

No rest for outgoing Delegate

Even out of office, Mike Watson to keep working on issues

By Dave Ress dress@dailypress.com

Part-time legislature? Not if you ask Del. Mike Watson, R-Williamsburg, as he scrambles through his final weeks representing the more than 52,000 voters in a district that slices across the Peninsula from west of Jamestown to the banks of the Poquoson River — including Skiffes Creek, where his grand-dad and dad based their tugboat.



JUDITH LOWERY/DAILY PRESS PHOTO

Watson's been working with the General Assembly's in-house legal experts drafting bills he won't be able to carry, discussing legislation with fellow members of the Business Development Caucus he helped launch, talking with Speaker of the House William Howell about ways to better coordinate community colleges to meet businesses' training needs, arranging a fundraising event for his campaign.

"I'm not going away," he says.

But he did promise his wife, Amy, to ratchet back a bit on legislative work after his term ends on Jan 8.

"I never looked at it as a part-time job," he said. "I spend more than 40, 45, 50 hours a week on this. ... I told my wife for the next two years, I would spend only 50 percent of my time on legislative stuff and the rest on business and other things."

"He's got a lot of respect in both houses and both parties"

Del. Chris Head, R-Botetourte

Watson's focus comes from the same place that launched him into politics in the first place: the challenge he and other high-tech manufacturers face when they look for workers. It was why, six years back, he pushed for a scholarship to help kids attend New River Community College's instrumentation and control automation program, in the name of a professor there, Billy Friend, who was Watson's big supporter when he was a student in the program.

The day before a weekend session with fellow legislators Michael Webert, R-Fauquier, and David Ramadan, R-Loudoun, Watson was on the road to the Shenandoah Valley to thank executives of McKee Foods for their contribution to the scholarship program.

"We have a capacity for 50 students, but we have only 38. When they graduate, they all have jobs — some of them at \$67,000 a year — and no debt," Watson said. "I want to try to get the word out to parents that there's an opportunity here."

It's an opportunity open to kids from across the state, as well. He took it when he headed west to Dublin to enter the program, and it helped him build his now-25-year-old business, New Kent County-based Control Automation Technologies Corp.

His weekend session with Webert and Ramadan, who stayed over at Watson's house, was a roll-up-your-sleeves effort to review some two dozen bills that the Business Development Caucus, now 27-strong, with members from both parties, wanted to push when the General Assembly convenes next month.

Watson's weekend was capped by a fundraiser at Busch Gardens Christmas Town, a \$55-per-ticket-and-up event that more than 100 had signed up for.

That week, he put the finishing touches on three bills he won't be able to sponsor himself, but that he'll still try to get enacted. One involves corporate taxes; another, businesses' access to capital; the third, to make sure

state agencies don't compete with the private sector in providing services. Watson said he's got the Department of Health particularly in mind on that one.

The week after, he was pushing on a fourth effort, looking at the complex issue of college students' rights in disciplinary hearings.

"Mike got this from his first day

— if you're going to get things done, you've got to play the long game," said Del. Chris Head, R-Botetourt, who has worked closely with him on several business issues.

"He's got a lot of respect in both houses and both parties," Head added. "He's just a very conscientious guy, who wants to listen to everyone and get an understanding of all sides to try to build a consensus."

That, plus the fact that Watson is always willing to tackle one more community meeting, sit through yet another briefing, head back to the office for yet another rewrite of a proposal makes his fellow legislators want to listen to him, Head said.

In this last session, Watson's proposal for a grant program to encourage businesses to donate new machinery and equipment to community colleges and vocational schools, another requiring background checks for staff at juvenile detention centers and proposals to allow distilleries and an out-of-state winery to sell their products at restaurants they own were enacted. So was a bill to boost employment of veterans by helping businesses hire and train them.

They were the kind of nittygitty bills that make up most of the legislature's work, and the kind where Watson plans to keep having a voice in politics.

"Everything you read about politicians these days, it seems like they are the lowest of the low," he said. "I wanted the 93rd District to have someone they could be proud of, who got things done and wasn't a crazy partisan."

And, he said, that attitude can work.

"Legislators came to me on business and technology issues and I think I helped them," he said. "Republicans or Democrats, it doesn't really matter. We get a lot of things done in Virginia."

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