

In striking feat, Democrats come close to retaking Virginia House

By SARAH RANKIN
Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — Democrats nearly wiped out Republicans' overwhelming majority on Election Day in the Virginia House of Delegates, with a handful of races that will decide control of the body remaining too close to call.

By Wednesday morning, Democrats had picked up 14 of the 17 seats they would need to retake the chamber for the first time in two decades.

"It really is an unprecedented result we're seeing," House Democratic Caucus Leader David Toscano said. The last time Democrats picked up more than five seats was 1975, according to Toscano.

This election season, with all 100 seats up for grabs, saw Democrats make their most energetic push in years to gain ground against Republicans. Sixty of the seats were contested by candidates of both major parties, more than in any year for at least two decades.

The House gains were part of a stellar night for Democrats, who swept all three statewide races. Democrat Ralph Northam beat Republican Ed Gillespie in the governor's race by nearly 9 points.

Together, Tuesday's electoral outcomes will be seen as an overwhelming victory for those opposed to President Donald Trump and as a potential predictor for next year's midterm election, when control of Congress and many more statehouses will be up for grabs.

In the run-up to Tuesday's balloting, Democrats said they were confident, but many analysts had expected them to pick up no more than a handful of seats.

Republicans maintained during the campaign that they would retain their majority. Their years in power helped



Heather Rousseau/The Roanoke Times

Democrat Chris Hurst, right, defeated Republican incumbent Joseph Yost to win House District 12 on Tuesday in Blacksburg, Va.

them build up a significant cash advantage, and they argued that voters in local races care about local issues — not what's going on in Washington.

"Obviously, tonight was a difficult night and the outcome is not what anyone expected," Matt Moran, spokesman for the House Republican Caucus, said in a statement Tuesday night.

The shift in power could have far reaching policy and political implications. It will change the makeup of committees, and Republicans may no longer be able to block Medicaid expansion. Democrats in Virginia also will have greater leverage when drawing new congressional and legislative boundaries during the next redistricting.

"I told Ralph I am jealous" of the legislature he will get to work with, said Gov. Terry McAuliffe, who fought the General Assembly unsuccessfully on Medicaid expansion for four years.

It wasn't immediately clear how long it would be before

the full results are known.

Five seats were too close to call Wednesday morning, according to the AP's count, although Democrats had claimed victory in two of those. They will be eligible for recounts if candidates request them. In one race, only 12 votes separated Republican Del. David Yancey and Democratic challenger Shelly Simonds.

Among the Democrats' influx of candidates this year were a record 43 women, many of whom said they were inspired by Hillary Clinton's defeat to jump into politics for the first time. At least nine of the new seats will be filled by women.

Among those will be Danica Roem, who is transgender. A former journalist, she unseated Bob Marshall, one of the chamber's longest-serving and most conservative members. Earlier this year, Marshall sponsored a bill that would have limited the bathrooms transgender people can use.

Roem will be Virginia's

first openly transgender lawmaker. She will also make history as the first openly transgender person elected and seated in a state legislature, according to the Victory Fund, a political action committee that works to get openly LGBTQ people elected.

Several other Democratic women also made history Tuesday night: Hala Ayala and Elizabeth Guzman — who both ousted Republican incumbents — will be the chamber's first Latina members, and Kathy Tran will be its first female Asian-American member.

In the Blacksburg area, Chris Hurst, a former Virginia news anchor whose journalist girlfriend was fatally shot during a live broadcast in 2015, defeated a Republican incumbent. After the shooting, Hurst became the public face of the grieving Roanoke station.

Associated Press writers Matthew Barakat in Fairfax, Virginia, and Alan Suderman in Richmond contributed to this report.

Gearhart: 'It's been a long haul and it's been worth it'

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"All of us did this together," Mayor Matt Brown said. "This was a true grassroots movement like nothing I've ever seen. I think this was really the epitome of the community coming together to fight for what I think is right: a sustainable, residential Gearhart."

City Councilor Sue Lorain was also happy. "This vote means we will continue to have our residential feel. It is a win — and it is a win for all of Gearhart for trusting their local officials."

As of Oct. 1, 81 vacation rental permits have been issued under the ordinance enacted last fall, 57 of which are complete and processed, according to the city administrator.

The ballot measure would have changed limits on permit transfers and maximum occupancy and repealed special regulations imposed on vacation rentals. The rules cover off-street parking, residential appearance, garbage service, septic sewer capacity inspections and cesspool prohibitions.

The measure would have also eliminated a requirement that a 24-hour representative be able to physically respond to the site within 30 minutes and removed a limitation on the number of vacation rentals.

A public vote would have been required for any future amendments to the vacation rental ordinance or any subsequent ordinance relating to vacation rentals.

"Fear is a powerful force," David Townsend, a repeal supporter, said. "Gearhart has chosen its path ... only time will tell."

Road to regulation

The trail to Measure 4-188 began in 2013, when city leaders and residents sought to improve the stock of long-term rental housing amid concerns about how vacation rentals in residential zones can negatively affect the city's atmosphere and livability.

At the time, the taxing ordinance for short-term rental properties provided exemptions for the approximately 50 single-family homes rented out under the city's guidelines.

Repeal of that tax came nearly three years later, when short-term renters were



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian
A ballot measure to repeal the city's vacation rental rules was contentious.

required to pay the city's 7 percent lodging tax.

By 2016, the nature of the internet and booking trends through companies like Vacasa and Airbnb added to scrutiny of short-term rentals.

Residents in favor of regulating vacation rentals cited Gearhart's comprehensive plan, written in 1994 and expressing the intent to recognize the importance of the city's residential neighborhoods and the need to protect them from the negative impacts of rental property.

Complaints that out-of-town management was unable to promptly reply to public safety concerns led to an increased call for regulation, including a provision requiring 24-hour owner contact information.

Property rights

In presenting Measure 4-188 to voters, opponents of regulation stressed property rights and said the rule changes go "far beyond" common-sense measures.

"It's been a long haul and it's been worth it," Planning Commissioner Terry Graff, an opponent of the repeal, said after election results were delivered. "You have to thank the worker bees who worked out of their kitchens to pull this off for the city of Gearhart."

Tuesday's vote could lead to further discussion of the short-term rental ordinance, Lorain said. "I would like to see where we are in a year, evaluate where we are and see what we need to do to change it."

Brown opened the door to potential changes.

"I think we should look at this law every single year," he said. "I think we should ask what are the ways that we can improve this law for everyone in the community."

Library: 'I'm just really relieved and excited'

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"I'm excited to see where our library's going to go," Mayor Henry Balensifer said.

he voter turnout and "yes" votes are "a testament to the hard work of the volunteers ... who went out and pounded the pavement and knocked on doors and got the word out," Balensifer said. "The town wanted it and the town went out and worked for it and they got it."

The city will not begin to collect the money until next year.

"For now we're celebrating and looking forward to whatever that next step might be," said Kelsey Balensifer, the chairwoman of the library board.

City staff will need to discuss exactly where the money will go. Staff and library board members have said the money will go toward automation services — books are still hand-stamped — to modernize library operations. It could also be used to expand the library's limited hours and add staff time as well as e-books, books and other materials. Some of the money may go to paying routine bills such as rent and utilities.

If the levy hadn't passed,



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Shelves are full at the new home of the Warrenton Community Library on Main Avenue.

the city would have adjusted its numbers and gone back to the voters again in May, Mayor Balensifer said, adding there would have been "some really hard discussions."

For more than a decade, the library has worked with the same levy amount even as costs and demands for services have increased.

The city has been supplementing the library's small budget, but the move to Main Avenue in June as well as growing demands for library services compelled the library

board and the City Commission to reassess a five-year operational levy set to end this year.

"It was coming to a point where we were asking, 'Do we cut back hours?' It's barely open as it is," Mayor Balensifer said. "We've got a bigger facility now which provides better services and more amenities but at the same time it's a lot to manage."

"I think I can breathe now," said site manager Nettie-Leog Calog. She had been trying not to think about it all day.

"I'm just really relieved and excited. ... I'm really grateful to the mayor and all the people who really pushed for the vote."

Her next step is to begin researching how to bring automation to the library. She plans to talk with staff at Seaside and Astoria's libraries for guidance and advice.

Since opening at its new location on Main Avenue after decades at a small, deteriorating building in Hammond, the library has become even more of a community hub, Calog said. People who hadn't realized the city even had a library when it was located in Hammond it has signed up for library cards. Calog has her own office. There is a book sorting room. There is even a children's corner.

It was hard to refrain from advocating for the levy increase, she said. As a city employee, she couldn't go out to talk to potential voters and solicit "yes" votes.

The library board established a political action committee to take on the campaign, setting up a website to educate people about the proposed levy increase and show them a variety of ways they could support the library's efforts.

Port: 'If we can't fix it, why do we have it?'

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Spending smart

"It helps to see the forest through the trees," Cummings said of a longer-term plan.

His agency manages grant programs such as ConnectOregon, a source the Port has used on several major projects, and the Special Public Works Fund. But increased demands and tighter budgets have put a strain on the programs.

The state is pushing to award grants tied to strategic plans, Cummings said, and

Business Oregon wants ports to work together to be more competitive for state funding.

Part of that is having each port create a capital improvement plan so that Business Oregon can submit a prioritized list of projects statewide in need of funding, similar to community colleges, Cummings said.

"If each port does this capital improvement plan, we can then go to the Legislature and ask for a full bucket of funds," he said. "Right now, what we see when we go to the Legis-

lature, is that we have one-off asks from different ports."

Port Executive Director Jim Knight said the Port's problem is not having enough funding to keep up an aging infrastructure.

The Port Commission recently voted to end its lease at North Tongue Point, an industrial dock and former military base lauded for its railroad and river access but expensive to modernize. The land is being negotiated for purchase by a private maritime company.

Knight also pointed to the East Mooring Basin causeway, a state-designated bridge extending from 36th Street through one of the Port's marinas to a \$30 million Army Corps of Engineers breakwater. The causeway has been closed to vehicular traffic for years, and it is in danger of being closed to pedestrians as well in the next couple of years.

"The danger I see coming our way is, if we can't fix it, why do we have it?" Knight said.

Chase: Bail set at \$50,000

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police affidavit. His blood alcohol content was 0.00 percent, but police are awaiting the result of a blood sample.

Pruitt-Rexroad has been charged with aggravated identity theft, unauthorized use of a vehicle, attempting to elude, driving under the influence of intoxicants,

unlawful possession of methamphetamine, reckless driving and four counts of recklessly endangering another person. He also has a warrant out of Multnomah County in a methamphetamine possession case.

Circuit Court Judge Dawn McIntosh set bail at \$50,000. If indicted, Pruitt-Rexroad is scheduled to be arraigned next week.

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