

Smart Transportation

Introduction

Virginia faces major transportation challenges. Transportation is central to our economy and quality of life — yet, many existing roads and bridges are in poor condition, congestion costs are high in many areas, transit is underfunded, changing demographics are creating demand for a greater range of transportation choices, and transportation is the leading source of carbon dioxide pollution in the Commonwealth. Despite some significant recent progress, we continue to focus heavily on highway construction and expansion — an approach that is costly to taxpayers, communities, and the environment — while doing little to relieve congestion in the long run. This costly and destructive approach needs to be changed.

Background

A number of significant transportation reforms have been adopted over the past few years to help ensure that recent funding increases are spent wisely. These include the development of the SmartScale funding prioritization process the Commonwealth Transportation Board must factor in when selecting projects, improvements to the Public-Private Transportation Act, and changes to funding allocation formulas.

In addition, we have seen increased funding for alternatives to driving, including the first-ever dedicated state capital funding for Metro (matched by DC and Maryland), additional passenger and commuter rail service, and funding for Richmond's first bus rapid transit line which opened in June 2018. However, the Commonwealth still spends a small percentage of its total transportation budget on rail and transit, despite the competitive benefits of these investments and their critical importance to Virginia's economy. Amazon made good transit a major evaluation factor in its RFP for its HQ2, and eliminated Richmond and Hampton Roads with their limited transit, while keeping Metrorail sites in the DC area on its shortlist.

Additionally, the SmartScale prioritization process has helped reduce funding earmarked for unneeded and unnecessarily large or destructive projects and to advance more targeted solutions to our transportation problems. Nonetheless, too many wasteful and damaging highway proposals are still moving forward with state and regional funding.

The bottom line is that Virginia's transportation spending is still too asphalt-centered, with nearly 80% of the new \$21.2 billion Six-Year Improvement Program dedicated to road projects. Evidence shows that new and wider highways often fail to provide long-term congestion relief since they cause development to spread out and generate significant new traffic. We need a more balanced transportation program that does more

to protect our communities and our historic, scenic, and natural resources while focusing on accessibility to daily needs that are central to our economy and quality of life.

Recommendations

Support funding for cleaner transportation alternatives. Among the changes needed:

- Any new transportation funding, such as an internet sales tax, should devote a substantial percentage of revenues to transit, rail, bicycle, and pedestrian projects.
- Provide increased funding for transit, bicycle, and pedestrian projects to meet the market demand for mixed-use, walkable, transit-oriented communities. While the 2018 General Assembly session addressed Metro funding, it did not address long-term capital and operating funding needs for other transit services across the state.
- Dedicated funding for passenger rail should be protected and additional federal, state, and local resources secured. In addition, the state should study the establishment of a Virginia Rail Authority to help ensure continuity of policies and investments and provide a mechanism for ownership of assets funded by taxpayers.
- Support freight rail as a preferred means of adding capacity in congested corridors with high truck density, such as I-81 and I-95.
- Allow regional tax revenues in Hampton Roads to be used for transit, rail, and other multimodal improvements, and not just roads.
- Support a dedicated regional revenue source focused on expanding and operating transit in the Richmond region, which lags most mid-size regions in the extent of its transit system. Any regional funding for the Richmond region must be accountable, tie transportation investments to smart growth, include repair of existing aging infrastructure, and make funding for public transit, passenger and freight rail, and bicycle and pedestrian improvements the top priority.

Support improved performance standards and priorities for transportation funding.

- Expand requirements for the development of performance standards and require VDOT and large metropolitan areas to meet measures that include reduction in per capita vehicle miles traveled and increased mode share for transit, carpooling, walking, bicycling, and telecommuting.
- Oppose any measure giving even greater weight to congestion mitigation¹ and

¹ The problem with making “congestion reduction” the primary focus is that it implies road capacity expansion, yet newly expanded roads in metropolitan areas can fill up again in as little as five years. It also fails to account for the

economic development as priorities for state or regional funding, as well as any effort to weaken or eliminate environmental quality measures in project scoring.

- Oppose any effort to exempt a particular project from the funding prioritization process.

Support transportation process reform. Actions that will reduce the damage projects cause to environmental, cultural, and historic resources, enhance public involvement in planning, improve the Public Private Transportation Act, or continue reforms to VDOT planning and CTB oversight should be supported.

Support improving the link between transportation and land use, and providing incentives for smarter growth. Potential measures include: target transportation spending to existing communities and congested areas, fund and improve access management and local street connectivity, provide technical assistance to localities to promote transit-oriented development, and repeal recent requirements that local land use plans conform to state transportation plans.

Contact:

Trip Pollard, Southern Environmental Law Center
tpollard@selcva.org (804) 343-1090
facebook.com/southernenvironment | Twitter: @selc_org

Stewart Schwartz, Coalition for Smarter Growth
stewart@smartergrowth.net
facebook.com/betterDCregion | Twitter: @betterDCregion