

RESTONIANS BATTLE OVER DULLES RAIL

By William Nicoson

During the year 2002, the proposed extension of Metrorail from West Falls Church through Tysons Corner to Reston, Herndon, Dulles International Airport and into Loudoun County was approved by the local governments involved (Fairfax and Loudoun Counties), two key regional authorities (Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority and Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority) and the key state agency (Commonwealth Transportation Board).

All of these decisions were taken despite vigorous opposition by a few property owners, mostly in Reston, whose properties lie within the tax district authorized by the Virginia General Assembly to help pay for rail. These opponents have apparently convinced themselves that because their properties are located at some distance from future stations, any increase in property value from rail may well be less than the tax burden imposed by the district.

They urge extension of Metrorail only to Tysons Corner with "bus rapid transit" (BRT) serving the rest of the Dulles Corridor. BRT is a bus system operated at high frequency in a dedicated right-of-way featuring platforms instead of steps to facilitate entering and exiting. District property owners expect they will not be taxed to pay for BRT.

Congressman Frank R. Wolf (R-10th Dist.) for many years has favored BRT as an alternative to rail, though he has also repeatedly said he would support the locally preferred alternative. Prior to the Commonwealth Transportation Board's meeting to act on Dulles rail, Wolf brought local and state leaders to meet with the Federal Transit Administrator, Restonian Jennifer L. Dorn.

Ms. Dorn reportedly told the astonished officials that rail to Dulles was too expensive (\$3.3 billion) and currently unsupported by ridership estimates. She urged extending rail now only to Tysons Corner and establishing BRT through the rest of the corridor to Dulles. She indicated rail to Dulles could be undertaken later as ridership grows.

This solution may warm the hearts of Reston's rail protestors, but it is far more expensive than building rail to Dulles now. Interest rates and inflation are now as low as they will ever be. The huge expense of marshaling men and equipment a second time should of course be avoided.

Furthermore, forcing a transit transfer at Tysons will certainly reduce ridership, rendering Ms. Dorn's concern a self-fulfilling prophecy. Worse, the estimates of ridership apparently relied on by FTA are two years old and ignore densities forecast in the recently amended comprehensive plans of both Fairfax and Loudoun Counties and the full draw of the National Air and Space Museum's Dulles Center scheduled to open in December, 2003.

Using BRT as an interim solution also means not only that the cost of rail will swell but that the cost of BRT (\$481.4 million) will be added to that inflated cost.

My guess is that proponents of BRT have never ridden a bus in Fairfax County. If they had, they would be aware that our existing bus system is fast, convenient and reliable. The major advantage of BRT is a dedicated right-of-way which Fairfax buses already have since they use the airport's inner access lanes. When I take a bus to the West Falls Church Metrorail Station, I glide right past the bumper-to-bumper traffic on the outer lanes.

BRT would be a bit more fancy, much more costly, but fundamentally no better than what we have today. Particularly now, when the air quality of our metropolitan area has dropped by judicial order from "serious" to "severe," is hardly the time to substitute buses for rail in transit planning.

As to the alleged extravagance of building rail to Dulles, the truth is it's a bargain. That's because the right-of-way in the median strip of the Dulles Airport Access Road will presumably be contributed by the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority and the Federal Aviation Administration without cost. The FTA hopefully appreciates the value of a free, 20-mile right-of-way.

The FTA must also appreciate the value of rail access to international airports serving Baltimore, Chicago, Atlanta, Cleveland, Philadelphia and St. Louis, not to speak of the major capitals abroad, including London, Paris, Bonn and Stockholm. Should the capital of the most powerful nation in the world be viewed as such a backwater that it's international airport doesn't deserve access by rail?

The 17 members of the Commonwealth Transportation Board were obviously not impressed by the preliminary views expressed on December 3rd by the Federal Transit Administrator. On December 19th all 17 voted to approve rail to Dulles now.

In June, 2003, FTA is expected to reach a final decision on transit to Dulles after further consultations with local, regional and state leaders. Hopefully the substantial progress in 2002 toward realizing rail to Dulles will be continued in 2003.

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