

GREENWAY LESSONS

By William Nicoson

Everybody knows that the Greenway, the privately-owned extension of the Dulles Access Road into Loudoun County, has not been paved with greenbacks for its sponsors. Since its opening at the end of September, 1995, the owners have been in seemingly constant refinancing negotiations with creditors and state authorities. Early in Greenway's life a planned increase of its one-way toll from \$1.75 to \$2.00 was turned instead into a reduction to \$1.00 for fear of driving down already low vehicle usage. Since then the toll has been raised in increments only to \$1.50 by the end of last July.

As late as March, 1997, revenue from tolls was sufficient only to cover operating expenses without reference to debt service.

Greenway did, however, offer big-buck benefits in the form of essential access for developers (including Reston's developer) who owned or could acquire substantial parcels for community building between Leesburg and Dulles. In December, 1998, Loudoun County supervisors were so alarmed by burgeoning growth that they cut the authorized potential homes in projects along the Greenway from 89,000 to 37,000.

But the economic generator of community building unleashed by Greenway has apparently bootstrapped use of the road substantially. Early this month Greenway officials revealed their concern not over vehicle counts but over congestion at the toll plaza connecting to the Dulles Access Road. Their solution was to return the week-day toll full-circle to the \$1.75 originally planned for 2-axle cars, except for cars equipped with Smart Tag transponders for which the toll would remain at \$1.50.

The 25-cent difference is an incentive to install Smart Tag which substantially reduces congestion at gates dedicated to Smart Tag traffic. And I can testify that at rush hours a transponder cuts big minutes from the slow creep to the toll plaza.

At first I resisted Smart Tag (then called Fastoll) because I was obliged to offer, free of interest, \$40 for somebody else's use and for as many years as I was fit to drive – close to forever, I naturally thought. But those creeping lines to deposit coins or fumble to get change while hundreds of Smart Tag drivers whizzed past convinced me that maybe they were in fact a lot smarter than I. I was worried about interest on \$40 while I was losing my mind from stress and frustration?

Now that I've been converted to Smart Tag, I wonder why, after the lesson of Greenway congestion, we hear nothing from the Virginia Department of Transportation which has an even greater congestion problem at the eastern toll plaza of the Dulles Access Road? On the Greenway, only untransponded vehicles pay the original toll of \$1.75, and vehicles with Smart

Tag pay 25 cents less. Isn't it obvious that VDOT should announce a similar reduction in toll for Smart Tag users on the Dulles Access Road?

Some of us poor and harried drivers will save money and time, and VDOT's toll collections will rise. Hey, Shirley Ybarra, listen up!

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