

dollars, half of that dollar that goes back to the locality gets cut."

Houck stunned the Orange County audience by sharing some tough questions a caregiver recently dropped on his Senate Education and Health Committee. "Who is going to wipe the snot?" she demanded as her wheel chair-ridden patient sat mutely beside her. "Who cleans up the blood? Who takes those diapers that are filled with feces? Who's going to do that if these positions are eliminated?"

As of this writing, those questions remain largely unanswered.

Another unanswered question: who's to blame? "Fundamentally it's the economy," says Houck, who refuses to point fingers. "We're the best managed state in the nation...We have a triple A bond rating, cited by *Forbes* magazine as being the best state to start a business in. We have all these great attributes: we're low taxes, we're a right to work state, we ought to be able to figure out a method of raising some revenue or of not giving as much tax relief."

Of his colleagues in the House of Delegates, Ed Scott and Rob Bell, Houck says "I respect them deeply. I think on a personal level we do fine. On a level of just trying to work together, like this Lake of the Woods thing, Ed Scott and I have



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Members of the Davis family make a plea for stem cell research before Senator Houck's Education and Health Committee. The family says that donating stem cells from one brother to the other cured the eldest of sickle cell anemia.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
At a forum attended by as many a 150 citizens, Senator Edd Houck patiently listened to how \$4 billion in state funding cuts will affect school teachers, parents of disabled children, and constitutional officers, among many others.

put endless hours and have been a team with that." But Scott and Bell were part of the 97 to 0 vote that slammed the door on a proposed 1 percent income tax hike earlier this winter. "We work well together," Houck repeats. "Fundamentally, I just disagree with this no-tax approach."

Asked about his political aspirations, he unequivocally denies he's gunning for the Governor's mansion. "No. I don't want to subject myself or my family to the political strains that it would take to do that. Would I like to be Governor? Yeah. Do I think I have the attributes and the right temperament and fair mindedness to do it? Yeah. I have had six contested elections. I don't sit in that chair by virtue of a free ride." He points to the black leather swivel executive's chair behind his desk.

"I mean I have to get out every four years and work my tail off because of this district that is a decidedly Republican district. And I am a Democrat. So this doesn't just come for free. So I have to subject myself and my family to do that, and I do it. I do it because I want to do it, and I do it because I feel like I do a good job and that I'm fair about the way I go about this."

And only when he's done doing that, is he going to learn how to play the fiddle.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
As its chairman, Edd Houck runs the day-to-day operation of the powerful Senate Education and Health Committee.

Mr. Houck goes to Richmond

All Edd Houck ever wanted to be was a school teacher...that and learn how to play the fiddle.

Our State Senator makes this statement from his spacious third-floor corner office in the General Assembly Building. Dressed in de rigueur blue blazer, charcoal gray slacks, white shirt and red power tie, Houck (pronounced *HOWK*, not *HUCK*) looks the part. Awards and photographs, including one of JFK, are grouped neatly on the wall. A bookcase brims with important tomes of one kind or another.

A few weeks ago, the *Insider* went to Richmond to see just what it is they do down there in the General Assembly. We followed our delegation around for most of the day; watched them in action at a Senate committee hearing and on the floor of the House of Delegates. We even sat down and talked to them one on one.

What follows is the first of a two-part series about the men we send to the state capitol to represent us: Edd Houck, Ed Scott, and Rob Bell.

Houck knows the ropes around here. He's been a State Senator for 27 years now, representing Orange for the past 10. He's made the obligatory appearances at the small-town charity fund raisers, church suppers and awards banquets. He's been button-holed and caucused, lionized and vilified. He's worked his way up in Richmond to be the third ranking Senator in the state, and now he's chairman of the Senate Education and Health Committee. He's earned this nice corner office with a view of the state capitol.

But learning how to play the fiddle will have to wait, because Edd Houck knows there are more important things to consider, such as the worst economic crises since the Depression. Sawing on a violin while the state's finances figuratively go down in flames would be a little too Nero-esque for political comfort. And Edd Houck must always mind his politics.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Edd Houck and his wife Dana first came to the area as public school teachers in 1973.

That's because he's a classic post-Byrd Virginia Democrat, representing a 150,000-person district in predominantly Republican Orange, Madison, and Culpeper counties. His 17th District also includes Democrat-leaning Louisa and parts of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania. But the core of his constituency is solid red state conservative.

That's just fine with him because he hails from a conservative background. The eldest son of a logger and sawmill operator in Smyth County, Houck's roots are decidedly rural. "I don't try to deny it; I don't try to hide it; its reflected in some of my votes and stuff, which probably appeals to a more conservative kind of citizen." Then he reflects on his four decades as a social activist Democrat and adds, "On the other hand, I try to be really progressive minded when it comes to education; trying to do things for economic development and health care."

He points to his father, who dropped out of school in the seventh grade. "A hard-core, yellow dog Roosevelt Democrat," is how he describes him. "If it hadn't been for FDR and the CCC camp, his family would have starved." By the time he was 10, Houck's family had moved into the town of Marion, where his dad had set up a building supply business. Houck worked there as a boy; remembers attending school "grades one through 11, all in the same building, two grades per classroom, 40 kids in a class...one teacher."

In high school he "played football but wasn't very good; very skinny, frail. I played basketball but wasn't very tall or fast. So, I really wasn't a very accomplished athlete," he says in his trademark self-deprecating style. "But," he continues, "I enjoyed school; school was the best time of my life. I liked school, liked the friends, liked the social aspect, liked the clubs. I was selected the most popular of my graduating class in 1968."

And so already the budding politician was emerging; laying the first course in a foundation that would eventually lead him to the chairmanship of the Senate Education and Health Committee.

The plan after high school was to attend Appalachian State, but lack of funds sent Edd (the two d's come from 'Eddie'...get it?) to Wytheville Community College instead. From there he earned his bachelor's degree in education from Concord College in West Virginia, met and married another budding educator, Dana, and they both set about looking for work. Their plan was to return to southwest Virginia, but a lack of jobs sent them northeast instead...to teach school in a county whose name they could barely pronounce: Spotsylvania. "And we didn't know anybody...didn't know anybody," he exclaims.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Eddie Houck, as he was known, grew up in rural Smyth County, the son of a logger and sawmill operator.

Edd Houck's first job was as a middle school science teacher, and he would be perfectly happy doing that today were it not for his budding interest in current affairs. "Being in college in the 60s and 70s, there was a lot of political activities and interests," he remembers of his graduate school days at UVA earning his master's degree. "You had Vietnam going on, you had the Civil Rights movement; you had women's rights; you had so many issues that as a college student I was pretty interested in what was going on in government; what was happening. So, when Dana and I moved to Spotsylvania, we said, 'you know one of the things we ought to do is get involved with the local Democratic Committee.'" Besides, this was a great way to meet other like-minded people and make friends.

"As a teacher it didn't take me long to understand that it was really the politicians who were affecting me most directly in my classroom: the board of supervisors at the county level; the General Assembly; that's where the real impact was on education. So I sort of fused my love and passion for education with a great deal of interest in politics."

In 1983, the State Senate seat in the area where they lived came up vacant, thanks in part to the gerrymandering of a district that stretched from Fredericksburg to Farmville! Edd Houck, who had been volunteering for the Democratic Committee for a decade now, made a bid for the seat and won. Since then, he has been challenged at the polls six times, and he fully expects to face opposition again in November of 2011.

But that's still a ways off. More pressing matters need to be addressed right now. In addition to the ever-looming budget crises, there is what he calls "that dam bill," which, considering all the time and effort that's gone into it, might better be referred to as "that damn bill."

It's a measure that seeks to circumvent regulations forcing Lake of the Woods to improve its dam, to the tune of \$6 million, so it can withstand (are you ready for this?) 37 inches of rain in a 24-hour period. Thirty seven inches of rain in 24 hours may have happened once in Virginia, during Hurricane Camille in Nelson County in 1969.

The fight over this theoretical model with the Department of Natural Resources, which oversees dam safety, has been going on for eight years now. "I was over there just trip after trip, privately just raising hell with them, fighting with them, trying to get them to understand this is just outlandish. This is crazy!" exclaims Houck in exasperation.

He says the Lake of the Woods structure is a model dam, a



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Freshman State Senator Edd Houck was first elected in 1983. Since then, he has faced opposition six times.

"poster child" for privately owned impoundments statewide. "We've got state dams, same classification, out of compliance and with this money problem we can't even go out and fix them ourselves, these unsafe dams. Yet, we're going to go out and tell a community they have to go in their pockets and pay \$6 million to tear down this perfectly safe, award-winning dam and rebuild it to comply with this theoretical rainfall model." The steam fairly hisses out of his ears.

Edd Houck has always been a strong supporter of education, as his personal past attests. Besides being a science teacher, he's been a guidance counselor, assistant principal, and direc-

tor of student services for the Fredericksburg City Public Schools. He retired from public education in 2007, and a year later became chairman of the Senate Education and Health Committee. His wife still teaches physical education at Courtland.

The Houcks also have a personal stake in the "Health" part of that Senate Committee. A daughter who he describes as "a soccer-playing rough and tumble kind of young woman, third year at George Mason, was stricken with multiple sclerosis and now she's totally disabled. It dramatically changed her life and changed ours." Houck purses his lips and adds that he also has "a family member who suffers from severe mental illness."

He looks over his glasses and adds, "When you live those things, it sensitizes you to it. You understand that there's a definite role that government has to play in those people's lives." Although he personally can afford insurance and home care and all that, "there's plenty of disabled people who don't have that support system; who don't have all that to look after."

Asked what it is he does for fun, he pauses a full 30 seconds to answer. "I love bluegrass music," he finally responds, as he dreamily summons a childhood memory of a country store, not far from the Crooked Road and the birthplace of American country music. "Right in front of our house where we lived, an old guy would sit there on the front porch of that store and play the fiddle all day long."

Like most of us who were teenagers in the late 60s, he was lured away by rock and roll and soul music. "But, now that I've had a chance to mellow a little bit, I've gone back to my roots and found bluegrass again, and I just really love to go to the festivals...My fun time," he pauses again, "that's a really hard question to answer." After a moment, he says "I like to sit out on my porch, out on my deck, drink a little scotch whiskey and listen to some bluegrass CDs."

But he has precious little time to do that because of what's known as "retail politics," the pressing of flesh and making appearances at all kinds of functions and gatherings and grand openings and the like. "I enjoy that," he says of this politically necessary chore. "I think that's the job...I like going to Orange County...I do well talking to people."

This is borne out recently in the middle of the busiest holiday weekend of this snowy winter. A crowd of 150 or so Orange County citizens have braved icy roads and given up their Saturday afternoon to attend Houck's second public forum in as many weeks. The topic today, as it is just about every day for

him, is the budget crises...a \$4 billion dollar shortfall in a state whose constitution mandates it must pass a balanced budget, unlike our big brother on the Potomac 100 miles to the north.

Houck is in his element here, meeting and greeting, offering a sympathetic ear to a sympathetic crowd. He's preaching to the choir, and they to him. He is interrupted by applause several times. He nods in agreement as school board members, constitutional officers, parents, teachers and concerned citizens line up to vent their frustration over the proposed cuts. School board member Judy Carter confirms Houck has been "extremely supportive of public education." Still, she estimates 80 jobs will be lost in Orange County Public Schools alone. Several parents of disabled children plead their case. Houck knows from first-hand experience what they go through day in and day out.

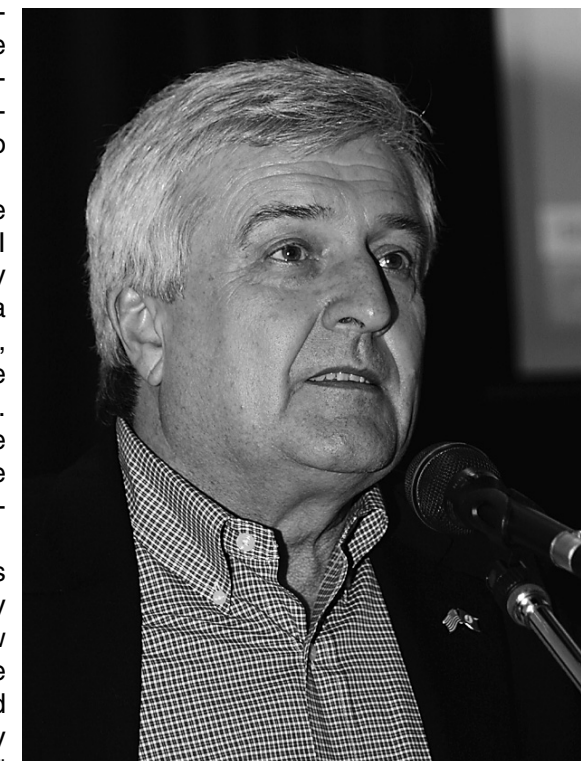


PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Democrat Edd Houck has been a State Senator for 27 years. His district has included heavily Republican Orange since 1990.

He looks at the budget reductions and says, statewide, "that's going to cost us by our best estimate, about 50,000 jobs: teachers, public safety workers, deputy sheriffs, state employees, college faculty, health care workers, hospitals, nursing homes." All told it's \$4 billion in cuts. "Tell me what it means in jobs," he challenges. "It's people working. It's people in Orange County who are working right today whose jobs are threatened."

Calling it the worst economic crises since the Great Depression, he continues, "Right now would be the worst time to put another tens of thousands of people out of work. We need more people working; we need more things to help prop up the economy... Governor McDonnell, he is the jobs governor. Well, this sort of contradicts that, directly. The no-tax mantra is basically going to cause tens of thousands of people to be displaced from work."

The other side of the argument is that no new taxes will stimulate the economy, make it easier for businesses to grow and hire people, and help those facing foreclosure and bankruptcy to wriggle out from under their debt. Still, Houck says, "I don't think we can just simply cut our way out of this ... This is really devastating folks. We've long gone past trimming budgets and trimming fat and making economies."

He pulls two quarters out of his pocket, holds them aloft and says 50 cents is what it will cost him per day to delay car tax relief, which is the \$950 million the state sends back to localities in exchange for giving up most of their personal property tax revenue.

But if car tax relief is suspended, the tax burden still reverts to the localities. "Guess what folks; it's just a shifting that's going on," admits Houck who adds that 52 percent of state revenues are bound for the localities anyway. "When we cut state