

# Republican legislators have different views on transportation funding options

By John Watkins (R - 10th)

VIRGINIA SENATE

Transportation has been a major focus of the legislature for a number of years. Unfortunately, in spite of the hard work of legislators from both parties in both houses of the General Assembly, the commonwealth still has not adopted a plan to ensure that transportation needs across Virginia are properly met.

## COMMENTARY

Transportation has become such a dominant issue because it affects the lives of nearly all Virginians. Many regions of the commonwealth are suffering from traffic tie-ups from early in the morning to late at night. In the metro Richmond area, traffic is on the rise, although not a major problem. However, if the money to keep up with the additional drivers on the road is not available, this area will eventually face the same sort of gridlock that northern Virginia and Hampton Roads drivers experience on a daily basis. Additionally, more money is needed to keep existing roads properly maintained and ensure that bridges are inspected and kept in good repair. I do not want to see more people in the region need to take their cars in for new rims and wheel alignments because our roads are deteriorating.

Here are some of the highlights of the current plan at the time of this writing:

One good point of the plan is that it avoids a significant tax increase for metro Richmond

drivers. Tax increases are limited to residents of the areas with the greatest gridlock - northern Virginia and Hampton Roads. This will protect you from seeing your hard-earned money being sent to other parts of the state to solve their local road problems.

Under the current plan, the only additional fee most local residents would pay is a \$10 year increase in auto registration fees. Additionally, a quirk in the law that taxes diesel fuel at a slightly lower rate than regular unleaded gasoline is resolved so that both types of fuel are taxed at the same rate. Additional money would come from the current budget surplus as well as future surpluses. Finally, an additional \$250 million from other sources would be dedicated to transportation each year.

I am troubled that the current plan takes money from other parts of the budget and rededicates it to be used for transportation. If the funds were not used for transportation, that money would be used for schools, public safety and health care. I am also troubled that some of the tax increases being proposed for northern Virginia and Hampton Roads include a special increase in property tax rates for commercial real estate. That places an additional strain on businesses, especially small businesses, in two of the commonwealth's



Watkins

most economically important areas.

But road maintenance and bridge safety are not something that can be ignored. The General Assembly simply cannot continue to let this issue go unresolved, creating massive gridlock in coming years.

I expect the proposal will see some real changes as it proceeds through the legislative process, and I will only support the final version if it appears to be in your best interest. I will not support a plan that makes you pay for the problems of people outside of metro Richmond.

By Sam Nixon (R - 27th)

VIRGINIA HOUSE OF DELEGATES

Senior Republican lawmakers recently announced a comprehensive transportation plan that would give Virginia's fastest growing localities more authority to combat sprawl and traffic congestion, reform the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), and inject over \$2 billion into road construction. The legislation is the result of a compromise between Senate and House leaders and breaks new ground on several important public policy fronts.

## COMMENTARY

Virginia's robust economy has enabled the General Assembly to substantially increase funding for public education, mental health and public safety. With this plan, transportation joins those other core services in becoming a top priority - a development long overdue. It accomplishes this objective without enacting a general tax increase on all Virginians.

First, the plan recognizes that localities need better tools to better manage growth and control sprawl. The proposed measures represent a clear, definitive break from Virginia's current land use policies. For the fastest growing areas of the state, the plan represents a long overdue modernization of the commonwealth's approach to local planning and road building. Legislation would devolve greater authority and control over roads within their boundaries to fast growing local governments that participate in the program. Obviously, land use reform alone cannot solve our transportation problems, but it is an important component in addressing Virginia's transportation needs.

Second, the plan includes common sense reform measures designed to bring greater accountability to VDOT. The main components include the establishment of congestion reducing performance goals, greater use of private sector partnerships, and increased accountability and transparency in spending. This multifaceted approach will accelerate

the process of improving Virginia's network of roads by achieving measurable and substantial results for Virginia's commuters and taxpayers.

Finally, by taking advantage of Virginia's AAA bond rating, the plan conservatively uses \$2 billion in additional transportation funding statewide through general obligation bonds. This will jumpstart critical projects throughout the state. In addition, the plan allocates \$339 million from the 2006 transportation reserve fund and dedicates 50 percent of the current and future budget surpluses to transportation. Those two measures represent \$566 million in new transportation spending in this year's budget alone.

Recognizing that Virginia's most acute transportation needs exist in northern Virginia and Hampton Roads, the plan properly places the primary financial burden on those localities. The plan allows local governments in those areas, by an affirmative vote of their governing body, the added flexibility of raising and retaining additional revenues for critical local road, rail and transit projects. If every eligible locality in the respective regions opted to participate in the plan, northern Virginia would garner an additional \$383 million in additional transportation funding annually, while Hampton Roads would receive \$209 million. This approach will enable those regions of the state to fund their needs without diverting road maintenance and construction funding from the metro Richmond region.

No plan is perfect, but, on balance, this proposal represents the best opportunity we've seen over the last two years to enact a comprehensive package to control sprawl, reform VDOT and jumpstart critical road building projects.



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