



2025 Legislative Priorities and Positions for Clarke County

October 15, 2024

Top Priorities for 2025

Issue: Local Land Use Control

Introduction: Local citizens through their local elected governing body should retain the right to control how their communities grow and develop over time. We strongly oppose any legislation eroding this authority.

Nutrient Credit Trading Program: According to DEQ, 1,082 acres in Clarke County have been converted to generate nonpoint source nutrient credits. This represents the second highest acreage converted of Virginia's ninety-five counties despite Clarke County being 89th out of 95 counties in land area. Entire farms in Clarke County have been converted to trees in order for development to occur in northern Virginia. The impact to prime agricultural land has been real. We request that local governing body approval be required before new nutrient banks are allowed to be created in our locality. In addition to taking farmland out of production, these parcels have been allowed to grow up in noxious weeds and invasive species causing concern from neighboring property owners.

Solar: Goals created by the Commonwealth are placing a lot of pressure on farmland to be converted to solar in addition to the growing energy demands created by data centers. Clarke County has allowed solar facilities, which in theory, will produce as much electricity as the County consumes. We request the continued authority to locally control zoning for solar so we can prevent important farmland from being consumed. We encourage urban and suburban solar siting alternatives to prevent rural areas from bearing the burden of solar development and hopefully reducing the need for new or expanded electrical transmission lines.

Fill Dirt: We support legislation that allows the County to regulate the dumping of fill dirt, especially dirt hauled from other localities, through local zoning and erosion and sediment control ordinances. We have had properties in Clarke County receive tremendous amounts of dirt from construction sites in adjoining jurisdictions and have received numerous citizen complaints about the truck traffic and erosion and sediment control issues. Statewide exemptions for agricultural fill operations prevent localities from ensuring neighboring lands are not adversely affected by these dumping operations.

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Issue: Route 7 Safety

The Board continues to hear from citizens about Route 7 safety concerns. The volume of traffic, especially during commuting hours, combined with excessive speeding and inattentive drivers have led to a significant number of accidents. There have been numerous fatalities because of motor vehicles accidents in Clarke County this year. The County is seeking traffic design solutions from the Virginia Department of Transportation and funding for those solutions from the General Assembly. Continued growth in neighboring counties will only exacerbate this regional problem.

Issue: Mental Health

Introduction: People who have mental health issues are not always able to receive the help they need. The system is broken and major state-level reforms are needed.

Hospital Beds: The demand for State adult and juvenile mental hospital beds exceeds supply. More state funding for preventative care to entities like community services boards could be an avenue to curb demand for additional hospital beds.

Student Mental Health: We support increased budget allocations to address student mental health issues in our local school system.

Issue: Funding & Revenue Collection Authority

Introduction: The State should fulfill its financial obligations instead of pushing these costs onto localities. We oppose unfunded mandates and the shifting of fiscal responsibility from the state to localities, and the state taking any of our revenue collection authorities away without fully reimbursing the County for the revenue lost.

State Funding for Schools: We support full state funding for public education, including the Standards of Quality (SOQ) as recommended by the Board of Education, the Joint Legislative Audit & Review Commission (JLARC), and Joint Subcommittee on Elementary and Secondary Education Funding. We support a review and rewrite of the local composite index formula. We support using the land-use assessment value rather than full market value in the composite index. We also support eliminating the income factor given that local governments cannot tax personal income. There is a flaw in the formula when a small rural county like Clarke has a higher composite index (.6032) than one of the richest counties in the country, Loudoun County (.5518).

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Employee Compensation: We urge the Commonwealth to meet its full funding obligations for Constitutional Officers and their state mandated positions. In addition, if the state provides pay increases for local, state-supported positions, the state should fully fund these increases. We request significant support for teacher pay increases to help retain and attract teachers.

Revenue Collection Authority: Any efforts by the Commonwealth to take current taxing authority away from localities should include offsetting, guaranteed state revenues in an equal or greater than amount the locality annually collects for the entire term the authority is removed from the locality. For example, if the Commonwealth removes the County's ability to tax personal property, we should receive at least the current amount collected from personal property annually from the state as long as the ban remains in effect.

Regional Jails: We appreciate movement in a positive direction on the funding of state prisoners housed in our regional jail. We request funding be based on actual costs as determined by the Annual Jail Cost Report, published by the Compensation Board. The Jail Authority also opposes a recent FCC ruling, which would limit fees paid by inmates for phone calls and other amenities provided. The revenue from these sources would either have to be made up with taxpayer funds or programs for inmates reduced or removed.

Other Issues of Importance

Issue: Education Teacher licensing requirements should be made more flexible to enhance the availability of qualified teachers to address the growing teacher shortage. We also support legislation which increases penalties for fake school threats and legislation supporting school anti-hazing efforts.

Issue: Public Notice/Public Meeting Requirements Support legislation which allows localities to use their websites and social media accounts, instead of print media, to post legally required advertising for public hearing notices, procurement solicitations, and similar items requiring advertisement in a local newspaper.

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Issue: Renewable Energy Commitments

We feel the General Assembly should closely study, and slowly implement, major commitments related to renewable energy.

Issue: Route VA 7 Pedestrian Bridge

The number of people attempting to cross VA 7 on foot at the top of the mountain, near the Clarke County and Loudoun County boundary, continues to increase. This location is very dangerous for pedestrians/hikers to cross because of the topography, along with the speed and volume of vehicular traffic. We request state and federal funding sources to construct the proposed elevated pedestrian crossing. We also request state funding to perform studies outlined in our updated Transportation Plan which address the Route 601/Route 7 intersection as well as other critical transportation infrastructure in the County.

Issue: Availability / Quantity and Quality of Water Resources

Availability / Quantity: Clarke supports proactive state action in reviewing and establishing regulations and programs to ensure that localities water sources are protected and that water quantity, as well as quality be protected.

Clarke supports the Commonwealth allowing localities to regulate quantity.

Clarke believes that protecting water availability for residents and local businesses should be a priority by ensuring that future large water users are required to demonstrate through scientific research and water availability studies adequate water supply for the proposed use.

Quality: Clarke supports cost effective measures aimed at reducing loadings of pollutants in state waters from both point and non-point sources but urges the Commonwealth to consider the impacts of such measures will have on both local governments and agriculture. Over-fertilization of urban yards, forever chemicals, and application of bio-solids are all areas that should be studied for their impact on water sources.

Clarke believes reliable forms of financial and technical assistance will be required to help localities and agriculture meet the Commonwealth's goals with regard to water quality and quantity.

Issue: Land Conservation

Clarke County supports the Purchase of Development Rights program, the Tax Credit program for the donation of easements, the transferability of tax credits.