

Virginia Viewpoint: A Whole New Ballgame

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Barring a few exceptions where unanimous consent is granted for new bills, legislators in the General Assembly have officially finalized their legislative agendas for the 2024 session. Committees are deliberating legislation as the Crossover deadline – when bills must move from the House to the Senate and vice versa – looms in less than three weeks.

With Democratic control in both the Senate and the House, the new political environment is now in full swing at Mr. Jefferson's Capitol.

Democrats Advance Legislation to Raise Minimum Wage

The new Democratic majorities in the House and the Senate did not waste any time to advance one of their top priorities this session. A House subcommittee and Senate committee voted in favor of legislation raising the minimum wage to \$13.50 per hour starting next year and \$15 in 2026. The bills – HB 1 and SB 1 – were the first pieces of legislation filed for the new session, signaling their utmost significance for Democrats. The bills are expected to pass both the House and Senate but could face the veto pen of Governor Glenn Youngkin.

Proponents of the legislation argued that raising the minimum wage will lift the economic wellbeing of low-income communities, while opponents warned that it could induce wage compression, exacerbate inflation and harm small businesses.

Judges Appointed to State Corporation Commission

In addition to the thousands of bills that the legislature will review over the coming weeks, legislators have already made key decisions on judgeships. Following a two-year impasse, the General Assembly filled the two vacancies on the State Corporation Commission, which is tasked with regulating Virginia's largest electric utilities – Dominion Energy and American Electric Power – in addition to other large corporate entities.

Sam Towell, former counsel at Smithfield Foods, and Kelsey Bagot, former counsel at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, were interviewed by the joint judiciary committees and subsequently approved by the legislature. They will join Judge Jehmal Hudson on the three-person panel.

Potomac Yard Arena Legislation Introduced

A proposal to fund a new professional sports arena at Potomac Yard in Alexandria, first unveiled by Governor Glenn Youngkin and Monumental Sports CEO Ted Leonsis last November, has gained momentum with enabling legislation filed by two Democrats from Northern Virginia. Senate Majority Leader Scott Surovell and House Appropriations Chairman Luke Torian filed the legislation which is expected to be considered by the General Assembly in the next two weeks.

With concerns raised over an influx in traffic in the area, Northern Virginia lawmakers have called for increased investments in the D.C. metro as a necessity for the project to move forward.

Legislation to Establish Cannabis Retail Market Takes Shape

Two years ago, the General Assembly enacted legislation allowing Virginians to possess and grow



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marijuana for recreational use, but with the notable absence of any retail market to be able to purchase it. This session, several Democrats filed legislation – albeit with different timelines and conditions – to fill that void.

This week, legislation filed by Senator Aaron Rouse was chosen by a Senate committee as the main vehicle to establish retail marijuana sales as soon as January 1, 2025. The bill allows localities to hold a referendum to opt out of the retail market. Sales would be taxed at 12 percent, with an even split of 6 percent going to the state and localities.

Casino Update: Host Cities in Flux

Gaming in Virginia is also a hot topic of discussion, as evidenced by the packed General Laws committees earlier this week that advanced legislation that could potentially add a new casino in Petersburg or Northern Virginia. While it could be an early litmus test, the bills still need to clear several more legislative checkpoints. Meanwhile, another bill advanced that would permanently remove Richmond from the list of eligible host cities, which may put the final nail in the coffin on casino hopes following two failed referendums in 2021 and 2023. Currently, Virginia has casinos in Bristol, Portsmouth, and Danville, while another is in development in Norfolk.

A bill to allow sports betting on Virginia college games also passed the committee. This would remove an exception that was carved out when sports betting first became legal in Virginia four years ago.

Looking Ahead: The Power of the Pen

Moving forward, stakeholders will be closely monitoring the ink levels in Governor Youngkin's pen. Despite Democratic majorities in both the House and the Senate, the Governor can utilize his veto power – and he has made it clear on multiple occasions that he will use it if needed. This will be a key development to watch as bills move through the legislative process.

Legislation introduced to fund arena for Wizards, Capitals

By MICHAEL MARTZ, ERIC KOLENICH, Richmond Times-Dispatch (Metered Paywall - 7 articles a month)

Senior Democratic lawmakers introduced legislation on Friday to create an authority to finance a \$2 billion sports and entertainment district that Gov. Glenn Youngkin proposed in Alexandria for the new home of the Washington Wizards of the NBA and Washington Capitals of the NHL.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Surovell, D-Fairfax, and House Appropriations Chairman Luke Torian, D-Prince William, sponsored the legislation despite lingering concerns among lawmakers about the project's financing and the need for major investments in the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority and surrounding transportation network.

Retail sales of recreational marijuana one step closer to becoming a reality in Virginia

By TYLER ENGLANDER, WRIC

Retail sales of recreational marijuana are one step closer to becoming a reality in Virginia.

On Thursday, Jan. 25, a Senate subcommittee approved a bill that would allow retail marijuana sales to begin in up to 400 stores starting Jan. 1, 2025.

Virginia General Assembly elects two judges to SCC

By MICHAEL MARTZ, Richmond Times-Dispatch (Metered Paywall - 7 articles a month)

The General Assembly finally found a way to agree about electing judges to fill two vacancies on the State Corporation Commission.

It took two years, the resignation of a second judge and pivotal legislative elections to reach unanimous votes by the House of Delegates and Senate on Wednesday to elect Sam Towell and Kelsey Bagot to the

commission.

Virginia Senate panel approves first batch of casino bills

By GRAHAM MOOMAW, Virginia Mercury

As Virginia lawmakers continue to discuss the addition of new casinos in the state, Richmond appears to be out, Petersburg seems to be in and Northern Virginia looks like a question mark.

A state Senate panel took action on an initial batch of gambling bills Wednesday, offering some early indicators of what policymakers might do on the topic this session.

Virginia Senate committee advances bill to raise minimum wage

By SARAH VOGELSONG, Virginia Mercury

Legislation to raise the state minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2026 is moving briskly through the Virginia General Assembly as Democrats take advantage of their narrow majorities in both chambers to complete an effort they began in 2020.

“This is a simple bill,” said Sen. Creigh Deeds, D-Charlottesville, who chairs the Senate Commerce and Labor Committee. “It just reenacts what we did before.”
