Complications attend growth in N. Virginia

By Jared Foretek
Staff Writer

Complications attend growth in N. Virginia, nearly 5,000 more than in Maryland, long considered to be the institutional anchor of Jewish life in the region. According to the study, the new numbers represent an 80 percent increase since 2006.

Revised boycott bill still draws criticism

By Hannah Monicken
Senior Writer

A bill that would bar U.S. companies from participating in anti-Israel boycotts has been revised to address First Amendment concerns, according to Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.), who introduced the bill last year with Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio).

The legislation is aimed at curbing the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement by prohibiting U.S. companies from “comply[ing] with, further[ing] or support[ing]” attempts by foreign countries or “international governmental organizations” to boycott Israel. It is an amendment to a 1970s law that forbade companies from complying with boycotts instigated by foreign governments in response to the Arab League’s threat to blacklist companies that did business with Israel.

The updated version does away with jail time as the punishment mechanism in favor of financial penalties. It also affirms the right of individual U.S. citizens to support boycotts.

“We have welcomed the public discussions that have been essential in focusing this bipartisan legislation in such a way that definitively upholds the rights of individual Americans while clarifying decades-old legislation,” Cardin said in a statement.

The Senate bill has 54 co-sponsors. The House version has 278. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) is also a co-sponsor. Cardin said he expects the House version to be considered in the next Congress.

Saudi expert eyes changing kingdom

By Dan Schere
Political Reporter

Tamara Cofman Wittes wants Americans to know that there is more to Saudi Arabia than oil, desert and sharia law.

The capital, Riyadh, is being redeveloped into a modern, bustling city of 5 million people with a subway system that is expected to be completed by the end of this year. Young scholars and students dream of the day when their country’s economy is driven by private sector innovation instead of petroleum. And women are slowly becoming more independent.

“The pace of change is really notable compared to my previous visits to the kingdom where there was a sense that the leadership of the country moved very slowly and cautiously,” said Wittes, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution’s Center for Middle East Policy. “It is clear that that’s not the case now.”

Wittes was in Saudi Arabia last month as part of a research team from Brandeis University’s Crown Center for Middle East Policy.
There’s always been a feeling that there’s more significant Jewish community in Northern Virginia than perhaps the community in, say, Montgomery County fully appreciated,” said Jeff Dannick, executive director of the Jewish Community Center of Northern Virginia. “So I think the study is maybe a validation that, yes, we are a significant Jewish community unto ourselves.”

The study was conducted in cooperation with the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and funded by The Morning-star Foundation established by Susie and Michael Gelman. (Susie and Michael Gelman are members of the ownership group of Mid-Atlantic Media, which publishes Washington Jewish Week.)

There are major differences, though, in the way Jewish life has developed in Greater Washington’s three major areas. Northern Virginia, which encompasses Fairfax, Prince William and Loudoun counties, makes up the largest land mass. Its Jewish population sprawls across more than 1,500 square miles, in stark contrast to the relatively concentrated Jewish community in Montgomery County.

With that sprawl comes transportation complications. According to a 2015 report by the U.S. Department of Transportation, Northern Virginia is home to three of the nation’s 50 worst bottlenecks. And with only a few of the area’s 24 congregations located near a Metro stop, deciding whether to go to a Jewish institution often requires a cost-benefit analysis.

In response, a number of the area’s Jewish institutions have taken a different approach. The Fairfax-based JCC, for example, is moving forward with a “hub and spoke strategy,” as Dannick calls it, prioritizing partnership with synagogues and cultural centers for its programming rather than building more brick-and-mortar locations.

“We want to create a presence within pockets of the Jewish community and make people feel like there is Jewish community close to where they live, regardless of where in Northern Virginia they live,” Dannick said. “It’s a challenge. It’s a geography challenge, it’s a traffic challenge, and it’s a scale challenge. But we have to be smart about it.”

It’s the kind of approach the JCC only Jewish day school — is making similar considerations. Dan Finkel, the head of school, said the study brings some new data for the school’s administration to mull as it begins a new planning process.

According to the study, 2 percent of Northern Virginia’s Jewish households had a child in a Jewish day school. But 9 percent had kids in non-Jewish independent schools. Finkel said Gesher’s leadership will be exploring ways to attract that population.

“We’re situated in Fairfax County, where the public schools are excellent,” Finkel said. “A lot of the conversations that we have with folks are about making a decision between a public school and Gesher. But what the data is telling us is, in fact, there are a lot of families who are choosing private schools to send their children, and maybe we should be having more of a conversation about those.”

Again, much of the challenge with that, he said, comes back to commuting. In a place where the morning rush dictates so much, there’s a balance for parents to strike. The school, like independent schools nationwide, is facing a declining enrollment. But Finkel said it will consider adding bus routes to draw from the dispersed Jewish population.

“With a little bit more investment, we could add routes that would significantly decrease travel time and probably reduce that barrier for some families who really like what we’re doing,” Finkel said.

Joan Sacarob represents a different part of the Northern Virginia community. She just moved to the Greenspring Village retirement community in Springfield. But she’s been in Northern Virginia for more than 60 years, and has been one of the region’s biggest proponents through its development, serving on boards and committees at synagogues like Eitz Hayim and Olam Tikkvah, as well as the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington and the JCC of Northern Virginia.

First and foremost, she’s been a concerned community member, and she said the study makes her think of how far the community has come.

When her husband took a job with the Navy and the two first moved to the area, she said her sense of the Jewish community didn’t extend far beyond her own synagogue.

“It was small,” she said. “There was not a lot more than what you saw at temple.”

But she brimmed with pride recounting a night last month when Eva Schloss, whose mother married Anne Frank’s father after the Holocaust, came to speak at George Mason University in Fairfax. Some 1,200 people attended the event, organized by Chabad Lubavitch of Northern Virginia.

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“One rainy, horrible night where you’d think that no one would be there, everyone came together,” said Sacarob, 81. “It was beautiful, and that’s what the Northern Virginia community is. It’s welcoming, it’s diverse. And it still has a lot of room to grow.”

Finkel said he hopes that the study opens the eyes of people to how much Jewish life there is in Northern Virginia.

If Montgomery County has the legacy Jewish institutions of the region, and Washington synagogues have the best access to national programming, Northern Virginia has, at times, had something of a chip on its shoulder.

“I think there’s been a sense that it’s a little unfair that Jewish life has felt so centered elsewhere, so maybe there was a sense that we weren’t getting the attention we deserved,” Finkel said.

“I think with [the study], that will change.”

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