

ENVIRONMENTALISTS OPPOSE LAWS TO EASE TRAFFIC CONGESTION

By William Nicoson

Massive tie-ups during rush-hour on the beltway and on all major roads in the corridor stretching from Tysons Corner to Dulles International Airport are routine. At a time of elevated gasoline prices, the economic waste in a landscape clogged with ribbons of idling cars is stunning. Worse still is the waste in time as trapped travelers miss appointments and grind their teeth in impotent frustration. Time is more than money when the acute stress born of time lost endangers health. And, speaking of health, we note that the exhaust emissions of all those compacted engines day-after-day threaten the respiratory freedom of residents on and off the roads.

In the recently concluded session of the Virginia General Assembly, Northern Virginia legislators sponsored three major measures to fight traffic congestion, two of which were passed and await expected approval by Governor Gilmore. The bill which failed, championed by Senator Richard L. Saslaw (D Fairfax) and Delegate James H. Dillard II (R Fairfax), authorized a referendum of Northern Virginia voters to consider raising local sales taxes by 1 cent, half of which would finance specific transportation improvements and the other half new and renovated schools. The first transportation project listed was \$300 million for transit in the Dulles Corridor. The bill lost by 2 votes in the House where a block of Republican delegates insisted on stripping educational assistance out of the bill.

Shame on them. Education in trailers is a blight on Fairfax County's legacy for the future. But Democratic Senators who insisted on all or nothing in this bill bear a measure of guilt since they invited this intransigence. Transportation assistance would have been better than nothing.

Senator William C. Mims (R Reston-Loudoun) and Delegate Roger J. McClure (R Centreville) sponsored legislation establishing a Northern Virginia Transportation Authority to consolidate regional transportation decision-making. The Authority has power to issue bonds approved by the General Assembly. A substitute measure giving Fairfax County effective veto power within the Authority was inadvertently killed by a procedural fumble committed by Delegate James M. Scott (D Fairfax) after it had passed both houses.

Another important measure introduced by Delegate Vincent F. Callahan, Jr. (R McLean), authorizes Fairfax County supervisors to establish a tax district to assist financing of rail in the Dulles Corridor based on a petition of owners of commercial and industrial land amounting to at least 51% of either the area or assessed value of such land within the district. The district is patterned on the existing Route 28 District.

A host of environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, Voters to Stop Sprawl and the Virginia League of Conservation Voters, successfully opposed legislation to permit increased sales taxes for transportation improvements and also opposed establishment of a regional

transportation authority.

Since fighting traffic congestion is synonymous with fighting air pollution, it is astonishing that environmentalists would fervently oppose funding to improve existing highways and build new transit facilities which can only mitigate the curse of bumper-to-bumper backup. The answer to this mystery is that 3 of the 17 projects to be assisted by sales tax revenue might have furthered the conversion of rural land to suburban use: the proposed Techway crossing of the Potomac (\$100 M), the Tri-County/Loudoun Parkway (\$100 M) and extension of the Route 234 bypass and relocation of Route 659 (\$50 M). These 3 projects would have accounted for 11% of the authorized funding.

That means environmental groups were prepared to sacrifice 89% of the bill's funding to fight air pollution because 11% might stimulate new land development.

There are small but discernible groups of developers, environmentalists, planners and other professionals who believe it is possible, across their disciplines, to find common ground in the process of land and infrastructure development and renovation. Most prominent is the Smart Growth Alliance whose members include the Greater Washington Board of Trade, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and the Urban Land Institute. The Chesapeake & Potomac Regional Alliance has assumed a mission to examine the possibilities and craft a process for such a breakthrough.

Based on the attitude of the aggressive environmental groups opposing legislation offering air pollution relief in Northern Virginia, don't hold your breath for new sweet reason to triumph over the ingrained joy of hostility any time soon.

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