

Virginia's Transportation System Needs Transformation Not the Status Quo

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Governor Kaine's most recent transportation plan for Virginia, it is a plan that lacks a comprehensive vision for addressing the transportation issues facing Virginia today or in the future. Simply put, perpetuating the current status quo is not a solution.

A new statewide vision for transportation with a focus on transforming the system is long overdue. What is needed is a transportation vision that directs resources to where they are needed the most.

Current and future transportation resources must be used for

- the preservation, renewal and replacement of an aging transportation infrastructure;
- the reduction of metropolitan congestion;
- ensuring safe and efficient mobility; and
- strengthening the economic competitiveness of the Commonwealth.

To accomplish these goals, the vision for transportation should integrate new strategies and innovative financing techniques such as tolling, congestion-pricing, and public-private partnerships, with existing resources to meet the objective of directing resources to where they are needed the most.

In meeting the goals of a transformed transportation system, the vision must be shaped by customer-oriented, performance driven criteria. After all, the transportation system must address the needs of the people and businesses that use it, and it must produce a network of different transportation modalities that can be measured for efficiency, effectiveness, and safety.

Before any new public resources are targeted for transportation, an independent audit of the existing VDOT operations must be conducted. While some bemoan the lack of revenue for statewide highway maintenance, most are not aware that, except for new transportation construction, everything in the transportation budget appears to be considered maintenance.

What do expenditures for administrative operations and office supplies have to do with actual transportation maintenance needs like filling potholes, repaving roadways, reinforcing bridge structures and ensuring that tunnel walls are able to keep water out?

Before declaring a maintenance budget shortfall, let's clearly define maintenance costs as the cost of the necessary maintenance materials and the labor to get those materials installed. How much does a lane-mile of maintenance cost using this definition? No one seems to know.

Before declaring that millions of dollars are needed for transportation, let's determine what funding is currently available from the primary traditional sources – motor fuels tax, vehicle titling tax, and vehicle registration fees, etc... – and project what funding might be available from tolls, congestion pricing, transportation concessions, and other potential public-private ventures.

However, before such a projection can be made for tolling revenue, the Kaine Administration must initiate the process for receiving permission from the federal government to impose tolls on interstate highway facilities.

Why hasn't this permission been requested? This does not take legislative action. It does, however, require some action and initiative from the executive branch of state government.

Before Virginia imposes tax increases to address a reported transportation budget shortfall, it would be most appropriate to

- have a defined vision with specific, measurable goals and objectives for Virginia's transportation system;
- determine the cost to accomplish the vision, goals, and objectives; and
- determine the current and the potential revenues from all transportation financing strategies.

Once these steps have been accomplished, Virginians will have a tangible idea of what is needed to maintain existing transportation facilities, reduce congestion, and have a safer, more efficient transportation network.

Until such a process is completed, Virginia will continue to do what it has always done and will continue to get what it has always gotten. This is not progress nor is it a solution, it is the status quo.

Transportation transformation requires thinking and ideas that represent a new paradigm for the future. Virginia's transportation system needs proactive and progressive leadership for the future not better management of the past.

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