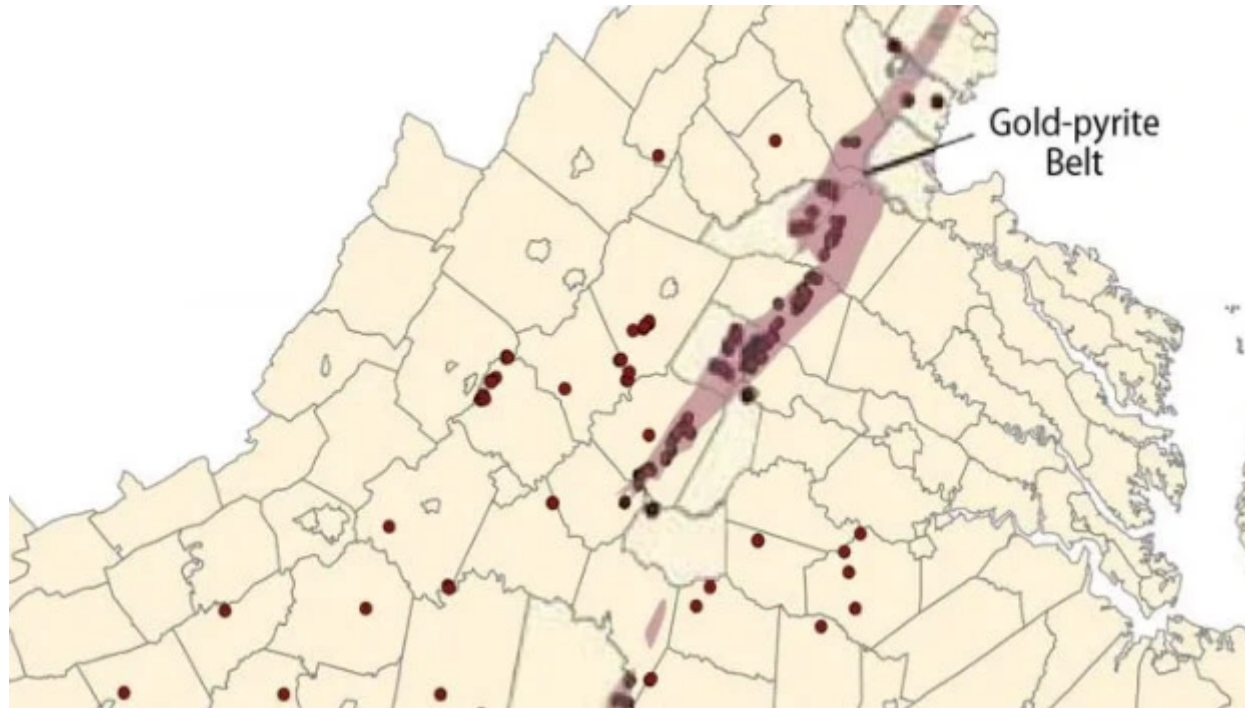


From The Editor's Desk: Who scheduled Virginia's gold mining meetings?

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A look at the deposits of gold in and around this region of Virginia.

As soon as the date and time were announced, the emails started coming in. Buckingham County residents were disappointed. The next meeting of the state's gold mining workgroup will be on Thursday, Nov. 3 at 9 a.m.

This group, set up by the General Assembly, is currently working on a report to determine if gold mining should be allowed in the Commonwealth and if so, under what conditions. In Buckingham, that's a personal cause for some of the residents, seeing as a Canadian company is currently prospecting near their homes. Residents wanted to hear the discussions in person. They wanted to see everything going on. They wanted to be involved. But there is just one problem. The meetings happen while they're at work.

Every meeting of the state gold mining workgroup has been the same. They run from 9 a.m. to noon on a weekday. Sometimes it's a Monday. One I covered in person was on a Friday. Now this next one will be on a Thursday morning. Not even one of the meetings has been on a weeknight or on the weekend. For everyone who reached out to talk with me, that's a problem, because they're at a job during that period. And unless you're willing to give up a day of vacation time, it's hard to explain to a boss that you're coming in late because you had to go talk at a hearing.

Why are they always at the same time? That question has been asked at every meeting I've covered so far, by one of the few Buckingham County residents who can show up. And the answer each time, from the Virginia Department of Energy (VDOE) staff, is the same. This is the best time for members of the workgroup to attend. However, seeing as most of the workgroup members only attend via Zoom, some from a conference room at their actual jobs, I have to question how true that is. No other time would be a better fit?

There's also another issue. Nobody seemed to ask residents when the best time for them would be.

Residents can't make gold mining hearings

It's a problem I've encountered quite a bit over the years. We're always asking people to get involved with government. You see the "be an informed voter" signs all over at this time of year. Everyone from town council members to state officials say they want input from the public, from the people who these decisions will affect. But how often do they actually mean that?

On the local level, they put action behind those words. The Farmville Town Council, for example, holds public hearings during their 7 p.m. meetings, giving people plenty of time to get off work and drop by council chambers. The same is true in Buckingham, Cumberland and Prince Edward counties, where supervisors also hold their discussions at night. But when it comes down to state meetings, it's a different story. From presentations to a "time to ask questions", two things are usually true. First, those meetings will be during the work week. Be it an Assembly hearing, workgroup meeting or time for testimony. Second, they'll either be in the morning hours or early afternoon.

This time, it was a series of gold mining meetings in Buckingham County. In 2014, I saw the same thing happen over a discussion on eminent domain in Augusta County. In 2017, residents experienced the same issue when state officials wanted input over a proposed interstate highway to run alongside the city of Martinsville. Each time, I walked into mainly empty rooms, with officials saying "I guess nobody cares about this stuff" as they packed up unused handouts and folded up maps. But that's not the case at all. People actively care about these things. Unless you're retired, however, the state doesn't make it easy to physically be there. That needs to change.

It's not about a guarantee

Now, to be clear, I'm not promising you'd be speaking to a packed house if the time changes. The gold mining meeting could shift to 5 p.m. on a Saturday and receive the same level of attendance. You can't guarantee anyone will show up. Even for those public hearings I mentioned in Farmville and Buckingham, where everything from tax rates to school budgets were up for discussion, there were plenty of empty seats.

And yes, there are multiple ways outside of the meeting to make your voice heard in these cases. Residents can see the documents online, watch videos from the meetings and post comments. But for many residents, that's not enough. Some people need to see things firsthand in order to understand or trust the process. They need to be able to ask questions face to face and get answers the same way, rather than in an email. And those people deserve to have that opportunity, without having to choose between coming to a hearing or showing up to work.

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