

AIRPORTS AUTHORITY PROMOTES RAIL TO DULLES

By William Nicoson

The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority has made public a sweeping plan which would combine the current two construction phases of rail to Dulles Airport and Loudoun County, relieve Virginia of future project expenditures, dispense with the time-consuming red tape of federal financing, substitute financing by tax-exempt bonds issued by the Authority, and assume responsibility for, and benefits of, Toll Road operations, including toll rate setting.

Revenue from tolls would presumably be pledged for bond repayment, greatly reducing interest rates payable by the Airports Authority on its bonds, and certainly at much lower rates than would be available to the private sector.

In short, the Authority would replace both federal and state financing and management of the Dulles rail project. The Airports Authority is in a position to execute such a bold proposal because it controls by long-term lease the median strip where rail will be constructed. Financing by local governments (by Fairfax County and its two tax districts and Loudoun County), would remain under the Authority's proposal.

The Authority has made no secret of its desire to permit, as soon as possible, air travelers to ride the rails to and from Dulles Airport and the Nation's capital city. Nine U.S. cities, including neighboring Baltimore, currently benefit from rail access to their airports, as do most European capitals. Of passengers going to Reagan National Airport, 17.6% use Metrorail, more than any other airport transit system in the country.

Yet, amazingly, even after the publication of the Authority's plan, some opponents of rail to Dulles still chant the mantra of bus rapid transit as a substitute. Bus rapid transit was carefully evaluated during the environmental phase of the project and not selected as the locally preferred alternative because it did not meet project objectives as well as rail transit -- including a seamless connection to the regional Metrorail system, support of economic development at corridor activity centers, and capacity to expand to accommodate projected growth in the Dulles corridor.

The Virginia Department of Transportation has under consideration four proposals by private consortiums to manage toll lanes on the Dulles Road. Particularly after announcement of the Airports Authority proposal which the Department has agreed to review, it's likely that the final decision will be made by the new Governor, Tim Kaine. The Governor's spokeswoman, Delacey Skinner, has said that the Governor would carefully consider the Airports Authority proposal.

The Federal Transit Administration has offered no comment on the Authority's plan, but it is unlikely to object to being released from all further financing for rail to Dulles.

In the choice by Virginia of the future toll collector, it will be difficult for the private

consortiums to compete with the Airports Authority whose use of tolls will be applied solely for the public benefit rather than enrichment of private investors, many of whom may be far removed from the Dulles Corridor.

The Airport Authority's proposal will replace future funding by federal and state agencies for rail to Dulles, will retain local funding and oversight in place on an accelerated timetable and, through efficient use of toll-backed financing on the toll road, reduce both the cost and the time required to bring rail to Dulles and beyond.

A slam dunk.

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