

Virginia Conservation Network, Virginia League of Conservation Voters, Coalition for Smarter Growth, Piedmont Environmental Council, Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club, Shenandoah Valley Network, Arlington Coalition for Sensible Transportation, Southern Environmental Law Center, Scenic 340, Valley Conservation Council, Partnership for Smarter Growth, American Lung Association of Virginia, Campaign for Loudoun's Future, WildLaw Virginia's Office, Virginians for Appropriate Roads, Virginia Forest Watch, Friends of Stafford Creeks, Audubon Naturalist Society, Virginia Bicycling Federation

September 19, 2006

An Open Letter to the Governor and General Assembly

Dear Governor Kaine, Senator Chichester, Speaker Howell, and members of the General Assembly:

While you have faced difficult negotiations over transportation funding, it is important to acknowledge your consensus that we must reform our transportation programs and link land use and transportation planning. For many of you, support for reform has come from the recognition that local land use decisions have created an unfunded mandate, placing a significant burden on the legislature and Governor to find revenues for transportation to deal with transportation problems created by often inefficient local land use patterns.

We believe that the general public shares with you the view that solving our transportation problems requires us to first address land use and the design of our communities. Therefore, it is imperative that you make planning reforms a priority to give the public confidence that additional spending can indeed make a difference.

A terrific example of public sentiment is the overwhelmingly positive response that you have received toward the traffic impact study legislation which you adopted unanimously last session. The first pilot study has demonstrated the extent to which land use decisions affect our transportation networks. The additional information garnered from these studies will be critical to more informed decisions and should lead to consideration of land use changes, street network design changes, and demand management programs that reduce the impact from new development.

Yet, traffic impact study legislation is only a first step in the reforms which need to be adopted concurrent with, or pre-requisite to, the provision of additional funding.

Existing transportation plans are unaffordable even with additional funding, and should be reevaluated with an eye to reducing travel demand. Volatile energy prices dictate the need to reduce the amount that Virginians have to drive, through thoughtful location of jobs, housing and transit infrastructure, and investing in rail for more energy efficient freight shipment. Making location efficiency a key component of the state's transportation, economic development, and

urban revitalization programs is the key to a more energy efficient transportation system and will allow Virginia to maintain its economic competitiveness.

Volatile energy prices are combining with a changing real estate market to change the type of transportation investments we need. There is increased market demand from retirees, empty nesters, and young professionals to live in historic towns, cities, and neighborhoods that allow families to walk, bicycle, take transit or much shorter car trips to schools, stores, church and work.

Performance standards for transportation planning need to be applied at the state, regional and local level that include goals to reduce per capita vehicle miles traveled and vehicle trips; increase mode share for transit, carpooling, bicycling and walking; and increase the share of jobs and residences within walking distance of community services and frequent transit service. The key is to focus on moving people and improving access to daily needs, not simply on moving vehicles. In addition to the time and pocketbook savings from achieving these goals, there would be important gains in improved air quality and respiratory health.

Transportation funding should be tied to meeting these performance goals and to completing essential planning, such as traffic impact studies and local build-out analyses that estimate total development and the resulting infrastructure needs.

A full range of alternatives must be fairly and transparently evaluated for transportation projects, rather than zeroing in on a pre-selected approach, in order to avoid the costly missteps like those we've seen with I-81 and I-66 inside the Beltway. The timeline for environmental reviews can be shortened, but only if the resource agencies are funded adequately to assist VDOT, if the public is engaged throughout the process, and if from the outset studies objectively consider a full range of alternatives including integrated land use and transportation demand reduction solutions.

If we are to use public-private partnerships they must meet standards that ensure public oversight is maintained, that the planning process is transparent, that the private sector really is investing new money, and that transit alternatives are funded where congestion pricing is utilized. The I-81 tolled truckway proposal fostered by the PPTA process showed the danger of letting the private sector determine the size and scale of a project, generating broad opposition and costing millions in wasted VDOT planning funds. The private sector should be engaged only after the full and fair consideration of alternatives and after the public sector has reached consensus on exactly what needs to be done to solve a particular transportation and land use problem, while minimizing impacts on communities and resources. PPTAs are also not a solution in the absence of more efficient land use patterns and should not be used simply to build new highways that fuel another round of scattered development.

Allocation formulas between modes should be shifted and public involvement in the allocation process increased. Not only should transit, freight rail, pedestrian and bicycle needs receive a significant share of new funding, but local streets need to be made a priority. Recent VDOT funding cuts have incorrectly come at the expense of transit, and secondary and urban streets. Sub-allocation to metropolitan planning organizations should be considered.

Greater interconnectivity of local streets, including those accepted into the VDOT system from developers, would reduce the burden on the few large arterials we can afford to build.

A minimum set of conditions for any additional funding approved during the special session would be:

- 1) Adoption of performance standards as described above.
- 2) Not earmarking projects, and instead funding programs.
- 3) Substantially increasing funding for transit, freight/passenger rail, pedestrian/bicycle facilities, and local streets.
- 4) Fully funding bridge repair needs statewide, making up for accumulated shortfalls in authorized expenditure of federal funds, and funding the accumulated shortfalls in authorized federal spending for Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality and Urban Surface Transportation Program.
- 5) Not funding new bypasses and never-ending highway widening, and instead focusing resources to better managing existing congestion hotspots and providing more transportation options.
- 6) Holding back significant funding until completion of a new public and technical process which reevaluates the VTRANS 2025 statewide plan and regional plans, developing integrated land use and transportation plans that meet the goals described above.

Virginia sits at a turning point, where it will be critical that our transportation plans are tied to more efficient use of land, energy, and scarce public resources. Taking the time to adopt the necessary reforms to ensure that public tax dollars are used wisely is essential. Thank you.

Sincerely,

(via email, addresses and phone numbers provided for verification)

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