

State's budget woes might hurt Dulles rail plan



SPRAWL & CRAWL

Steve Eldridge

You heard it here first. There are indeed problems afoot in the Dulles Corridor. We tipped you off two weeks ago but I finally was able to attach some major names to the story, as you may have heard Wednesday.

To recap, U.S. Rep. James P. Moran, D-8th District, told me he has serious concerns the rail project will suffer from the state's budgetary problems, and says he believes that it might not be built until 2016 or 2017. He said he thinks that current budget numbers in the \$3.3 billion range aren't high enough in part because they will likely need six rather than the planned four Metro stations in the Tysons Corner area alone.

Leo Bevon, director of Virginia's Department of Rail and Public Transportation, confirmed that his department has had to develop contingency plans because of fears of funding shortfalls. In his words, "They [the feds] told us that we were asking for a lot of money and

that we're going to have to wait and see what happens."

Katherine K. Hanley, chairwoman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, told me last week she hadn't heard about the contingency plans being developed but stressed that this project must remain a top priority for the region. Hanley, D-at large, said she is confident a "benefit assessment district" will be put together whereby businesses in the corridor will agree to pay a tax equating to an additional 20 cents per \$100 of revenue to help fund the project. That will enable Fairfax County to benefit from improvements while spending almost none of its own funds.

And the cost of a drive down the Dulles Toll Road will cost a lot more. That comes even though I thought I remembered something about the region not being able to use revenue from the toll road for anything other than its operation and maintenance.

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Even still, it seems rather incredible that 21 percent of the entire project cost could be added-on fat at a time when the region is struggling with serious congestion issues and when Metro is trying to expand as far and as fast as it can.

Don't get me wrong. I think this project is a good idea. I believe it will help reduce traffic in one of our most congested corridors. I just wonder if it makes good fiscal sense over some of the options available. And yes, I know that Tysons is key to this and that bus rapid transit wouldn't be able to navigate the surface streets there.

New buses

Speaking of Metro, I'm sure many of you heard that the regional transit administration plans to purchase 250 compressed natural gas buses over the next two years. This seems like a good move to get some immediate impact on our air quality problems. On a bus-by-bus comparison, these buses do reduce

certain airborne pollutants but, at the same time, they emit much higher amounts of another.

There is some research coming out of California that may lead some cities to hold off on the bulk purchase of CNG buses. A study by the California Air Resources Board showed that a diesel bus with a soot trap did better than a newer CNG bus in eight of 11 pollution tests and that the CNG bus created a number of toxic pollutants like formaldehyde.

It should be noted that these tests used a very small sample (I believe it was just two buses) but it creates enough questions to necessitate further studies and a wait-and-see attitude before we rush to buy more buses.

Environmentalists

Robert in Alexandria wrote to say, "I read the responses and comments in the article 'Environmentalists criticize but offer no answers,' with some interest. I am glad that someone had the guts to question what motivates some 'environmentalists.' I am a member of the Sierra Club, but I am becoming more and more frustrated with the 'all or nothing' approach regarding growth and environmental issues.

"What is wrong with a balance? From what I understand, the proposed sales tax increase devote 41 percent to transit improvements and such. I am thrilled with the

idea of that much money being dedicated to transit. I have lived in places where there is no decent transit and all the money is pretty much spent on roads. This is like a dream come true to see this much money being proposed for transit and I am irate that these people who call themselves environmentalists will try to kill such a proposal."

Thanks, Robert. It's also interesting to note in the analysis by environmentalists that the 41 percent does not give any credit for the high-occupancy vehicle lanes that are part of Gov. Mark R. Warner's transportation proposal.

In the "old" days, these groups fought long and hard to get HOV lanes. Now they don't include them as an environmentally beneficial measure, at least not in this analysis. Maybe it's time for both sides to stop playing games with numbers so that real people can make real decisions about things that are important to their lives, quality of life issues like the environment and transportation options.

Steve Eldridge is a veteran traffic reporter in Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C. For more Sprawl and Crawl, tune in daily to WTOP-FM 107.7, WTOP-AM 820 or 1500. Send questions or comments to Sprawl & Crawl, The Journal, 6408 Edsall Road, Alexandria, VA 22312; e-mail steve@sprawlandcrawl.com; fax to (703) 846-8366.