

Finding the Way to Dulles Airport

By William Nicoson

Most major cities in the world with subways provide rail access to their international airports. How is it that the capital city of the most powerful nation in the world does not?

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) designed its Metro system in 1968 with its western arm, the Orange Line, terminating in Vienna, thus bypassing the future growth corridor Tysons-Reston-Herndon-Dulles. If that wasn't unfortunate enough, Vienna's Town Council has consistently rejected mixed-use development regarded by planners as appropriate to complement an end-of-the-line terminal, thus sacrificing an important regional engine of economic growth. In 1991 WMATA added four "fast-track" extensions to its original design, none of them bringing Metro into the Dulles corridor.

During the 1990s, a consensus among transportation officials developed around the extension of a Metro-compatible line to Dulles from Metro's West Falls Church station. Fairfax County amended its comprehensive plan to include rail stations in Tysons Corner, Reston and Dulles Corner. In 1996, a comprehensive study by Parsons Brinkerhoff of rail and bus alternatives in the corridor sponsored by the newly created Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (VDRPT) forecast 114,500 rail riders per day, about 10 times the expected ridership for an expanded bus system. The Commonwealth Transportation Board immediately adopted the study's recommended alternative for a heavy rail system compatible with Metro. In 1997, VDRPT proposed a funding plan of more than \$2 billion, calling for 80% from federal sources and the balance from the state and airports authority.

Congressman Frank Wolf (R-Va.10th Dist.) has organized a taskforce of state and local officials to reconsider the alternatives. Mr. Wolf leaves no doubt that his intent is to reverse the momentum for an immediate commitment to rail by developing a high-speed busway on the Dulles access road. As Chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee with jurisdiction over transportation, he no doubt believes that the capital cost of an express bus system will be easier to deliver than the much higher capital pricetag of rail.

Proponents of rail fear that further delay will continue to escalate capital costs, killing rail to Dulles by a kind of Chinese water torture. They point out that the costs of air pollution and road congestion should be considered in measuring rail against express bus service. They also argue that financial results of operation are as critical as capital costs. For example roughly 70% of Metrorail operating costs are covered by fare revenue. For most bus systems recovery in fareboxes is limited to one-third or less of operating costs.

Under the bipartisan leadership of Delegates Kenneth Plum (D-Fairfax) and Vincent Callahan (R-Fairfax), The Dulles Corridor Rail Association (DCRA) has been established to advocate completion by 2010 of a heavy-rail system serving Dulles. Among the early supporters of rail to

Dulles has been the Greater Reston Chamber of Commerce which now leads the Northern Virginia Coalition of Chambers.

Debate on rail to Dulles is reflected within the councils of Reston 2000, the taskforce of Reston leaders established by Supervisor Robert Dix (R-Hunters Mill) to survey current issues facing the community. The transportation committee adopted a report even less positive than the go-slow-on-rail position of Congressman Wolf: “Dulles Corridor rail transit consideration should be deferred pending strategic plan analyses and public hearings”. A plenary session of the Taskforce last Monday, however, rejected this position, calling for an operational rail system “as soon as is practicable.”

The outcome of the debate has substantial consequences for the nation and its image in the world as well as for residents, employees and employers in the Dulles corridor.

William Nicoson is a former publisher of Connection Newspapers, and is married to the acting executive director of DCRA.