

## **METRORAIL TO TYSONS CORNER...AND BEYOND?**

By William Nicoson

After years of endless meetings, futile talk and vacant hopes, it now seems certain that rail will begin its march through the Dulles corridor. Long proclaimed by CEOs, planners and civic activists as the last, best hope to combat the traffic congestion and air pollution born of phenomenal economic growth, rail remained an evanescent vision, forever glimmering on the horizon but forever out of reach. After all, the estimated price tag was \$2 billion.

The vision suddenly gained the sharp focus of reality last Friday at a meeting of government and business leaders and transit advocates brought together by Rep. Frank R. Wolf, a Republican with constituents in Herndon and Reston. Metro General Manager Richard A. White announced plans to extend Metrorail seven miles from its West Falls Church station to Tysons Corner by 2005. Federal, state and local officials present seemed convinced they could find the estimated \$700 to \$900 million needed for the project.

Congressman Wolf chairs the transportation subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee in the House of Representatives. He identified \$86 million in federal funds now available. An additional \$35 million is projected in excess revenue from use of the Dulles Toll Road over 5 years. Delegate Vincent F. Callahan, Jr., a Republican with constituents in Herndon, has actively advocated rail and serves as Vice Chairman of the Dulles Corridor Rail Association dedicated to bringing rail throughout the corridor by 2010. This year he will chair the Appropriations Committee of the Virginia House of Delegates. His committee faces the difficult task of dealing with Virginia's \$1 billion surplus.

Two coalitions of giant engineering firms and local business interests have presented competing plans to build rapid-transit bus terminals convertible to stations for metro-compatible rail from West Falls Church through the corridor into Loudoun County. The plan drafted by Bechtel Engineering calls for stations at Wiehle Avenue, Reston Parkway, and Monroe Street, and is supported by the West Group development companies, major landholders in Tysons Corner. The plan proposes use of a Tysons tax district under supervision of Fairfax County supervisors, permitting businesses to contribute a portion of transit development cost.

The combined funding from federal, state, and local sources, and the committed positions of officials with power of the purse make the calculation of economic feasibility credible. Just as important, the project will be undertaken as an extension of Metrorail, permitting transit to and from the existing system without transfer.

For the first time, there is official designation of a deadline for completion of the first phase of rail in the corridor. And that deadline, 2005, leaves ample room for follow-on commitments consistent with the target 2010 for completing the line through Dulles to Loudoun County. The dynamics of large civil engineering projects propel construction forward from phase to phase,

given the high start-up costs for marshaling heavy equipment and manpower which are saved by continuity. Furthermore it now seems likely that the new line will be planned and managed by Metro, as it should be to assure a seamless fit to existing transit.

The importance of this prospect for Reston, Herndon and other communities in the corridor can't be overstated. The positive impact on property values is likely to be substantial, and that impact may be quickly felt. The contribution of rail to easing the commuting hassle and assault on air quality will also be substantial. And the capital city of the most powerful nation in the world, with its environs, will finally be connected by rail to its international airport like other major cities of the world.

Am I saying rail will make us rich, relaxed and respected? Sure I am. Have I mistaken the old evanescent vision for reality? Maybe, but there are real people at work here with power to reshape the reality of the future. My guess is they'll put rail to work for us.

*William Nicoson is a former publisher of Connection Newspapers and is married to the president of Dulles Corridor Rail Association.*