



Richmond City Council

The Voice of the People

Richmond, Virginia

RICHMOND SOUTHWEST 4TH VOTER DISTRICT

The Honorable Sarah Abubaker

Councilmember, Richmond Southwest 4th Voter District

November 21, 2025

CAO Donald:

I am writing to follow up on your November 15 memo titled *Unaudited Estimate of General Fund Balance (period ending June 30, 2025)* and to address broader concerns about transparency, communication, and respect for the role of City Council.

I want to begin with Councilmember Lynch's Res. 2025-R050, which has become an early and telling indicator of how the Administration intends to approach the budget process. During Finance Committee discussion, when asked whether the Administration would comply if the resolution passed, your response, "No ma'am," signaled an unwillingness to respect the expressed will of the elected body responsible for budgetary authority under the City Charter.

It is also important to clarify what Res. 2025-R050 actually does — and does not do. The resolution merely asks the Administration to provide iterations of the FY27 budget at the \$1.16 rate, not to commit to adopting that rate. This is a distinction the Administration has repeatedly blurred. Claiming that it would be "impossible" to provide multiple budget scenarios is simply not accurate. Many localities, and the Commonwealth itself, routinely develop budgets under multiple scenarios: conservative, moderate, or aggressive revenue assumptions; differing expenditure trajectories; or varied tax policy impacts.

It is almost certain that similar internal scenario-building is already occurring within the City. Council is simply asking to be part of that conversation — to evaluate the same possibilities and implications that staff evaluate. To shut down that request outright, rather than engage in a transparent discussion, sends the wrong signal about the Administration's commitment to the collaborative, open budgeting process that Richmonders were told to expect with this new Administration.

When Mayor Avula took office, his Administration was welcomed as the beginning of a more transparent, partnership-driven Richmond. However, the handling of recent fiscal matters has instead mirrored past patterns that erode trust: limited communication, a lack of timely information, and decisions presented without meaningful collaboration with Council.

In your October 10 memo, *Tax Rate Deliberation*, you described equalizing the tax rate to \$1.16, returning \$17.2 million to taxpayers, as a "potentially catastrophic decision." One is tempted to ask whether the Administration already knew, or had reason to know, that the actual FY25 surplus would exceed that amount. That question only arises because Council

was not kept informed in real time, nor included as a genuine partner in the financial review process.

The Administration's approach to the FY25 surplus further underscores these concerns. The report was delivered to Council fewer than seven hours before the Code-mandated deadline. When questioned by the media, your spokesperson emphasized that it was delivered "on November 15," demonstrating a clear understanding of the Code requirements. Yet your accompanying email suggested that if November 15 falls on a weekend or holiday in future years, the Administration intends to submit the report late, on the next business day.

This is not a minor procedural issue — it is a stated intent to disregard City Code as early as next year. If avoiding weekend work is the concern, the responsible and lawful solution is to deliver the report before the weekend, as many Richmonders — including City employees — routinely do in their own roles.

To restore confidence and enable a more constructive working relationship, I am requesting answers to the following:

- When did the Administration first become aware of the likely size of the FY25 surplus?
- By what date did the Administration know or reasonably suspect that the surplus would exceed the projected impact of a \$1.16 tax rate reduction?
- What concrete steps will the Administration take to ensure that Council, and the public, receive timely, accurate financial information necessary for fully informed decision-making?
- Mayor Avula has stated he supports lowering the tax rate "in the future." What specific actions is the Administration taking to improve fiscal efficiency and make that possible?

Despite my concerns, I remain committed to building a productive partnership with the Administration. Supporting Councilmember Lynch's resolution would be a meaningful step toward that goal. It would show a willingness to provide Council, and the people we represent, with the information required to assess all options openly and fairly. If the Administration's position prevails in that public debate, it prevails. But Richmonders deserve a process grounded in transparency and respect for Council's role.

With respect and partnership,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "S. Abubaker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "S" and a stylized "A".

Sarah Abubaker
Councilmember