

**RAIL, YES!  
MORE TAXES AND TOLLS, NO!**

By William Nicoson

A swell of moaning and groaning has been heard among Restonians following the determination by state officials that the first of two phases of Metrorail to Washington Dulles International Airport and beyond will end at Wiehle Avenue. No new rail yard is planned: trains will simply turn around and return. But major expansion of parking facilities is anticipated. "It'll be a major mess," pronounced one of my developer friends.

What I see is a major opportunity. Instead of incremental growth over 40 years, as at Tysons Corner, a vertical, transit-oriented urban center at Wiehle, including residential, commercial and public uses, could be planned and constructed using roadway air-rights and adjacent properties in less than 10 years. Yes, this would increase required parking, but sound planning would fold all parking into the developed structure.

Similar development at greater density could be planned around the Reston Parkway station linked to Town Center as rail construction continues west. Town Center's center of gravity over the years will spread south to the station.

Visionary developers may already be examining these and other possibilities offered by rail. But until plans have been completed and air-rights assured, no developer is likely to go public with such a project. Instead some Reston developers have launched a concerted public relations campaign against the tax district established to fund the local share of rail extension as unfair to property owners west of Tysons Corner.

This might be a justified complaint if, during construction, stations at Tysons were placed in operation before Wiehle. That will not be the case. No train will grace the Tysons tracks until the Wiehle station is operational. In fact an opposite complaint might be made by property owners in Tysons who will be taxed to build rail from Wiehle to Dulles where the principal benefits will accrue to local owners rather than owners in Tysons.

Reston property owners also cite the fact that Tysons will have four stations to Reston's one in the first phase. Tysons' current scale and density are many times the current scale and density of prospective rail-affected property near the intersection of Wiehle and the Dulles Highway. Greater scale and density means higher assessment valuations. Absent a detailed analysis of comparative tax burdens, it's impossible to justify a claim of discriminatory levies by the tax district.

The negative public campaign by some Reston developers against the tax district risks the appearance of strident, self-serving and invidious resentment of competitors in Tysons Corner. Most Reston developers claim to support rail. They should be proposing solutions to improve

the likelihood that rail will be built rapidly to Dulles and beyond rather than trumpeting claimed inequities which may discourage or stall necessary government action.

The only alternative proposal offered for local financing has been the creation of two tax districts: one for Tysons Corner and the second for Reston-Herndon. This is a non-starter since it would free Tysons Corner property owners from contributions to the second district, thus vastly increasing property taxes of Herndon businesses (already \$ .28 per \$100 higher than in Reston) as well as businesses in the Route 28 tax district (already paying \$ .20 per \$100 to the existing district).

The public campaign against the tax district for rail has simultaneously savaged proposed increases of tolls on the Dulles Highway to be dedicated to payment of the state's portion of the costs of rail. Increased tolls are a logical way to finance rail because they will encourage the use of transit rather than automobiles and thus help reduce road congestion.

It's not surprising that developers owning land near the proposed rail extension should support rail. That proximity will greatly increase the value of their real estate holdings whether or not they elect to build my vertical city. But it is surprising, even stunning (since the developers I know are experienced and smart), that they would mount a costly public campaign trashing the only proposed means of raising the local and state share of rail financing without proposing a viable alternative.

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