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# In Latest Twist for Commuters, Dynamic Tolling to Take Effect

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## 'Congestion Pricing' Affects Times When Traffic Is Greatest

By Michael Laris  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Thursday, January 10, 2008; PW02

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Yes  No

Yes  No

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The year-end agreement to build Capital Beltway toll lanes in Fairfax County includes a single bureaucratic phrase that will shape the daily lives of thousands of Washington area commuters: dynamic tolling.

It sets prices based on how many cars are on the road. And, as the agreement between the Virginia Department of Transportation and the private companies that will build and operate the high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes noted last month, "There shall be no restrictions upon toll rates."

State officials point to detailed traffic models and projections showing that the average rush-hour trip along the new toll lanes will be six miles and cost \$5 to \$6. But the market will be the final arbiter.

"The upper limits will really be set by people's choice," said Barbara Reese, Virginia's deputy secretary of transportation.

Reese said it would be counterproductive for the two companies behind the project, Fluor Enterprises and Transurban, to ratchet up prices too aggressively. Comparable projects in the United States, including in California, bear that out, she said. The maximum toll on the 91 Express Lanes, which run 10 miles along the Riverside Freeway in Southern California, is \$10 for cars eastbound on Fridays at 3 p.m., according to the latest toll schedule.

"I think we can trust the public to tell them what's going to be the appropriate rate that they are going to be willing to pay to use the road," Reese said. She added that cars with three or more occupants and public buses will travel free.

The idea behind "congestion pricing" is logical enough: The private companies are accepting what Transurban's executive vice president, Michael Kulper, calls a "significant risk" in financing the \$1.9 billion project, and they expect a healthy profit.

But the effort will add a complex new calculation to daily commutes. Signs will be posted ahead of entrances to the HOT lanes telling commuters how much taking the toll lanes, two in each direction, will cost at the moment. If it's too expensive, drivers can take the free lanes. If they're in a hurry, they can pay. The posted toll could change every few minutes, but once drivers enter, their rate is locked in, and the amount is calculated when they exit. They are charged electronically when they leave the road.

State officials, who are contributing \$409 million in construction costs, say such choices reflect the dual realities of limited resources and growing congestion.

The Beltway project will stretch 14 miles, from Springfield at the Mixing Bowl north to Old Dominion Road. In addition to the four new lanes, major improvements will be made at key points, including the Springfield interchange. Because the volume of traffic has increased faster than projected, four access points will connect the HOT lanes to the Tysons Corner area.

The 80-year agreement between VDOT and the companies includes measures that could kick in if profits are especially high or if traffic projections miss their mark. For example, VDOT would get a percentage of revenue collected by Fluor and Transurban if the companies' return on investment is greater than about 8 percent.

Current projections show that that could occur in the last 10 or 15 years of the agreement, Reese said. Any such funds would be used for projects that would benefit HOT lane users, officials said.

Conversely, if more than 24 percent of traffic on the toll lanes is made up of carpools and public transit, which would keep the companies' revenue down, VDOT must compensate them. Officials said that would be unlikely, based on experience locally and nationally.

The agreement also mandates that traffic on the toll lanes be "free flowing," Reese said, which generally means traveling at least 45 mph. The companies would regulate that with price increases or, if necessary, by preventing vehicles from entering the toll lanes, she said.

Crashes are another factor. "If there's an accident on the general-purpose lanes that stops traffic, the agreement requires that they have to open their lanes to traffic, at no cost," Reese said.

Construction on the project is scheduled to begin this spring.

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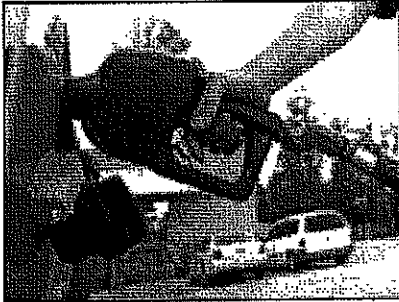
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## Politics

Dems: Replace abuser fees with gas tax



Sheena Jeffers, The Examiner  
2008-01-11 08:00:00.0  
Current rank: # 13 of 8,806

### Richmond -

Democratic legislators, set on scrapping the hated driver "abuser fees," are proposing raising the gasoline tax as a way to pay for Virginia's transportation needs.

Del. Kristen J. Amundson, D-Mount Vernon, is proposing a 1.5-cent increase in the 17.5-cent tax, which would raise the \$65 million a year the abuser fees were created to generate.

(AP)

Virginia Democrats want to scrap the dreaded abuser fees by raising the gasoline tax. "A 1.5-cent increase will allow us to repeal the fees and refund those who already got them," Amundson said.

"A 1.5-cent increase will allow us to repeal the fees and refund those who already got them," Amundson said.

The abuser fees, enacted last year as part of a statewide transportation funding package, were meant to help Virginia's growing highway maintenance deficit. They quickly came under fire, especially from Democrats, because they targeted only in-state drivers and added hundreds or thousands of dollars to the costs of some traffic offenses.

Senate Democrats committed to scrapping the fees Thursday but would not comment on how the money they would raise would be replaced.

Nonetheless, Del. Dave Albo, R-Springfield, one of the fees' chief architects, expected senators to seek to raise the gas tax.

"It's the most ludicrous thing I've ever heard, that some of them want to cut taxes on criminal drivers and increase taxes on law-abiding citizens, and that's basically what they're doing," Albo said.

He warned a 1.5-cent gas tax could be the first step in a much larger increase.

A gallon of gasoline costs an average \$3.10 last week, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

State auditors reported last month that the abusive-driver fees would not raise as much revenue as predicted and failed to curtail bad driving.

Gov. Tim Kaine, a Democrat, proposed repealing the fees Wednesday, joining lawmakers of both parties who want to abolish them.

The highway maintenance deficit for fiscal 2009 is \$290 million and growing, according to state Transportation Secretary Pierce Homer.

Income from the gas-tax increase would go toward the deficit as well as funding projects, Amundson said.

"It's an honest replacement," she said. "People understand it takes money to maintain our roads."

*William C. Flook contributed to this report.*

### Paying at the pump

Current local gasoline taxes in cents per gallon

» Virginia: 17.5

» Maryland: 23.5

» District: 20

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*Examiner*

Article published Jan 12, 2008

## Transit troubles back on the table for '08 legislature

January 12, 2008

By Seth McLaughlin - Virginia lawmakers thought they had put the problem of the state's decaying transportation network behind them last year when they adjourned after passing a multibillion-dollar road and rail-improvement plan.

But after contentious election campaigns, a lingering court battle and strong voter outcry, the topic has re-emerged in the opening days of this year's General Assembly session.

"The lingering thing is that the transportation bill was supposed to be the savior of the Republican Party, and it hurt us and it won't go away," said Delegate Jeffrey M. Frederick, Prince William Republican. "It did the opposite of what it was supposed to do."

Last April, Gov. Tim Kaine, a Democrat, and the Republican-controlled General Assembly approved a multibillion-dollar transportation deal, the first overhaul of the state's transportation system in 21 years.

Since then the plan has faced scrutiny — most notably from motorists who are outraged about the "abuser fees" that have been imposed on Virginia drivers since the summer. They range from \$750 for driving on a suspended license to \$3,000 for driving-related felonies and are added to any court-imposed fines.

Mr. Kaine and the new Democratic leadership in the Senate this week joined Lt. Gov. Bill Bolling, a Republican, and a growing number of state lawmakers in calling for a repeal of the fees.

Although there is a growing sense that the added pressure will kill the fees, the transportation package could unravel more.

"There is a sense that people had hoped to be able to have a victory lap with the transportation bill, and here we are having discussion about how we are going to fix it," Mr. Frederick said. "I'm sure people didn't want to be in that position."

On Tuesday, the Virginia Supreme Court heard a constitutional challenge regarding lawmakers' decision to delegate taxing powers to the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority, an unelected body, meant to generate about \$300 million a year for local transportation projects. The lawsuit was filed last year on behalf of Loudoun County officials and a group of conservatives led by Delegate Robert G. Marshall III, Prince William Republican.

On Thursday, Senate Democrats said lawmakers need to cover a projected shortfall of about \$260 million in the road maintenance budget, which often is paid for by siphoning money set aside for road construction.

"What we did last year was essentially postpone doomsday about three or four years on the maintenance funds," said Senate Majority Leader Richard L. Saslaw, Fairfax Democrat.

Despite the backlash, Republican leaders say Virginians need to wait for "the ink to dry" on the road and sound unwilling to swallow the proposed gas tax increases.

"I'd like to see House Bill 3202 [the transportation deal] settle down and get into effect and see if that meets the need in lieu of talking about any revenue," said Sen. Walter A. Stosch, Henrico Republican. "Reopening that debate is not going to achieve anything good for transportation in my mind."

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Tuesday, January 15, 2008

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## LEADING THE NEWS



### Study to kick-start highway bill lobbying

By Jim Snyder  
January 15, 2008



Business groups are looking at Tuesday's release of a transportation study as a start-your-engines moment to what is likely to be one of the most aggressively lobbied highway bills in recent memory.

A panel of public and private officials who reviewed the country's transportation needs for the past two years wrote the long-awaited report. Congress formed the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission in the last highway bill.

"Every stakeholder in the transportation industry ... has been waiting for this report to come out," said Janet Kavinoky, director of transportation infrastructure at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

"Nothing like this has been done before," said Rosario Palmieri, vice president for infrastructure policy at the National Association of Manufacturers.

The report will examine all four components of the transportation infrastructure system: freight rail lines, highways and bridges, ports, and mass transit systems.

The current highway bill lasts until 2009, but lobbyists anticipate the debate over surface transportation will begin this year given the rising importance of transportation bottlenecks on operating costs. An anticipated \$4 billion shortfall in transportation accounts in 2008 is also likely to drive the transportation debate on Capitol Hill.

One key element of the debate is whether the gas tax should be significantly increased to help pay for new spending.

Under the plan endorsed by a majority of panel members, the federal share of transportation spending would increase from 37 percent to 40 percent, according to one lobbyist.

There is a broad coalition of forces arrayed in support of tax increases, but increasing the gas tax is likely to remain politically difficult.

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"A special commission came up with an old, cold, bad idea," said Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), the ranking member on the Senate Finance Committee. "This is a disappointment and probably even a big waste of tax dollars," Grassley said in a statement anticipating the panel's report.

Transportation lobbyists said the committee itself was split on the need to raise taxes. The Bush administration opposes a tax hike, and current Transportation Secretary Mary Peters reportedly is one of the panel members to have argued against raising taxes as a way to spend more on infrastructure.

However, groups like NAM and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, normally allergic to tax hikes, in this case have joined contractors, civil engineers and others in support of higher user fees.

"This is a priority for [our members] as the costs for logistics are increasing much faster than they have before," Palmieri said.

The issue of infrastructure spending "has never been more important to them. It is very high on the agenda," he said.

He noted one estimate that congestion adds \$8 billion a year in prices for consumer goods.

Kavinoky, who is also the executive director of Americans for Transportation Mobility, one of several infrastructure coalitions formed in anticipation of the next highway bill debate, defended the tax.

"Right now, a user fee is the simplest and most straight-forward way to collect revenues," she said.

Even though the bulk of the new money would come from an increased gas tax, long the mainstay in transportation funding, business lobbyists also anticipate the report will recommend the sort of paradigm shift they were looking for.

One lobbyist, for example, expected the report to call for the creation of a permanent commission that would develop a transportation bill through a process that mirrors the Base Closure and Realignment Commission method Congress adopted to handle the politically sensitive work of closing military bases.

Under that scenario, Congress would approve or reject the commission's transportation report. But lawmakers would not be able to amend the legislation.

The report is also expected to advocate for a performance-based matrix that would tie funding to improvements in safety, congestion and maintenance efforts.

"That is the equivalent of a massive earthquake in transportation policy," Kavinoky said.

Kavinoky said federal dollars are distributed by program with little regard to how the money will improve performance.

A variety of other funding mechanisms are expected to be proposed by panel members to improve system performance.

Those are likely to include public-private partnerships for toll roads that are controversial in some quarters, and a transit tax to support expansion of public transportation programs.

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## Commuters cool to HOT lanes

January 18, 2008 12:43 am

By KELLY HANNON

While toll lanes on Interstate 95 will let drivers pay their way out of traffic, commuters are mostly saying, no thanks.

Instead, a majority of Northern Virginia commuters plan to keep carpooling, vanpooling and hopping a bus or train.

Also, roughly four in five people who participate in slugging--82 percent--said they will continue to line up to form instant carpools after toll lanes replace High Occupancy Vehicle lanes.



The vast majority of people who take part in slugging say they'll continue the practice after toll lanes are put in.

The group most likely to switch methods? Solo drivers. Only 53 percent of respondents said they would continue to drive alone after toll lanes open.

Virginia commissioned an online survey to look at commuter behavior in the I-95 corridor in advance of the toll-lane project.

The results show commuters overwhelmingly intend to stick with their current mode of travel.

"They will not change their commute in any way when HOT lanes are open and functional," said Corey Hill, the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation's chief of transit and congestion management.

Hill shared survey results with the Commonwealth Transportation Board in Richmond Wednesday. The online survey was conducted last summer and targeted commuters who travel northbound on I-95 on weekday mornings.

A private partnership, Fluor-Transurban, intends to expand HOV lanes on I-95 to the Massaponax area by 2014. It will widen the two-lane HOV corridor to three lanes from Arlington to Dumfries.

Under the proposal, vehicles with three or more occupants will continue to ride for free. But vehicles with one or two occupants can pay a toll to use the lanes. Tolls will fluctuate based on the time of day and level of traffic.

The toll-lane proposal sparked fear in the slugging community, Hill said.

Slugs worried that drivers would prefer to pay the toll rather than stop at commuter lots to pick up the extra two riders needed to use the lanes at rush hour, Hill said.

With more than 80 percent of sluggers pledging to continue, and 81 percent of carpoolers insisting they will stick with it, there should be no reason to fear, Hill said.

The incentive to pick up slugs has always been saving time, said CTB member Douglas Koelemay of Springfield. Now, drivers will simply have an added financial incentive, he said. Drivers who pick up slugs would avoid tolls that could run \$50 or more for a one-way trip at rush hour.

Tolls must adjust to a point where traffic continues to flow at 55 mph. This could take \$1.60 a mile at peak travel times to achieve, according to one government estimate. Fluor-Transurban has estimated tolls approaching \$1 a mile at peak travel times.

Vanpoolers were the most loyal to their method, with 95 percent intending to continue after HOT lanes open.

The survey had good news for the Virginia Railway Express, with 86 percent of train commuters pledging to stay on board. Commuter buses are another popular mode of transit, with 91 percent of users committed to riding.

Proceeds from the toll lane project and federal money could generate around \$300 million for transit.

The state intends to use some of that money to expand public transit in the I-95 corridor, beefing up bus service from the Fredericksburg area, adding VRE cars to existing trains and expanding Park & Ride lots.

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When toll lanes open on Interstate 95, will commuters switch travel methods?

A survey taken last summer drew 3,289 respondents. Among them were 917 solo drivers, 686 train riders, 606 slugs, 389 bus riders, 356 carpool riders, 268 vanpool riders and 67 people who categorized their mode as "other." The survey has a 95 percent confidence rate.

Here's how many said they would will stick with their current method of commuting.

95 percent of vanpoolers 91 percent of bus riders

86 percent of train riders

82 percent of slugs

81 percent of carpoolers

53 percent of solo drivers

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## Local

VRE on track to raise fares through 2014



(Examiner file photo)

Those planning to ride VRE trains in and out of Washington, D.C. can expect to pay higher fares over the next few years.

up to discuss the current rate increase.

Dan Genz, The Examiner  
2008-01-19 08:00:00.0  
Current rank: # 567 of 9,348

### Washington DC -

Virginia Railway Express riders would face fare increases every year for the next six years under plans proposed by the railway's board Friday in Woodbridge.

Fares would increase about 3 percent annually or 6 percent every two years for its approximately 15,000 daily commuters under a plan to tie the fares to an inflation gauge that tracks transportation costs.

The board is preparing to raise rates 3 percent in July and will ask riders for input on the broader plan to regularly increase prices each year at hearings already set

Higher fuel and insurance costs, combined with the expense of operating four more trains, will push up operating expenses about 3.6 percent each year, Chief Executive Dale Zehner said.

Announcing that riders should expect increases of about 3 percent will help them budget and reduce the potential for aggravating surprises, Fairfax County Supervisor Sharon Bulova said.

The proposal would gradually increase the average fare of \$5.87 by about 20 cents each year to more than \$7 in 2014, though how the increase would be administered has not been decided.

The fares were kept steady in 2008, but climbed at least 4 percent the previous four years.

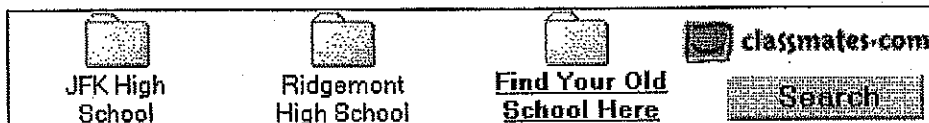
Most riders would be willing to stomach small increases, but want assurances the increase would not be set in stone if the railway's financial conditions improved or use surged, said Dick Peacock, a Manassas-area representative of the Virginia Association of Railway Patrons.

"The problem with increasing fares is you're going to lose some riders," Peacock said. "It seems reasonable if the increases are going to be 3 percent or less."

The budget assumes an increase of 100,000 passenger trips each year from 3.7 million to 4.2 million by 2014.

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*Examiner*

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## Study examines HOT lanes' effect

By LILLIAN KAFKA  
lkafka@manassasjm.com  
Thursday, January 24, 2008

RICHMOND - About 70 percent of slugs are afraid that high occupancy toll lanes would harm their unique way of commuting, but even more of them say that doesn't mean they'll change their ways.

That's according to market research done by the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, which is studying transit within the Interstates 95 and 395 corridor, where an Australian firm has proposed building HOT lanes to Washington, D.C.

DRPT surveyed residents from Spotsylvania to Arlington to find out how their commuting habits might differ if the HOT lanes proposal goes through.

They received responses from about 3,300 bus riders, single drivers, train riders and slugs. Slugs are people found mostly in Prince William, Stafford and Spotsylvania counties who pick up or ride with strangers in order to meet high occupancy vehicle requirements.

Through the HOT lanes agreement, Virginia could receive millions of dollars for expanding transit and car pooling opportunities from the Potomac River south to the Massaponax exit on I-95.

Nearly \$300 million could come from excess HOT lanes revenues, transit fare box revenues and the federal government for transit services that DRPT is analyzing.

"We're trying to figure out the best transportation demand management for the corridor," said Tanya Husick, HOT lanes project manager for DRPT. "There is a belief that there will be money available for these services and it's only money that comes if the project happens."

She's making final changes to a study that will make recommendations on how the Commonwealth Transportation Board could invest monies coming from HOT lanes.

Suggestions include more buses, more rail cars and more park-and-ride lots along the highways.

Transurban, the company that proposed to build HOT lanes, wants to toll single occupant vehicles a variable, per-mile rate to ride on reversible express lanes. HOV and buses wouldn't pay tolls. Some revenues would go back to Virginia, depending on an agreement that has yet to be finalized.

Husick said about half of single drivers polled were likely to pay to ride in HOT lanes part of the time.

"In general that's typically what you find with this type of service, a premium service," Husick said. "They won't use it every day."

She said they didn't study whether or not enough cars would use HOT lanes to make them viable for Transurban, which has already committed to investing millions in a Capital Beltway HOT lane project.

DRPT's upcoming study on HOT lane-related transit is going suggest upgrades to bus, rail and park-and-ride infrastructure, Husick said.

If HOT lanes are a reality, the Fredericksburg line of Virginia Railway Express could use excess revenues to increase their 14 trains per day to 20 and bus systems could increase their runs from 82 per hour to 97 per hour. That's according to information presented to the CTB last week by Corey Hill, chief of transit and congestion management for DRPT.

Other suggestions include creating five bus rapid transit stations, three new bus centers, telework support, vanpool assistance, rideshare program support, and thousands of new commuter lot parking spaces.

DRPT's highest estimate conservative and liberal amounts of cash flowing from HOT lanes into the state's coffers. The highest amount considered - \$500 million - could help fund an extension of Metrorail to Woodbridge and add two new VRE stations.

Husick said the final report is expected to be released next month.

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### Budget office estimates \$1.4B shortfall in Highway Trust Fund

Predicted shortfall less than August 2007 estimate

January 24, 2008

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) released its winter snapshot estimate of the revenue and balance expectations for the Highway Trust Fund (HTF) on Jan. 23. CBO estimates that the HTF balance will fall \$1.3 billion short of what is necessary to meet projected obligations for fiscal year 2009.

This estimate is an improvement over the previous snapshot, released in August 2007, which estimated a shortfall of \$4.3 billion. CBO reports that outlay estimates were lowered significantly for the next several years, based on historical spending under SAFETEA-LU and information the office has received from the states about projected spending.

While the estimate is an improvement, federal budget rules would still require a cut in outlays of approximately \$5 billion in FY 2009 if these numbers do not improve. The shifting estimate shows that the numbers are fluid, and the projected shortfall could be higher when the next estimate is released.

The Office of Management and Budget will release its estimate soon, and the OMB estimate will be used by the administration to make its budget request in February for FY 2009 spending.


Source: *AGC of America* January 24, 2008

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## Local

State emphasizing carpooling in HOT lanes

Dan Genz, The Examiner

2008-01-25 08:00:00.0

Current rank: # 184 of 7,626

### WASHINGTON -

Virginia transportation officials are hoping 3,750 additional commuter parking spaces along the Interstate 95 corridor will reduce concerns about the planned high-occupancy toll lanes wiping away Northern Virginia's carpool culture.

The proposed high-occupancy vehicle lanes running from the Pentagon to Massaponax would be open to vehicles with at least three passengers and to commuter buses, and would generate millions of dollars annually from single commuters willing to pay a toll for quicker commutes.

The new plan would use \$37 million of \$298 million projected state revenue from the toll lanes to construct thousands of additional park-and-ride spaces for bus riders and so-called slug lines. Those spaces would be added to the 3,000 already included in the project, said Tanya Husick, project manager for the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation.

Most commuters who regularly carpool with strangers at existing park-and-ride lots, so-called slugs —82 percent — said in a recent agency survey that they will try to continue their current practices with the new lanes.

But 71 percent said they are concerned the changes would threaten those commuting practices.

"What I think we're seeing is that there is a big concern, but the reality of what people are planning to do does not match up with that concern," Husick said.

Del. Paul Nichols, D-Woodbridge, who is trying in Richmond to block the HOT lanes, said he believes opposition to the lanes is widespread based on his twice-weekly campaign visits to park-and-ride lots in the fall.

"This was hundreds of people and everybody made it a point to make it known they are against them," Nichols said.

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*Examiner*

## Wolf still pushing Dulles Metrorail link

By LILLIAN KAFKA

lkafka@potomacnews.com

Thursday, January 31, 2008

RICHMOND - Rep. Frank Wolf, R-10th, and regional transportation officials are urging the Federal Transit Administration to take more time to consider funding the Metro to Dulles project.

Wolf has asked Virginia officials to consult Jeffrey A. Parker and Associates, a firm that is already familiar with Metro operations and maintenance needs. In a letter to U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Mary Peters, Wolf asked Peters to take pause while considering funding part of the \$5 billion Metro extension to Loudoun County.

He said he hopes the project doesn't collapse in its 11th hour because of a lack of federal aid.

Last week the FTA announced that the project rated poorly - too many problems existed within Metro for the federal government to spend \$900 million for further expansion of its network of rail lines, officials said.

Northern Virginia Transportation Authority officials agreed with Wolf that the project is too important to pass by.

In a letter NVTA Chairman Chris Zimmerman wrote to FTA Administrator James S. Simpson, Zimmerman urged the federal agency to work with Virginia to resolve issues of concern.

If rail to Dulles were a reality, the railcars would remove 150,000 vehicle trips from area roads such as Va. 7 every day, Zimmerman wrote.

In addition, last year the Virginia General Assembly pledged to give the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority \$50 million a year; NVTA, of which Prince William County is a member, urged the FTA to not forget that the state is willing to fund Metro operations.

Therefore, a lack of local funding matches shouldn't be reason to deny federal dollars from the project, Zimmerman wrote.

More from the NVTA letter:

- Metrorail is essential to providing an emergency evacuation route from D.C.
- Once completed, the project would help improve the region's air quality
- Federal government employees would rely on certain mass transit options - bus service could not satisfy their needs
- In order to compete with cities of international significance, D.C. should have another rail link to a major international airport

## Manager Seeks \$150 Million for Urgent Repairs

By Lena H. Sun  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Thursday, January 31, 2008; B03

Metro has \$150 million in capital projects that need to be funded immediately to maintain safe and reliable operation of the rail system, including a power system upgrade and repairs to track equipment and deteriorating station platforms, General Manager John B. Catoe Jr. said yesterday.

"We've put together an 'immediate needs list' of things that we need to do right now," he said. The list includes buying transformers for power substations to supply the electricity required to run more eight-car trains; \$20 million to replace 120,000 worn metal fasteners that help keep tracks secure; and funds to repair concrete under eight outdoor station platforms.

Metro doesn't have the money for these projects, Catoe said during a meeting with reporters to mark his one-year anniversary as manager. The transit agency plans to present its short- and long-term capital needs to the Metro board next month and to review options for funding them, such as borrowing money.

Catoe plans to present the transit agency's 10-year capital program, which begins in 2010, to the board in the spring. He estimates it will exceed \$3 billion.

Metro's capital and repair needs were cited by federal officials last week when they said the proposed Metrorail extension to Dulles International Airport would not qualify for federal funds. Metro is the only major transit agency that does not have a reliable stream of funding on which to base capital planning.

Catoe said he and Metro officials have been regularly updating federal officials, including a session two weeks ago with Federal Transit Administration Administrator James S. Simpson. Asked about a report published in the Washington Examiner quoting Simpson as saying that Metro has \$7 billion in unfunded needs, Catoe said yesterday, "I don't know where that number came from."

FTA officials yesterday said there was a misunderstanding between Simpson and the Examiner.

Despite the FTA's comments using Metro's funding needs to question the viability of the project, Catoe backed the rail extension project. The Metro board voted last year to take control of the line after it was built, and Metro has the financial and operating capacity to run it, he said. The first full year of operation of the extension's first phase would increase Metro's total operating and maintenance costs by about 3 percent, he said.

On Friday, Simpson mentioned a letter that was sent to the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority by a Metro employee that raised concerns about the authority's management of the project. The letter, Simpson said, highlights divisions and discord within the consortium of agencies behind the project. Several project supporters, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of negotiations, said that the letter was a typical mid-level communication and that the FTA is blowing its significance out of proportion.

Yesterday, Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-Va.) said he wrote a letter to U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters saying that he had asked Virginia officials to bring in outside transportation experts to address the FTA's concerns about Dulles.

As for Metro's pressing needs, one of the most urgent is upgrading its electric substations, also known as traction power substations. The substations convert energy from utility companies into 750-volt direct current to operate the trains.

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For Metro to meet its goal of running more eight-car trains during rush hour by the spring of 2009, the agency needs to replace transformers at many substations. The longer trains draw 33 percent to 50 percent more power than six-car or four-car trains. Failed transformers and a lack of spares were a cause of power failures in August that virtually crippled the subway system for two days.

Catoe said he wants to focus on improving safety and reliability during his second year. He arrived at Metro after three employees were killed by Metro trains. There had also been a derailment as well as pedestrian accidents involving buses.

Metro has retrained bus operators and put in place an authority-wide safety improvement program in an effort to reduce accidents and injuries by half within five years.

To improve train reliability, officials have reduced the number of debris fires and mechanical breakdowns through more thorough cleaning. The agency also is trying to repair ongoing door problems with one series of rail cars and identify what is causing brakes to lock up on its oldest series of rail cars.

Catoe also said Metrorail ridership is up slightly since the largest fare increases in agency history went into effect Jan. 6. Rail ridership is up by 1 percent overall and 2.6 percent on weekdays, according to Metro staff, but officials said it was too early to know whether the increase was statistically significant.

*Staff writer Amy Gardner contributed to this report.*

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## Guest Column

James V. Koch

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### A Sensible Tax

**A 5-cent hike in Virginia's gas tax as a way to fund transportation improvements is vastly preferable to the motley mash of taxes, fees and fines enacted last year.**

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Senate Majority Leader Richard Saslaw, D-Fairfax, has offered a proposal to increase the Commonwealth's gasoline tax, which last was raised in 1986. Saslaw would increase Virginia's gas tax by a penny per gallon each year for five years. Alas, even if Saslaw's proposal passes the Senate, it appears to be destined for defeat in the House. Even so, it's a good proposal and is superior to current approaches. Let's see why.

First, Virginia's tax on gasoline is 17.5 cents per gallon. Since 1986, the consumer price index (CPI) for urban consumers has increased 91 percent. This means that the "real," after inflation spending value of these 17.5 cents has fallen to about 9.5 cents. Putting it differently, if Virginia spent \$500 million on road construction and repair in 1986, then the same amount of money will purchase the equivalent of only \$272 million of road construction and repair today.

Whatever we thought we were accomplishing with our gas taxes in 1986, we're now accomplishing much less of that in 2008.

Yes, it's true that the General Assembly approved a \$1.1 billion per year transportation package this past year; however, that tax package contained a grab bag of taxes and charges, including the notorious anticipated \$65 million of abusive driver's fees. The economic impact of this unappetizing stew is mixed and even somewhat unpredictable. Further, this package backed away from our traditional position that it should be the Commonwealth that funds Virginia's highway needs.

Instead, the package placed heavy reliance on regionally approved tax initiatives in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads. Both regional plans contain a potpourri of items reflecting tax-collecting convenience and momentary political considerations rather than sound, long-term transportation policy. In Hampton

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Roads, for example, the package includes additional taxes on rental cars and automobile repairs, plus a grantor's tax on real estate sales. This is not the smart way to run the proverbial railroad, though one must admit that these regional approaches were superior to doing nothing.

Further, neither the Northern Virginia nor the Hampton Roads regional tax initiatives conclusively deals with those regions' transportation problems. Taking Hampton Roads as the example once again, we see that this region's new taxes will only generate about \$170 million per year, while the major projects on its wish list (things such as third crossing and improving Route 460 to Richmond) cost \$9 billion at current prices (52 times as much). Can this wish list be pared down? Of course, but even if it is cut in half, the funding mismatch still is apparent.

Sen. Saslaw's proposal has the merit of raising \$250 million in additional funds annually to deal with the needs of the entire Commonwealth, not simply Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads. There are, after all, significant road funding needs elsewhere in Virginia, as anyone who drives I-81 can verify.

But we shouldn't forget that an increase in the gas tax will generate other desirable effects. Higher gas prices will encourage the use of public transportation, inspire car pooling and cyber commuting, and of course stimulate the purchase of more fuel efficient automobiles. When all is said and done, current Virginians are likely to drive fewer miles. This will moderate highway congestion, reduce highway deaths, and even dampen carbon dioxide emissions. Not such a bad combination.

Finally, there is elemental justice attached to an increase in the gasoline tax --- those who drive are those who pay the tax. It's a classic user tax that provides incentives for people to change their behavior even while it raises revenue. Sure, gas taxes don't have lots of political sex appeal, but then legitimate, long-term solutions to tough problems seldom do. Let's not kid ourselves that there exists an almost painless solution to our transportation challenges magically paid for by "someone else."

Kudos to Sen. Saslaw for focusing our attention where it should be -- on the most economically sensible long-term approach.

**-- January 28, 2007**