

# Economic Woes Personal For Future Council Member

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Alicia Hughes will start her tenure on the Alexandria City Council on July 1 with a pretty strong sense of the economic troubles facing many Americans these days.

A week after her unexpected election to the post, Hughes was scheduled to be evicted from her West End apartment. She narrowly avoided that result last week. But her repeated struggles to keep pace with her rent, as documented in court records, have given her unique standing to make the campaign claim that "many who helped to build great Alexandria can no longer afford to live here."

"My thing is, I don't believe in making excuses. I don't want to start by doing that now," Hughes said last week. "Financial difficulties and balancing acts are difficult things."

Hughes, who ran as an independent with Republican backing, did not discuss her financial troubles before her election in the heavily Democratic city. She made a \$1,450 infusion to her campaign account in March, listing herself as the contributor, just as she was struggling to pay her rent on time, records show.

Incumbent Timothy B. Lovain (D), who lost his reelection bid to Hughes by 168 votes, said he wishes "voters would have had a chance to consider that."

"If a person can't take care of their personal financial situation, should they be trusted to look after the public's money?" asked Lovain, a Washington lobbyist.

Hughes works as a patent examiner at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. She said she owns a house elsewhere but has been waiting for a better market. "I am not in a position to sell my house, where I could then move forward and buy something here now," Hughes said. Decreasing home values "make transitions difficult on people. . . . People are living this every day."

Hughes ran on a platform that emphasized fiscal responsibility. The city's most urgent problem is its budget, she said.

After the election rush, she knew that it was time to get caught up on personal matters. She thought, "I've got to get back on track with everything," she recalled. After being away the weekend of May 8, she was stunned to see an eviction warning from building management upon her return, she said.

"Dear God -- someone can put a note on my door or give me a message . . . on the eighth of May that I'm supposed to leave my home on the 12th," she said.

Sheriff's officials said they notified Hughes on April 24 that she would be evicted May 12.

The most recent episode was part of a longer-running effort by her landlord to collect her rent, according to public records. In November, an Alexandria court ordered her evicted. She was late on \$1,501 in rent as of August, according to an affidavit filed by Realty Management Services Inc., the property manager. In March, she was late on \$1,581 in rent, according to the company. She reported the \$1,450 campaign contribution in March.

On April 20, a court ordered her eviction again, saying she owed \$462. Hughes said she had not received a \$500 referral credit as she had expected. She said her May rent was also late, but she cleared it with a cashier's check of \$1,360.

Except for August, Hughes said, she paid her rent "within the course of a month. That's a fair cycle to me for getting bills paid."

She also encountered trouble with her home in Baltimore. She bought the \$244,000 property in May 2006, and foreclosure proceedings began that September, according to records. The case was later dismissed.

Hughes said her personal economics do not change her views on Alexandria's finances. Before the election, the council passed a \$530 million operating budget that cut 117 city positions and raised the property tax rate by 5.8 cents, adding \$76 to the average homeowner's annual tax bill.

Her campaign Web site said: "I am a strong believer in balancing the budget."

"I stand by statements that I have made with regard to the City's budget," she wrote in an e-mail last week. "My election suggests that my position on taxes and budget concerns is obviously shared by many voters in the electorate."

"Further, I still advocate public accountability for public dollars," she added.

Hughes would not offer details about how she fell behind, and she said her ability to pay is telling.

"If you want to talk about financial management, the fact that I did have the money in the bank to pay the bill should be indicative of something, right?" she said.

Her lease agreement from last year indicated that she registered to park a 2005 Mercedes C230 with Maryland plates at the apartment. Her campaign finance report showed that she gave her campaign a \$900 in-kind contribution of wholesale jewelry in March.

Alexandria Sheriff Dana A. Lawhorne said his office handles many similar eviction cases. "They're pretty common," he said. "Most of them are resolved by the person going in and paying it."

A letter from Hughes's property manager said last week that everything is now paid up.

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.