

WILL VETO SESSION REDUCE CONGESTION?

By William Nicoson

It's crunch time today in Richmond. The Virginia General Assembly will convene for a single day to address the vetoes and amendments transmitted by Governor James S. Gilmore III on all legislation enacted during the current session. Action on transportation initiatives will be among the most critical to the future of Northern Virginia residents.

The Governor's first veto of the session targeted a bipartisan measure permitting Northern Virginia counties to sponsor referenda on imposition of an income tax of up to 1% to fight traffic congestion. The revenues produced by such a tax would be slim compared to the costs estimated to alleviate congestion, but it would at least have demonstrated the willingness of Northern Virginians to ante-up without relying totally on state and federal funds. But this innocuous self-help measure encountered the political mantra of "no new taxes" which triggered the Governor's veto.

Will the veto be overridden today by the required two-thirds vote? That's most unlikely because the vote of down-state legislators who have no stake in the measure may be described in the next election as a vote favoring new taxes.

On the positive side, the Governor not only hailed the \$2.6 billion transportation bill passed by the General Assembly but submitted an amendment which would commit a permanent revenue stream for the bill: one-third of taxes levied on insurance premiums. This was a surprising amendment since the Governor had not included it in his own bill and the Senate Finance Committee had struck a similar provision from the House-passed bill.

The amendment, requiring only a majority vote, will likely pass the House, but its future in the Senate is clouded by the antipathy of Republican Finance Chairman John H. Chichester, whose constituents include some residents of Prince William County. Senator Chichester's occupation happens to be insurance. The fact that a revenue commitment for transportation was proposed by fellow Republican Delegate Jack Rollison, whose constituents also include residents of Prince William, and has at last been accepted by Republican Governor Gilmore, may not sway Chichester but should influence enough other Republicans to win passage.

Another amendment proposed by the Governor but little noticed by the press would eliminate from the budget all funding for the Joint Legislative Audit Review Commission to study the administrative structure of the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), which some legislators blame for inaction and delay on measures to reduce traffic congestion. Democrats argue that the amendment transgresses upon legislative prerogatives in the interest of saving the Gilmore Administration from political embarrassment. Will the Democrats win over enough Republicans to defeat the amendment by majority vote? My guess is no.

To recap my handicap: Gilmore's veto of county authority to hold referenda on Northern Virginia income taxes to combat congestion will not be overridden (BOO!); Gilmore's amendment to establish a permanent revenue stream for transportation will be passed (YEA!); and so will his budget amendment dropping funds for VDOT review (BOO!). Check Thursday's daily papers for my wins and losses.

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