

Critical choices for growing county

By FRANCES HUBBARD

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KING WILLIAM Motivational speaker and author Anthony Robbins has been quoted saying, You are now at a crossroads. This is your opportunity to make the most important decision you will ever make. Make this decision consciously. Make it carefully. Make it powerfully.

Many have said King William is at a crossroads and five men have been asked to help the county decide which direction it will take. For those members of the Board of Supervisors that task has become a matter of finding balance a balanced budget, balanced services, and a balanced community environment as a whole and each member has his own ideas as to how King William should achieve this goal.

### **Growing Pains**

Over the past few years King William County has experienced many of the ups and downs that come along with an expanding community.

After dipping into the county's reserve over the years to offset tax hikes, rising expenses, and millions in debt, the county has been forced to borrow millions over the past few years in the form of revenue anticipatory notes to pay bills.

A lot of things have contributed to the reserve depletion, said board chairman and first district representative Thomas Redd. We are working on the reserve. That's one of our main goals to get the reserve built back up. You can't fix it overnight.

A continuously growing community, cost hikes in state mandated programs and the over \$30 million incurred in debt for projects like the new courts facility, schools, and the water and sewer project at Central Garage contributed to the county's money troubles.

The two newest supervisors, second district representative Danny Wright and third district representative Cecil Schools, both elected last November, said they each decided to run for their seats because they felt they could help the county.

We need to stay on top of this and get together a few times a year to go over the status, Wright said. Its not about me. Its about we and we is more than five people. I dont think weve been listening as much as we should.

Its spending and control of spending, Schools added.

During last years budget process, the county tightened the purse strings across the board as well as raising the tax rates and redistributing revenue into the general fund to begin the process of rebuilding.

Each department is going to have to tighten their belts. Do more with less, fourth district representative Tom Smiley said.

### **Economic Development**

Another main priority on the boards agenda is attracting business to the county. The right form of industry can not only help out financially by producing a new tax base, but can continue to highlight King Williams image.

Its got to be good business. Sometimes there is a fine line, Redd said.

The ideal business for King William, Redd believes, would be one that pays taxes, employs a lot of people, and doesnt drain the countys resources.

The board also has to protect the rural appeal of King William while attracting businesses.

I dont think we can keep business out just to stay rural and we cant change so much to bring the business into the county, Redd said.

The county has adopted an Economic Development Plan, hiring consultants to market certain industry properties, and in the past few years, the board has approved several commercial rezonings before a specific business signed on simply to attract a business in the future.

Right now we are not moving forward with business as we should. I feel the county needs to offer tax incentives for businesses to come to the community, Wright said. The more business we get the less the tax rate will go up.

Wright believes a 25-30 percent business ratio is ideal for King William. If not, people in King William will be taxed to death, he said.

Supervisor Wright believes the county can benefit economically by bringing Natural Gas in as an option for potential businesses.

Weve got to look at long range planning. We cant always be doing what I call crisis management, he said.

Another economic tool the county has begun to implement is the water and sewer system provided at Central Garage, but some believe the system is not established enough to attract larger commercial industry.

Either we get completely in the water and sewer business or we get out, Wright said.

One way to do that, Wright recommended, is to establish a Utilities Department, which is currently handled by the Maintenance/Public Works Director.

Right now its manageable but its out of whack, he said.

We either move forward or fall back.

### **Emergency Services**

Recently the Emergency Services Coordinator Steve Puckett presented a plan to the Board of Supervisors he says has to be implemented before tragedy strikes.

Emergency Services across the county are struggling to keep up with the ever-expanding community. A lack of volunteers, funding, an increased population, and what Puckett described as an unorganized chain of command are just a few issues contributing to the problems.

Its more than just putting out a fire. Its a coordinated effort, Wright said.

Theres going to be a situation where we need [Emergency Medical] services and theyre not available, Schools said. Citizens coming into the county now expect it and expect a lot faster service.

The board is in the process of appointing members to a new Emergency Services Advisory Board, as recommended by Puckett. The hope is that this board can review options to assist fire and rescue departments in the county and designate plans to prepare citizens for a possible large disaster in the future.

We need to let people know what we expect of them and what they should expect out of their government, Wright said.

Just last month, West Point Volunteer Fire Department, due to lack of volunteers and increased call volume, was forced to hire paid personnel to supplement their volunteers in the daytime hours, and the other departments may soon have to do the same thing.

We definitely have to look at in the future hiring full time people. Its not inexpensive, Redd said.

### **Communication**

In recent months, the board has been overwhelmed with citizen input, from passionate motocross opponents and

proponents to hunters pursuing support, and they all say this sort of interaction is key.

Participation by the citizens seems to be improving but we could always use more input, Schools said.

If we dont work together were only harming ourselves, Wright said.

Internal communication with the county government is also an important stepping-stone for a growing community.

One of the things we need to improve on is communication between the finance department, the county administration and the board, Schools said. We need more information, the good and the bad.

Some of the board members recommended meeting with the department heads on a regular basis to make sure the communication is there.

### **Finding a balance**

King William County is projected to grow an average of 19 percent every 10 years, a faster rate than the state as a whole. The countys population was estimated at 13,208 in 2000 and by 2010 it is expected to jump to 16,187.

We welcome people to come to King William. We need good people. We just need to do whats best to keep them here, Redd said.

As the county continues to expand, the balancing act for its five-member board will also increase.

Its very difficult to find [a balance] because it keeps moving, Smiley said. Its something you have to be aware of at all times.

Part of that accountability is embracing King Williams past while moving into the future.

Its a fine line between making King William a great place to live while keeping it a place they can afford to live the best of both worlds. Thats not an easy task, Redd said.

Some believe its impossible to sit at a crossroads and know its a crossroads. Most see it as simply a big change, but no matter how its viewed its a moment of opportunity.

Im going to do whats best for the people I serve. This county will be here a long time ,for generations to come, and theyre going to point their finger at what we did. How do we want to be remembered?, asked Wright.

*Fifth district Supervisor Otto Williams did not return phone calls for comment.*