

TILTING AT TOLL BOOTHS

By William Nicoson

Last week as I drove the Greenway from Leesburg, heading on to Dulles Airport and to Washington, it occurred to me that the driving experience can actually be a pleasure. It's true that driving is often a frustrating experience due to traffic congestion. In addition it's become a more costly experience as the price of gas has been hijacked by foreign suppliers. And, yes, aggressive driving and increasing instances of road rage make the experience increasingly hazardous.

But gliding leisurely along the Greenway, admiring the stretching greenswards on every hand, I marveled at the contrast in driving experience I was about to encounter on the Dulles Toll Road.

A former Reston resident and architect of considerable distinction, Wayne L. Hughes, has explained to me that there's more to this contrast than the view of rural nature versus exploding urban landscapes and low versus high traffic counts. He is leading a campaign to force the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to replace its signage system on the Toll Road which, he says, "takes the concept of confusion to a new level." He faxed me his manifesto.

Hughes contends that VDOT's system is "antiquated and redundant" and that its graphics combine 8 different type faces and sizes, creating a "visual maze."

He gives high marks to signage on the Greenway, built recently by private-sector owners. Because Greenway graphics are "well designed" and "both consistent and informational," Hughes believes they banish confusion. He also notes that Dulles Airport is currently in a design phase for replacement of its entire graphics display system. "With rapid transit on the horizon, another layer of information will have to be integrated."

Hughes is also critical of the VDOT design of its toll booths serving as the eastern portal to the Dulles Corridor. "This is the e-commerce capital of the world, as the skylines of Tyson's Corner, Reston, Herndon and Dulles Corner attest." Yet where the quality of design is most critical, the threshold, and along "the very spine" of the Corridor, the Toll Road, he finds an "environmental disaster." In view of the Greenway success and the Dulles redesign decision, Hughes wonders whether "a well coordinated design and graphics system for the entire Dulles Corridor" might now emerge.

He urges VDOT to re clad toll canopies with a light-weight perforated metal screen designed to incorporate graphic displays and to discard confusing signage in favor of a Contemporary Electronic Graphic Display System offering "two tiers or layers of crisp graphics" which convey "both directional information (fast toll lane versus cash only) and safety information (fog, accident, delays)." In fact destination information indicating routes to communities within the Corridor would also be a welcome addition to a uniform signage system.

Is Hughes a modern-day Don Quixote, tilting at toll booths and traffic signs? He has the good Don's fierce desire to serve the common good and, come to think of it, VDOT can easily be mistaken at times for a political windmill. Anyway, I volunteer to serve as Sancho Panza.

William Nicoson is a former publisher of Connection Newspapers.