



ON THE FUTURE OF TRANSPORTATION IN VIRGINIA ... Mass Transit Represents Investment in Prosperity

Wednesday, Jan 09, 2008 - 12:09 AM

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Greater Richmond is in a dynamic period in which we are shaping a growing community. A comprehensive regional mass transit system is critical to our future growth and prosperity. Many of us have traditionally viewed public transportation as a costly social burden and mass transit as an expensive boondoggle. However, across the country, including Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads, many thriving metropolitan areas are realizing mass transit is a strategic investment in economic development and regional attractiveness that simultaneously enhances environmental quality, public health, social justice, and other aspects of a high quality of life.

Better yet, the federal government provides significant funding. Richmond's metropolitan planning organization is now undertaking a Regional Mass Transit Study (RMTS) that is evaluating our transit needs for the next 25 years. We need to ensure that the RMTS is driven by a comprehensive visioning process allowing ample opportunity for an in-depth community discussion of the role mass transit can play in ensuring our region's future prosperity and the investment necessary to create a transit system. After all, informed public debate is at the heart of our democratic process.

Unfortunately, the RMTS is not on track to generate broad community visioning and strategic thinking or to produce a bold plan for regional mass transit. The Richmond Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (RAMPO) is required to base the RMTS on the projections of the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) for future population and employment growth.

BECAUSE THE RMTS is driven by these data projections, November's public meeting was more in the nature of "for your information" than a meaningful dialogue on the benefits of regional mass transit and the community investments necessary to create the system. To make matters worse, the VEC projections RAMPO is relying on call for unending suburban sprawl over the next 25 years.

The VEC's sprawling projections do not account for dramatic changes in the region's political views regarding "new urbanism"-style development in suburban areas; increasing fuel prices; regional approaches to growth, multi-modal transportation, and economic development; the transit needs of an aging population; or environmental concerns. Nor do the VEC's projections reflect mass transit's ability to proactively shape growth by channeling high-density development into targeted transit corridors.

Moreover, continuing to develop a "data-driven" Regional Mass Transit Study contradicts two key recommendations of Putting the Pieces Together, James Crupi's recent analysis of the Richmond region. Crupi urges the Richmond region to engage in a dynamic community visioning process that will generate a strategic vision of our future. He also strongly recommends that our strategic vision include the formation of a Regional Transportation Authority that will coordinate the development of a regional,

multi-modal transportation infrastructure including mass transit. Prudence dictates that the RMTS utilize a visioning process incorporating Crupi's analysis and considering his recommendations.

CURRENT EVENTS in the city and suburbs also support utilizing a strategic visioning process for the RMTS. The City of Richmond is using a very dynamic community engagement process to develop the Downtown Master Plan, and hundreds of citizens have participated in its creation.

That process has identified the importance of maintaining and expanding the traditional urban model of walkable neighborhoods linked with trolley service as key components for downtown revitalization. It recognizes our current dependence on automobiles, but notes that multi-modal transportation can help stimulate vibrant mixed-use revitalization in the downtown area where the streets, sidewalks, and utilities already exist. In the suburbs, growth was a major factor in the recent elections, reflecting citizen concerns about the sprawling manner in which our region is growing. With every new subdivision and shopping center, new roads and other infrastructure must be built and maintained at taxpayer expense, while farms and forests are lost forever.

We have a greater appreciation of how our auto dependence is creating sprawl -- and how that sprawl is negatively affecting our quality of life. Other regions with viable mass transit are showing us how we can direct and encourage redevelopment and growth in targeted areas. Mass transit converts vacant and under-utilized real estate into valuable locations for higher density development, creating vibrant central city neighborhoods and facilitating downtown revitalization. The benefits include increasing local tax bases, reduced pressure for suburban sprawl, and a higher quality of life.

We rarely have such a momentous opportunity to spur our economy, preserve our environment, help less fortunate individuals, reduce traffic congestion, and elevate our quality of life. Norfolk and Virginia Beach have seen the light and are developing their light-rail system. It is imperative that RAMPO ensure that the RMTS gives our community the opportunity to fully explore mass transit's potential. The sooner we invest in regional mass transit, the sooner we will harvest the benefits. Ford Weber is the executive director of the Virginia Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC).

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