically had no specific incentives," she said.

She added, "It would cost money in Town staff to get rid of it—it allows you

to do what you want to do—it doesn't have to be gotten rid of." Lehr also touted the Zone's potential revenue—"If we put a 30-room hotel on 21st Street and you have a 50% occupancy—you'll make \$24,000 a year in taxes." In practice, however, the occupancy tax could be waived for up to nine years under a Tourism Zone, meaning the Town could legally collect no revenue during that period.

While serving on Town Council, Joan Lehr voted in favor of the Vineyard Square project while also leasing a business property owned by the project's owner. She later supported the voluntary upgrade to the Town's wastewater treatment plant, which added approximately \$60 million to the town's debt.

Developer Casey Chapman, who manages the only properties in the Tourism Zone, said, "So asking you to incur cost would not be part of the plan—it doesn't sound enticing." He pointed out that he

has never looked for any type of reduction. Chapman has not built any projects in the Tourism Zone in over 15 years, but he said, "That doesn't mean it can't be utilized."

He also said, "We would not be asking for any reductions in rates—we aren't looking for any reductions in tap fees." He suggested a public-private partnership to "maybe" use the Tourism Zone to get there. "It's premature to eliminate something that you haven't even had an opportunity to have a conversation with I myself about it..."

Contrary to Rayner's statements at the Jan. 13 Town Council meeting, Leesburg does not have a Tourism Zone. Rayner cited this nonexistent Zone to justify retaining and expanding Purcellville's Tourism Zone.

Purcellville carries approximately \$47 million in outstanding debt. Any decision to grant tax relief or expand the Tourism Zone would affect projected tax revenues during the term of any incentive.

STATE BILLS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Senate Bill 648—have placed Nett and the Town of Purcellville at the center of a new political controversy. Nett describes the legislation as the latest escalation in what he calls a sustained effort to remove him from office following the 2024 election.

House Bill 505, sponsored by Del. John McAuliff (D-30), would prohibit members of a locality's governing body from holding any other employment with that same locality. If enacted, the bill would declare a seat vacant if a council member begins or continues such employment after taking office and would bar that member from voting on matters related to former employment for one year.

Senate Bill 648, introduced by Sen. Russett Perry (D-31), applies only to towns in Planning District 8 with populations between 8,000 and 10,000—criteria that currently describe the Town of Purcellville.

The bill would require the automatic suspension of elected town officers charged with felony offenses pending resolution of those charges. During the suspension, a court may appoint "some suitable person" to act in the officer's place, while the elected official's compensation would be withheld unless the charges are resolved in the officer's favor.

SB 648 would also require the town to procure a comprehensive study evaluating its debt, infrastructure, utilities, and other significant liability risks. The study must be conducted by a large public institution of higher education, in consultation

with a chief administrative officer from a separate, much larger locality, and must include recommendations on fiscal priorities and potential amendments to the town's charter. The study is required to be completed by July 1, 2027, and the town would then be required to adopt a remedial plan based on its findings.

The study could let elected officials quietly push developments and taxes residents oppose while shifting responsibility to its state-mandated recommendations.

Purcellville currently retains Davenport & Company as its financial advisor and Stantec as its utility-rate consultant, firms that already advise the town on debt management, infrastructure planning, and utility operations.

In addition, SB 648 would restrict Town Council votes to items published at least three days in advance unless amended at the start of a meeting by a three-fourths vote of the full council, increasing the threshold for agenda changes from a simple majority.

The bill would also grant any town resident standing to challenge council actions in court, require such cases to receive priority docket placement, and mandate reimbursement of attorney fees to prevailing residents.

The legislation is set to expire July 1, 2028, approximately one year after the next Purcellville town election.

"If you don't think HB 505 is the 'Ben Nett Bill,' then tell me with a straight face that SB 648 isn't the 'Ben Nett Bill,'" Nett

wrote in a public statement released Jan. 21 titled *The Plot Thickens*.

Nett said the targeting began after his successful 2024 campaign on reforming town operations, including the police department, opposing annexation for commercial and industrial development, lowering utility rates, and stabilizing property taxes.

According to Nett, Council Member Erin Rayner, now a candidate for mayor, played a central role in actions taken against him.

"Rayner was revealed to be the sole source of the abuse of sick leave allegations against me, upon which the phony Internal Affairs investigation into me, with its pre-determined outcome, was based," Nett wrote.

Nett also claims Rayner provided information that led to his Brady/Giglio listing by Loudoun County Commonwealth's Attorney Bob Anderson, which occurred two days before the expiration of his due-process rights.

"He took this action two days before the expiration of my due process rights for maximum political effect," Nett wrote.

Nett further alleged Rayner was the source of claims that prompted a Virginia State Police investigation, which he said proceeded without investigators seeking to interview him.

Nett stated that the language of HB 505 was first circulated in 2025 by Rayner prior to its formal introduction in the General Assembly.

"The language for HB 505 was first

circulated in 2025 by Councilmember Rayner," Nett wrote.

"Delegate McAuliff denies any influence from Rayner," Nett wrote. "That denial doesn't change the fact that the bill's language was previously circulated by Rayner. Think what you will."

Virginia law already provides for the removal of elected officials convicted of felony offenses. SB 648 would instead mandate suspension based solely on the existence of charges, regardless of outcome.

"But now, we're going to remove elected officials charged with felonies?" Nett wrote. "Any felonies? Even those brought forth by political opponents for purely political reasons? And what happened to innocent until proven guilty?"

The legislation could significantly affect the composition of Purcellville's seven-member Town Council and future votes on annexation, zoning, and taxes.

"These people have taken my job, my livelihood, destroyed my reputation, hurt my family, and are now threatening my very freedom," Nett wrote.

He said the stakes extend beyond his own position.

"That's what this entire drama is about—power and money," Nett wrote. "If they get rid of me and flip the council, then annexations into the town are coming."

Senate Bill 648 passed with bipartisan support at the end of January.

NETT FILES, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

his running mates viewed as top-heavy in command staff while patrol coverage declined. One proposal supported by Nett was eliminating the Deputy Chief of Police position, added in 2017, and redirecting resources toward patrol officers.

The lawsuit describes the 2024 campaign as contentious, alleging that opposition to the reform slate extended beyond political debate and into efforts to discredit Nett and pressure him to withdraw from the race. According to the filing, after announcing his candidacy, Nett became the subject of repeated internal scrutiny within the Police Department.

The complaint alleges that Nett was subjected to multiple disciplinary inquiries tied to routine police activity, including a revived citizen complaint involving a dog-in-a-car call, scrutiny over his presence at an early voting location while responding to a service call, and restrictions on his ability to follow up on that call while on duty. The lawsuit also claims he was ordered to undergo a drug test on the eve of the election.

Nett also alleges that police leadership questioned him about campaign materials, attempted to restrict his participation in community events, and sustained discipline over a body-worn camera issue despite departmental policy granting officers' discretion under the circumstances. According to the complaint, these actions were intended to intimidate him and chill his political activity.

In November 2024, Nett and his slate won their races, with Bertaut elected mayor. The election produced a new 4-3 majority on the Town Council aligned with the reform platform.

According to the complaint, while Human Resources Director LaDonna Snellbaker was updating the Town's Employee Handbook—which had not been revised in nearly two decades—a provision was added stating that an individual could not simultaneously serve as a town employee and an elected town official.

After Nett took office, town officials asserted that this provision barred him from serving as both a police officer and councilmember. Nett sought guidance

from the Virginia Conflict of Interest and Ethics Advisory Council, whose executive director, Stewart Petoe, issued a formal opinion concluding that Nett's dual roles were permitted under state law. The handbook provision was removed.

The complaint alleges that despite the state ethics opinion, efforts against Nett continued. In January 2025, Nett attended a routine agenda-planning meeting at Town Hall while on duty as a police officer, an appearance the lawsuit says was made at the direction of the town manager. According to the filing, a citizen complaint was later solicited regarding Nett's attendance, triggering a new internal investigation.

The lawsuit further alleges that additional scrutiny followed concerning Nett's planned attendance at the Virginia Municipal League's Annual Local Government Day in Richmond. Nett had initially registered for the conference but informed his supervisor that he was taking sick leave due to flu-like symptoms and a knee injury.

According to the complaint, Nett later attended the conference after another councilmember offered to drive him, allowing him to participate without making the trip himself.

While at the conference, Councilmember Erin Rayner observed Nett and later reported to police leadership that Nett did not appear to be sick, describing the encounter as a "gotcha," according to the complaint. The filing alleges that Rayner urged police leadership to pursue disciplinary action based on the incident.

In the weeks that followed, Nett was notified that he was the subject of multiple disciplinary investigations. He was placed under confidentiality orders restricting his ability to discuss the matters and was later placed on administrative leave for alleged insubordination related to sick leave documentation.

The lawsuit says Nett continued to face politically motivated scrutiny. One example, the complaint states, involved an outside investigation that the Fairfax County Police Department declined, calling it too political.

When Prince William County Police took it up, the lawsuit claims the investigation relied solely on statements

from Nett's political opponent, Erin Rayner, and did not interview other officials who attended the Virginia Municipal League event with him.

On Feb. 21, 2025, Nett received two notices proposing his termination. The notices cited his attendance at the agenda-planning meeting, his conference attendance while on sick leave, and alleged noncooperation with the investigation. The lawsuit alleges these actions were taken without proper authorization or consultation with town legal counsel.

The complaint further alleges that Lombrana reported Nett to Loudoun County Commonwealth's Attorney Bob Anderson as having been dishonest. On Feb. 24, 2025, Anderson placed Nett on the Brady/Giglio list, a designation that generally prevents a law enforcement officer from testifying in court and effectively ends the officer's career.

According to the lawsuit, Anderson acted on disputed allegations that Nett was actively contesting through the town's grievance process and placed him on the Brady/Giglio list before he was ever interviewed by Prince William County Police.

Nett was formally terminated on April 4, 2025, and filed a grievance under the town's established grievance procedure. A full evidentiary hearing was held before a three-member panel on June 25, 2025.

On June 28, 2025, the Grievance Panel issued a unanimous 21-page decision overturning Nett's termination in its entirety. The Panel rejected all five grounds cited by the town, including allegations related to the agenda-planning meeting, sick leave, conference attendance, cooperation with the outside investigation, and placement on the Brady/Giglio list.

The Panel concluded that the town lacked clear policies governing Nett's dual role as a police officer and councilmember, found that sick leave requirements had been misapplied, and determined that the outside investigation relied on incomplete and flawed information. The Panel ordered Nett's reinstatement with back pay and benefits and directed the town to pay his attorneys' fees.

According to the complaint, the

Grievance Panel process was properly conducted under attorney Robert Sproul's oversight. Yet when it came time to implement the decision, town officials repeatedly stalled, bouncing the case from Interim Town Manager Diana Hays—who held it for nearly three weeks—to Loudoun Commonwealth's Attorney Anderson, and then to Special Prosecutor Eric L. Olsen, who ruled on a completely unrelated matter.

The case finally landed with a new lawyer who refused to act, and at no point did officials formally sign off "that the relief granted by the Panel Decision was consistent with the Town's Grievance Policy."

During this period, the lawsuit alleges that Anderson issued additional advisory opinions asserting that Nett's participation in certain council discussions and police-related matters violated state ethics law—positions the complaint says conflicted with prior guidance from the Virginia Conflict of Interest and Ethics Advisory Council and Purcellville's Town Attorney.

One opinion warned that Nett could face criminal prosecution if he failed to remove himself entirely from the council chamber during specific discussions—contrary to the Town Attorney's opinion.

Meanwhile, the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services moved forward with decertifying Nett as a police officer. DCJS later stayed the decertification after receiving the Grievance Panel's decision, pending resolution of Nett's due process claims.

In the lawsuit's closing section, Nett asks the court to overturn his termination and require the town to carry out the Grievance Panel's unanimous decision, including reinstatement and restoration of his employment rights.

He also seeks a declaration that the grievance process was improperly halted and an order directing town officials to complete and enforce it as required by policy and state law. In addition, the filing requests relief for alleged violations of constitutional rights, harm to his professional reputation, and interference with his ability to continue his law-enforcement career. Nett has also asked for a jury trial on all claims eligible for one.



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JUST LIKE NOTHING (ELSE), CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

So—no—I’m a little sorry to say—I didn’t park my car and take my chances of trespassing on anyone’s property that day along Mount Gilead Road, in the hopes of getting a stunning shot of the morning sun lighting up the entire Loudoun Valley. I wanted to return home with my skin intact.

Nor did I continue driving past the “End of State Maintenance” sign, posted near the “Private Property” placard as the road narrowed and continued along the crest of the ridge. As I said at the top of the story, life just seems to work out easier, and better for all concerned—in the adherence to certain rules.

But I’ve got these items on my bucket list of exploration in Loudoun County, and you just may see a “Return to Mount Gilead” in this series a few years down the line. The roadway continues—according to those high-tech mapping services—for several miles to the south—just about all the way to Goose Creek—opposite the northernmost terminus of Wild Goose Lane—along which I’ve also delivered the US Mail. In the meantime, I still have lots of memories of the sights I’ve seen along Mount Gilead Road, and now, hopefully, you do as well.

COURT EXAMINES, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

court proceeding.

Olsen’s Bill of Particulars, in contrast, includes new allegations that were not listed in the petition. According to McGovern, these allegations fall outside the pleadings and concern matters unrelated to the claims presented to voters, including conduct pertaining to Nett’s service as a Town of Purcellville police officer and issues involving municipal administration and compliance.

McGovern told the court that many of these allegations involve conduct outside Nett’s duties as a Town Council member. She also said several claims are vague, lack dates or factual detail, and were never sworn to by voters, leaving Nett without proper notice of the claims.

Some allegations involve actions Nett does not have authority to take, such as hiring a consultant or offering positions in the police department, or assume legal duties that do not exist, such as agreeing or not agreeing with consultant findings.

The motion asks the court to strike the Bill of Particulars in full and dismiss both the removal petition and the petition for a rule to show cause, with prejudice. McGovern wrote a recall is limited to the allegations voters approved when they signed the petition.

The court has not yet ruled. At this stage, the case is focused on whether the allegations in the Bill of Particulars align with the claims presented to voters, not on assessing the validity, accuracy, or substance of the allegations themselves.

CABIN FEVER FILM FESTIVAL, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 16

historical and unexpected angles. Films screened Saturday included:

- “But Did It Happen,” Jonathan Wymer
- “Joanna Sanders Documentary,” Josh Ryan
- “A Rook’s Tale,” Bakhtawar Chaudhary
- “The Impossible Stitch,” Phil Erickson and Penny Hauffe
- “Isabel Mayer Testimony and RAW Ministries,” Josh Ryan
- “My Friend Margaret,” JoJo Apfeldorf
- “An Honest Conversation,” Josh Ryan
- “Bandida,” Rikki Elizabeth Stinnette and Drew Broadhurst

The festival awards were designed by Jill Evans-Kavaldjian of Garden Corner Studios, an artist, muralist and decorative painter who lives near Lovettsville. A graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of Fine Arts and a former teacher, Kavaldjian created signed original prints for each winning filmmaker.

The Cabin Fever Film Festival is sponsored by the Purcellville Arts Council and held in partnership with the Franklin Park Visual and Performing Arts Center, which hosts the winter festival as part of its year-round programming.

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Staff brief supervisors on state legislative updates

BY SOPHIA CLIFTON

At their Jan. 21 business meeting, Loudoun County leaders walked citizens through the opening weeks of the 2026 Virginia General Assembly and what new laws under consideration might mean at home. County staff framed their update

GOVERNMENT

as a roadmap, explaining which bills align with the Board's priorities, which items staff are tracking for potential local impacts, and where the county may ask the Board to weigh in as the session moves forward.

The 2026 General Assembly convened Jan. 14 and is scheduled to adjourn March 14. Staff reminded the Board that bills introduced in each chamber must be acted upon by Feb. 6 (excluding the budget bill), at which point successful measures will "cross over" to the other chamber for further consideration. The two budget bills filed this year are HB30 and SB30.

The county's adopted 2026 Legislative Program, the policy guide the Board uses

to evaluate bills, was finalized in late 2025. "The Board's 2026 Legislative Program was adopted on Nov. 18, 2025, and amended and readopted on Dec. 2, 2025," the report notes. Staff pledged to use that program to guide county lobbyists and staff as they engage with the General Assembly.

Staff broke the update into two main sections. First they covered bills that directly match positions the Board has already adopted. Second, they covered a broader set of legislation the county is monitoring for possible impacts. For residents, a few practical themes stood out.

One bill of interest to the county would change local authority over homeownership and workforce housing grants. HB1061 would remove the current cap layers on grants for local employees and school staff.

The report explains that the bill "eliminates the maximum amount a locality may provide ... for homeownership grants to purchase primary residences" for local government employees, including school staff, and "eliminates the requirement ...

that such grants adhere to ... regional sales price and household income limitation guidelines."

Multiple bills would authorize state action to accept and manage significant land in Loudoun for conservation and recreation in the county. A package of bills (HB239, HB500 and SB157) would let the Department of Conservation and Recreation accept roughly 1,240 acres known as Oak Hill Farm "for the purpose of establishing and operating a state park."

On housing affordability and local control, HB278 was featured prominently in the report. This measure would empower localities to adopt anti-rent gouging ordinances, including public notice and hearing requirements, caps on rent increases, and mechanisms to grant exemptions. As described in the report, "The bill provides that all landlords ... cannot increase the rent by more than the locality's calculated allowance ... and states that the anti-rent gouging board ... establish a fair return on investment rent increase exemption where

necessary to offset increased operating expenses."

Another priority from Loudoun's Legislative Program is HB1112, which would allow counties to consider grid reliability when they write zoning ordinances. This bill "permits the governing body of any locality to give consideration to the adverse impacts on the electric grid caused by high-energy users ... and require a high-energy user ... to provide information regarding projected annual electric energy usage ... prior to consideration."

Beyond bills that already align with Board policy, county staff provided a comprehensive list of legislation being monitored for possible future recommendation. These range from wage-and-labor bills such as minimum wage bills to election code changes and criminal justice provisions.

Among the supported measures are bills to expand child-care supports and free school breakfasts, proposals to add certain local employees to enhanced retirement benefits, and measures expanding local authority in select land-use and safety issues.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 26 »

Supervisors approve tourism fund request

BY SOPHIA CLIFTON

At a Jan. 13, Loudoun County Board of Supervisors finance committee meeting, supervisors took a close look at how tourism

GOVERNMENT

dollars are being used, and whether some of that money should go toward better understanding who visits Loudoun and why.

The discussion centered on a request from Visit Loudoun, the county's official tourism organization, to use \$75,000 from the county's Transient Occupancy Tax reserve fund to pay for a visitor profile study. The study would analyze who comes to Loudoun County, where they come from, what they do while they're here, and how the county compares to other destinations.

After reviewing the proposal, the Finance/Government Operations and Economic Development Committee voted unanimously to recommend approval to the Board of Supervisors, with Supervisor Kristen C. Umstattd (D-Leesburg) absent. County staff also backed the proposal, stating, "Staff concurs with the FGOEDC

recommendation."

The funding request involves the Restricted Use Transient Occupancy Tax, a tax paid by visitors who stay in hotels, short-term rentals, and similar lodging in Loudoun County. Under an agreement between the county and Visit Loudoun, the tourism group receives 75 percent of projected tourism tax revenue each year to promote the county and support tourism-related services.

When actual tax collections come in higher than expected, Visit Loudoun is allowed to ask for a one-time use of the excess funds, as long as the money is used for a specific purpose tied directly to tourism.

County staff confirmed that this request meets that requirement, noting that Visit Loudoun's proposal is "for a specific one-time purpose that relates directly to Core Tourism Services."

Visit Loudoun officials say the study would give them a clearer picture of today's visitors and help guide future decisions. According to the staff report, the goal is "to gain a deeper understanding of Loudoun County's visitors," including both domestic and international travelers.

The research would look at visitor demographics, travel motivations, spending habits, and perceptions of Loudoun compared to other destinations. It would also explore how likely visitors are to return or

recommend Loudoun to friends and family.

The final product would include a detailed written report, a summary of key findings, and presentations for local stakeholders. Results would be broken out to show differences between U.S. and international visitors.

County staff described the expected outcome as "actionable insights"—information that Visit Loudoun can actually use to sharpen its marketing, improve visitor experiences, and better support local businesses that depend on tourism.

While the requested \$75,000 is more than the extra tourism tax revenue collected during the most recent fiscal year, staff said the overall tourism fund is healthy enough to cover the expense.

The staff report notes that "the RTOT year-end fund balance was \$56,357" for FY 2025, but the bigger picture tells a different story. "The total cumulative fund balance for the RTOT Fund at the end of FY 2025 is \$4.9 million," according to the staff report.

County policy requires that at least 10 percent of tourism tax revenue be kept in reserve—roughly \$479,000. Even after approving the study, the fund would remain well above that minimum.

Because the request is a one-time expense and would not affect ongoing grant programs or required reserves, staff said it could be approved without financial risk to the county.

At the Board of Supervisors' Jan. 21 business meeting, the visitor profile study request passed, along with other consent agenda items, in a 6-0-3 vote with Supervisors Kristen Umstattd, Mike Turner, and Koran Saines absent.

Visit Loudoun plans to move quickly. The proposed timeline calls for the study to be completed by early to mid-March 2026, with results shared publicly at Visit Loudoun's annual meeting in April.

Supporters say the study could help Loudoun make smarter choices about how it attracts visitors—and how tourism dollars are spent. By better understanding visitor behavior and preferences, county leaders hope to strengthen Loudoun's position as a destination while supporting wineries, farms, historic sites, restaurants, and other local attractions.

The study would also look at how visitors view Loudoun compared to nearby destinations, an important factor as the county competes regionally for tourism dollars.

There was little sign of opposition during the finance committee's review, and both staff and supervisors appeared comfortable treating the study as a strategic investment rather than an ongoing cost.

With strong fund balances and staff support, the study will move forward, giving Visit Loudoun a clearer snapshot of who's visiting the county and how Loudoun can continue to grow its tourism economy.

MIDDLEBURG CELEBRATES,
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

Community Center for the official kick-off of the America 250 event.

The Town's second Semiquincentennial event of the year will be held on Wednesday, Feb. 11, also at the Middleburg Community Center, at 5 p.m. This event will celebrate and honor Black History Month. In 2025, Middleburg embarked on an Oral Histories Project, focused on recording the stories of the African American community in Middleburg and, specifically, the Asbury Church. Ten individual videos were created, with



stories of the local Middleburg community, desegregation in Middleburg, and African American leaders and businesses in Middleburg.

A twenty-minute compilation video was created out of the individual videos, providing a glimpse into the history, life, challenges, and triumphs of African Americans in Middleburg and its surrounding areas.

In addition to showing the Oral Histories videos, the Town will present the initial Schematic Design for the restoration of the Asbury Church, the oldest standing church in Loudoun County. Since 2015, the Town of Middleburg has sought a proper use for this historic and storied building that the Town was gifted. In 2025, the Town began the formal design process, with the goal of making the Asbury Church open to the public as an interpretive site and for small gatherings.

The public meeting to reveal the initial Schematic Design will allow the community to see how the Asbury Church will be restored to some of its original layout and design, honoring the history of the church

and its membership. In addition, the Town will discuss ways that the community can participate in the rehabilitation of the Asbury Church, including through donations and funding pledges.

This event is also free to the public, with light food and drinks available.

Future events around America's 250 will merge with existing events, such as Art in the Burg, Middleburg Day, and Independence Day. More details will be released as those events draw near, and more information is available on the Town website at www.middleburgva.gov/america250.

More information on the Asbury Church is available at www.middleburgva.gov/asbury.

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Former Purcellville officer indicted on drug-theft charges

Former Purcellville Police Officer Timothy Hood, 40, has been indicted on 50 counts of obtaining controlled substances by theft in Jefferson County, West Virginia. Hood had been serving as a Ranson, West Virginia, police officer since 2021.

Each count alleges that controlled substances were obtained “unlawfully, feloniously and knowingly by misrepresentation, fraud, forgery, theft, deception or

subterfuge.” The indictment specifies that the substances were taken from items in the Ranson Police Department’s evidence storage, involving multiple prior cases.

Hood fatally shot Loudoun Valley High School student Christian Sierra in May 2014 but was cleared of criminal wrongdoing in the incident. In a civil trial, a jury found Hood liable for battery and for the wrongful death of Sierra, concluding that he used excessive force during the incident.

The indictment in West Virginia represents a significant development in Hood’s law enforcement career. Authorities will now pursue the charges in Jefferson County courts.

Virginia Valley Vipers, Tree of Life team Up for food drive

The Virginia Valley Vipers are partnering again with Tree of Life Ministries for a community food drive on Saturday, Feb. 21, from 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at Giant Food, 1000 E. Main St., Purcellville.

The drive is part of an ongoing effort to address food insecurity in Western Loudoun County and surrounding communities. Residents are encouraged to stop by, donate non-perishable food items, and support neighbors in need.

“The Giant food drives, with support from the Valley Vipers, have been a huge blessing to our pantry,” said Maddy Cockerill, Western Loudoun regional director for Tree of Life. “Because we can ask shoppers for specific

items, it fills critical gaps in our stock.”

During a previous drive, the Vipers and Tree of Life collected between 500 and 800 pounds of food. Since the partnership began, roughly 20,000 pounds of food have been donated, underscoring the impact of community participation.

“It’s very important to continue staying connected in the community,” said Josh Kirby, director of communications and media relations for the Virginia Valley Vipers. “We are honored to continue serving with Tree of Life Ministries to help end food insecurity in Western Loudoun County. The support from the community for every food drive is always appreciated.”

The Vipers have made community service a central part of their organization’s mission, supporting families and individuals across the region through initiatives like the ongoing partnership with Tree of Life Ministries.

STAFF BRIEF SUPERVISORS, CON’T. FROM PAGE 24

HB18, referred to as the “Employee Child Care Assistance Program”, would “support state funding that provides additional childcare slots and reduces waitlists for early childhood care and education programs”, while HB96 would offer free meals in schools.

HB205/HB750 aims to add 911 dispatchers to the list of local employees eligible for enhanced hazardous duty retirement benefits, and SB154 would similarly expand such benefits to animal control officers.

HB457/SB26 supports enabling local authority for solar canopies in parking areas, while HB564 would focus on enforcement systems for bus obstruction violations.

Loudoun County staff told the Board they will keep monitoring the fiscal impact of the proposed legislation and may bring forward supplemental information or action items as the session unfolds. “This item provides an update on the Board’s legislative initiatives, bills being tracked by staff, and budget amendments,” the report explains.

Because legislative timelines are tight, staff noted they may seek informal “straw polls” from the Board on certain measures between business meetings; those informal positions would be followed by formal votes at later meetings. That approach reflects the reality of fast-moving committees and crossover deadlines in Richmond.

Staff grouped bills by topic, including a separate list focused on data-center


legislation and another on reproductive rights, to help supervisors quickly see what could affect Loudoun’s services and budget.

“Staff will continue to evaluate fiscal impacts to the County of applicable introduced legislation and will evaluate applicable budget amendments once they are made public,” staff stated. If a bill appears likely to affect county operations or costs, staff said they will return to the Board with a detailed analysis.

The General Assembly’s decisions matter to Loudoun because state law frames what counties can regulate, how they can raise or allocate funds, and what services they must provide. Bills about workforce housing, the authority to regulate certain rent increases, or rules around data centers and high-energy users could all reshape Loudoun’s planning, revenue picture and day-to-day life for residents and businesses.

For example, if the Oak Hill legislation continues to move forward, Loudoun could see a major new state park that provides recreational opportunities and preserves open space. If zoning authority to consider grid impacts is enacted, future land-use applications, especially for energy-intensive facilities, could face new local scrutiny tied to electrical infrastructure.

The Board’s meeting made clear that county staff and the Board’s lobbyists are actively engaged in Richmond, but many outcomes remain uncertain until committees act and crossover deadlines pass.



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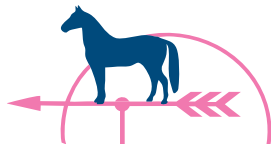
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