Warrenton's Ward 5
Street News

ISSUES UPDATE

From Eric Gagnon • Town Council, Ward 5 • Fall Update • October

Opinions expressed here are my own and do not reflect the policies or positions of the Warrenton Town Council.

Hope you and your family are enjoying this Autumn season!

I know it's been awhile since you've received our newsletter, and I will get my next one out to you as soon as I can. Meanwhile, I did want to send you this brief update on some of the more pressing issues we've been working on in the Council.

My most important concern is our Town budget. The Town has, rather unwisely in my opinion, drawn almost $10 million in additional debt to cover its budget deficits over the past two years, and is poised to add even more debt to pay for what I believe are extravagant and unnecessary projects, such as a new $850,000 skate park and a new $15 million Public Works building. I voted "NO" (along with my colleague, Dave McGuire) on both this current budget, and to the 2 point increase in Town property taxes. With an uncertain economic forecast, high inflation, and rising fuel costs, we need to exercise meaningful fiscal discipline before even thinking about raising taxes. Unfortunately, this didn't happen this year.

If you want our Town property taxes to stay low, which they are, relative to other, comparable towns, then some tough budget decisions will have to be made to both Town overhead and many capital projects which, in my opinion, are "nice to have," but not "need to have" priorities for Warrenton.

For this and other issues, the upcoming elections for Warrenton Town Council and Mayor are critically important to shape the future of the Town we want: A Town Council that protects the welfare and interests of our citizens, a non-partisan Mayor who respects our Council-centered form of government, and an efficient, fiscally sound and prudent Town government that is responsive to your needs.

Some notes about the upcoming election: For the election this November 3rd, I believe that Patty Pratt and Tammy Lake are the best choices for the two open Town Council seats, and David McGuire is the best

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Town Budget

Taxes and Budget: Both Up —Not Good!

This June the Town Council voted for a 2 point increase in your Town property taxes, from 5.5 cents per $100 of assessed value, to 7.5 cents. This amounts to an average extra $142 per year for every homeowner in Warrenton. David McGuire and I were the only no votes on this tax increase, and sadly, the Council also voted for some major projects (see below) which, if carried out, would increase our debt load by over $16 million.

The Council also erred procedurally this year by voting through a tax increase first, before approving the budget, instead of our customary practice of approving the budget first, and then setting a tax rate to cover the Town's budget requirements. Also, there was a general consensus among both the Town staff and the Council that there was not enough advance time devoted for us to carefully review and scrutinize this budget, and I couldn't agree more. Fortunately, our new Town Manager, Judson Rex, has set a new budget review process to give us more time, starting this January, to seriously review our budget, so now there will be several months before we must finally approve our budget on July 1.

I have always believed that our Town spending should be carefully scrutinized to save every possible cost across all categories of Town spending, before we even think about raising taxes. That's why, along with Dave McGuire, we conducted an in-depth, line-by-line review of Town expenses during last year's budget discussions. Unfortunately, this year the Council had no interest in going through this exercise again, preferring to raise taxes instead of making any effort to cut Town expenses and overhead. The two candidates I endorse for Town Council, Tammy Lake and Patty Pratt, have both made firm commitments against tax increases, and both share fiscally conservative values, so I am hopeful that this situation will change next year.

Authorized and Paid for by Gagnon for Town Council
Not authorized by any other candidate

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choice for Mayor.

I have known both Tammy and Patty for a number of years, and I respect their values and positions on Town issues. Both were involved in early anti-data center opposition. Tammy Lake is an experienced business executive who was an early opponent of the Warrenton Village Center project in 2024, and Patty Pratt is a theoretical physicist with a knack for problem-solving, and both will be real assets to the Council. They both hold fiscally conservative views and have made public pledges NOT to raise taxes, which I endorse. They also appreciate and strongly believe in saving Warrenton's small-town character, which I know is important to all of us.

I have worked alongside David McGuire on the Town Council, and believe he will bring a strong and steady hand to the position of Mayor in Warrenton. He respects our "strong Council/weak Mayor" form of government as established by our Town Charter and I am confident that, unlike our current and some former Mayors, he will not step outside the rules defined for this position. He has also been a stalwart opponent of tax increases, excessive Town spending, and data centers, and will bring these values to his leadership as Mayor.

If you want to preserve our small Town, I urge you to get out and vote for Patty Pratt and Tammy Lake for Town Council, and for David McGuire for Mayor.

Take a look at some of the important issues covered here and, as always, contact me if I can be of service to you: E-mail me at egagnon@warrentonva.gov, or call me at (540) 645-6156.

Town Debt

Town Funding Unnecessary Projects With Debt

The 2027 budget approved by the Council this year includes millions of dollars in new spending for capital improvement projects, and I strongly believe that some of these projects are both unnecessary and, quite frankly, outrageous.

First, the Council approved a $100,000 engineering study to build a new $850,000 skate park, to replace the current one at the WARF. Second, and even more excessive in my opinion, was the approval for an engineering and design study to build an entirely new building for the Town Public Works Department, which will cost up to $15 million, to replace the current facility on Falmouth Street. The Council also approved a $1.25 million expenditure for improvements to facilities at Eva Walker park, including an outdoor amphitheater.

"An $850,000 skate park and spending millions for 'nice to have' capital projects shows misplaced spending priorities."

Adding on more debt is just as bad for a Town as it is for a family budget. Additional debt for our Town becomes a burden that must be paid in the future. Higher debt limits our financial options, and increases the pressure to raise taxes in the future to cover this debt load.

I have seriously questioned many of these large capital expenditures, and will continue to criticize this spending, even more so when we have to take on more debt that we can't afford to cover these costs.

To me, an $850,000 skate park and spending millions for "nice to have" capital projects shows misplaced spending priorities and a lack of financial awareness and prudence, especially when we see danger signs on the horizon for our larger national economy. At some point in time, and maybe not long from now, new economic realities will require us to take a hard line on this kind of spending—and with the right people on the Town Council, maybe we can get this done next year.

Town Spending at a Glance

New skate park	**$850,000**
Skate park engineering study	**$100,000**
New Public Works building	**up to $15 million**
Eva Walker Park improvements	**$1.25 million**
Town tax rate, per $100	**5.5¢ → 7.5¢**
Average added tax bill	**$142 a year**

Saving Our Small Town

Let's Close the "High-Density Housing Loophole"



Architect's rendering of the approved Warrenton Village Center.

One of the hidden surprises in our current zoning ordinance, and a stated goal of our 2040 Comprehensive Plan is a "high density affordable housing bonus" granted to developers for new projects in Town. Under this provision, a developer can more than double the size of the housing units in their project, in exchange for offering a small number of these units at rental rates somewhat below their project's regular market rates.

The Warrenton Village Center project, approved in 2024 and slated to begin construction next Spring, utilized this zoning loophole to pack a four-story apartment complex, a four-story indoor parking garage, and two-on-two townhouses, in a massive new 386-unit complex behind Ace Hardware (formerly Rankin's Hardware) along Oak Springs Drive and Route 17.

This development will bring a Manassas-style housing project to Warrenton, along with about 900 more residents, negatively impacting the character of the northern end of our Town. This project was approved despite a highly flawed traffic study which, in my opinion, did not account for the significant increase in car traffic pouring out from Oak Springs Drive onto Route 17.

In addition to this project, our current zoning and Comprehensive Plan permits other, similar "edge development" projects at the Safeway shopping center on Route 29, and possibly elsewhere in Town.

Additionally, a major feature of our Comprehensive Plan calls for construction of high-density housing in residential neighborhoods, such as duplexes, quadplexes, and the like, in our conventional single-house neighborhoods in Town.

I am strongly opposed to this, and will join with other Council members to revise our zoning ordinance and Comprehensive Plan to put an end to more Warrenton Village Centers and similar projects, both large and small, in Town. As a homeowner, you have both a right and an expectation not to have your neighborhood be changed radically into something you never wanted or expected.

The two candidates for Town Council, Patty Pratt and Tammy Lake, share these views, along with mayoral candidate David McGuire, and I am hopeful to join with them next year to make these positive changes to our zoning ordinance and Comprehensive Plan to roll back these radical housing options in Warrenton.

Town Roads & Traffic

Roundabouts Are Coming—Whether We Want Them or Not

In 2023, the Town Council agreed to accept about $29 million in state funding for construction of two roundabouts at Winchester Street and Blackwell Road at Route 29, with construction set to begin sometime in 2030.

During their construction, these projects will bring significant disruption and permanent change to how all of us get around Town. While roundabouts have been touted as a way to reduce accidents and make traffic flow more smoothly, some residents point out that they will make it more difficult for pedestrians to cross Route 29 at these intersections. Also, given the already high rate of congestion, mostly from drivers headed through Town during rush hour, some have questioned whether or not this will truly relieve congestion, or might create an experience more akin to that of the panic-inducing traffic circles of Washington DC.

Council candidate Patty Pratt, who has researched this matter extensively, also points out the risks of potential hidden construction delays due to unforeseen factors, such as buried utility lines and other issues that could extend the time we all would endure torn up

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roads, detours, and other significant inconveniences at these locations.

Recently, the Council also voted (with David McGuire and me voting no) to authorize the Town to apply for funding for a roundabout at the intersection of Culpeper Street and Shirley Avenue. I believe we will already have our hands full in dealing with the two major roundabout construction projects already set to be built, and we should see how those projects go before we think about adding more roundabouts in Town, which explains my "No" vote. Also, Culpeper Street residents need to weigh in on this issue before further action.

Waterloo Street

What's the Future of the Warrenton Middle School?



Warrenton Middle School on Waterloo Street.

In the next few years, students and classes will transfer from the Warrenton Middle School on Waterloo Street, to the expanded Taylor Middle School on Shirley Avenue, when construction is completed on this renovated County facility. This will leave options open for a new use for the current Warrenton Middle School building and site, as well as the large 18-acre space behind the school.

Currently, I'm hearing the County will use this building for extra administrative office space for County school system employees and an alternative school, but other ideas have been floated for use of this facility: A community art center, a free clinic, subsidized affordable housing project, and an incubator for start-ups and small businesses.

Neighbors on Waterloo Street and surrounding areas have a right to be concerned about the potential future uses of this facility, and I share your concern. You live here, or moved here, with the expectation that you would be moving near a school, and you have a right not to have the rug pulled out from under you by having this school turn into something that you didn't expect, or won't tolerate. You might find some uses, such as a community arts or innovation center, agreeable to you, but I certainly understand your concern about using this site for subsidized housing or other less acceptable uses, and will firmly oppose any such proposals if they are brought forward.



The large open space behind the school—entire site is 18 acres.

"You have a right not to have the rug pulled out from under you."

Town Council candidates Tammy Lake and Patty Pratt share my position on this issue, and would add to my voice of opposition on bringing any subsidized housing to this site, or any other use deemed unacceptable to local homeowners in our ward. David McGuire, who is running for Mayor in this coming election, also joins in this opposition.

Election Information

See sample ballot at right; you can vote early until October 31st at the Fauquier County Registrar's Office, 528 Waterloo Road, or at your Ward voting location on Tuesday, November 3rd.

