

Proposed VA Transportation Improvements Will Not Solve Region's Traffic Problems

By Ronald D. Utt, Ph.D.

Summary

The problem with urban planning has always been that planners design what they think people should have, rather than what people want. Perhaps we should remember who's picking up the tab.

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By devoting a significant share of the money to transportation schemes the public consistently avoids, Virginians will be paying more in taxes but getting little or no congestion relief in return.

On November 5, 2002, residents of nine Northern Virginia communities will vote on whether to increase the state sales tax from 4.5 percent to 5 percent, and apply the additional revenue to transportation spending throughout the region. This half percentage point increase will raise about \$130 million per year to start, and this extra revenue will be used to pay the annual debt service on as much as \$2.75 billion in money borrowed to pay for twenty-eight planned projects. Although the debate on this vote has centered on whether Virginians can afford a tax hike, very little of the discussion has focused on whether the proposed projects will perform as promised and reduce congestion. That neglect should change because there is plenty of reason to believe that many of these costly projects will make no meaningful improvement in local congestion.

One of the chief reasons for the plan's likely failure to deliver the promised relief is the extent to which the planned projects are at variance with Washington's mobility patterns and commuters' preferences. According to the plan's proponents, an estimated 40 percent of the \$2.75 billion borrowed will be spent on transit programs such as buses, commuter rail and metro upgrades, while the other 60 percent will be spent on road improvements to better serve automobiles and trucks.

The chief problem with this revenue split between transit and cars is that the prescribed shares for spending bear no relationship to the actual market share each mode holds in Washington's vast transportation market. According to findings on America's travel patterns just released by the U.S. Census, less than 10 percent of commuters in the Washington/Baltimore metro area (9.3 percent to be exact) use transit to get to work, and much of this usage is concentrated in Baltimore and in Washington DC proper. If the transit market share is calculated just for Northern Virginia commuters, usage drops to 7.6 percent. It is to this small fraction of commuters that tax increase supporters promise 40 percent of the money. Go figure.

Given how few people in Northern Virginia use any form of public transportation to get to work, this plan will waste \$1.1 billion, or 40 percent of what's borrowed. And by devoting a significant share of the money to

transportation schemes the public consistently avoids, Virginians will be paying more in taxes but getting little or no congestion relief in return.

Transit advocates will answer this pessimistic prediction by arguing that spending more on public transportation will make transit more attractive, and people will respond by riding the rails or buses, not cars. While there is a kernel of intuitive plausibility to such assertions, history shows this line of speculation reflects the triumph of hope over experience. In reality, transit systems throughout the country are littered with costly improvement schemes that failed to reverse transit's long-term decline in market share across the nation.

Since 1960, governments at all levels have invested approximately a half a trillion dollars in a variety of transit projects around the country. But since that same year when the U.S. Bureau of the Census first began measuring commuting practices, transit's share of the market has continually declined despite massive investment. Between 1990 and 2000, transit's share of commuters fell from just 5.12 percent of the market to 4.57 percent, the lowest it's been since the series was first calculated.

Moreover, ridership declined in absolute numbers as well: over the past decade the number of commuters riding transit declined by 22,596. Among the nation's top fifty metropolitan areas, transit ridership declined in thirty-nine of them, including Washington/Baltimore where transit's share of commuters fell from 11.55 percent in 1990 to 9.3 percent today. For all travel in the region, transit's share is less than 4 percent.

Some environmentalists point to Portland, Oregon as an example of the kind of success that can be achieved with a costly pro-transit strategy that includes land use regulations to encourage development near transit. But even here the facts offer scant support. Despite huge investments in transit, very little in highways, and subsidies to encourage the building of homes and offices near rail, Portland has managed to raise transit's market share by only one-third of one percentage point in ten years. With transit holding just 5.7 percent of that commuting market, transit's performance in the Portland metro area lags even that of auto-obsessed Northern Virginia.

By the time Virginia's commuters discover the false promise of a bizarre transportation plan that devotes 40 percent of tax money to transportation programs that more than 9 out of 10 Virginians avoid, it will be too late to undo the damage. By borrowing against several decades of future tax revenues, Northern Virginians will be legally committed to service these bonds year after year. Something to think about. Deeply. Before it's too late.

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