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The JLARC Review: The Phantom Echoes of Discontent? (Part 1)

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“. . . Because we are not reviewing whether eVA is successful or not, but rather how it impacts one group of users and potential users, the questions do not focus so much on the elements of success that are addressed in Yes Virginia! But try to get at small business impact”

e-mail from Chief Legislative Analyst, [Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee](#) (April 2009)

Last month I received an unexpected call from from the Commonwealth of Virginia’s Chief Legislative Analyst requesting my feedback or perspective on House Joint Resolution No. 119. The resolution which was agreed to (or passed if that is the right terminology) by both the Commonwealth’s Senate and the House of Delegates in early March 2008, directed the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee ([JLARC](#)) to study the impact of eVirginia ([eVA](#)) on small businesses in the Commonwealth.

Based on extensive research, and the fact that eVA represents one of only a handful of public (and private) sector eProcurement initiatives that are successful, I have been one of the strongest advocates for the program since my Yes Virginia articles ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)) were first published in the Procurement Insights Blog in the fall of 2007.

The series, which has been amongst the most widely read articles I have written was subsequently picked-up by several other publications

including a front page feature on the Canadian-based [Summit Magazine](#).

Virginia's success has also led to a highly popular [seminar](#) of the same name, where I have had the privilege of sharing the eVA story with audiences of 20 to as many as 400 in North America as well as overseas.

I also do not want to forget to mention that I have also authored a paper titled [Yes Virginia! A Profile In Excellence](#) that has been purchased by government and government "associated" organizations from as far away as Australia.

It is of course important for you to know the extent of my experience with eVA as it provides a clear understanding in terms of which side of the investigative lens I am speaking.

I also think that it is important for your to note, and as my audiences will attest, I begin each and every conference with the admonition that even though the ideas and concepts that I am sharing are thoroughly researched, anything and everything I present (or for that matter anyone who has the privilege of standing before a group of people), is subject to the same scrutinizing thoroughness. I say this as it is my belief that this is the only way to achieve what I refer to as "sustainable veracity."

As a result, the fact that the Virginia Legislature has decided to "examine" eVA is an undertaking that I can both appreciate and even support. Unfortunately, this is where the harmonization of principles ends, starting with the Chief Legislative Analyst's written statement that "we are not reviewing whether eVA is successful or not . . ."

[Love and Marriage](#)

Like Old Blue Eyes' rendition of the song Love and Marriage which stresses that you cannot have one without the other - I know I am old fashioned, it is impossible to separate eVA's success from the impact on the small business sector. Attempting to do this is tantamount to saying that the color of a car's interior is more important than whether the car itself actually works.

While there are many points of contention beyond the attempt to segregate what are clearly interrelated points of co-dependence, the most prominent of all the issues surround the methodology being employed to ascertain eVA's impact on small business. This includes the lack of an established baseline reference in terms of analyzing what is at best a nominal amount of tangible spend data, and the perplexing utilization of a survey in which only 95 out of a possible pool of thousands responded. To create a point of context relative to the paucity of survey respondents, Virginia has 12,000 buyers and as of 2007 34,000 registered suppliers. The fact that the survey only garnered replies from 95 of a possible 46,000 stakeholders might in and of itself be telling in terms of the validity of an undertaking for which the impetus was a complaint that eVA had a negative effect on small business.

Results Speak?

The results of the JLARC investigation, which will be published in a report and corresponding slide presentation on July 13th, 2009 will be interesting to say the least.

During the intervening weeks, I will be examining the progress of the mandate which charged JLARC with the tasks of "identifying the total number of State purchase transactions and the total dollar amount of such transactions awarded to small business" since eVA's inception in 2001. The stated mandate also includes an undertaking to "examine the impact of the registration and transaction fees and the mandatory

nature of the system on the procurement opportunities of small Virginia businesses." Once again, and on the surface, there is absolutely nothing wrong with this kind of review.

However based on preliminary discussions, which included two rather lengthy telephone conversations, numerous e-mails and a 7 page Q&A document to which I had responded in writing, it is what lies beneath the surface that is both telling and disconcerting.

As a result starting today, and each Friday from this point on until the release of the JLARC report on July 13th, I will be posting a weekly perspective. The objective of my efforts is not to justify eVA, but to ensure that the process by which the program is being reviewed is based upon sound research methodology in which there is an absence of the oligarchical self interest that appears to have led to its legislative introduction in the first place. This will include a series of articles in which I will share with you the basis for my expressed concerns including the results from my 7 page Q&A exercise.

As long as the process through which the program is being examined and ultimately assessed is unfettered by the prospects of a predetermined outcome, I for one am more than happy to let the proverbial chips fall where they may. If after the assessment it can be clearly demonstrated that certain aspects of the eVA program are detrimental to the "collective" best interests of all stakeholders versus the "isolated" best interests of a few, then I for one will openly lead the charge of change starting with an updated white paper and revised seminar.

This is because at the end of the day, I believe that it is more important to get it right rather than be right!

[eVA Poll and Corresponding Radio Broadcast](#)

We have just posted a Procurement Insights/PI Window on Business Poll that asks the question ["Is Virginia's eVA program a benefit to SME/minority & women-owned suppliers?"](#)

Click on the above question and take a few moments to cast your vote. Please note that the poll has been created through the LinkedIn Business Network. If you are not a network member but want to vote, simply follow the on-line prompts to quickly set-up a profile. There is no cost to join, and you will also gain access to a number of tremendous resources including the newly established ["Public Sector Supplier Forum."](#)