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May 14, 2024

National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board
Walter A. Scheiber Board Room
777 North Capitol Street, NE, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20002

RE: Item 8 - Visualize 2050 Action on Air Quality Conformity Scope of Work and Project Inputs Table Presentation

Dear Transportation Planning Board Members:

Thank you for your continued service to the residents of our region. The work of the Transportation Planning Board is immensely impactful to Fairfax County commuters and I appreciate having the opportunity to weigh in on a vote you are taking on May 15 concerning the I-495 Southside Project, the extension of the I-95/495 Express Lanes from the Springfield interchange across the Woodrow Wilson Bridge to MD 210 (Indian Head Highway). I strongly recommend you support advancing this project without modification.

Extending the Express Lanes beyond the Woodrow Wilson Bridge supports our region's equity goals and the One Fairfax equity policy. Currently, the segment of I-495 from the Springfield mixing bowl to the Woodrow Wilson Bridge is the only segment of Interstate in Northern Virginia without an Express Lanes component and, therefore, without a transit benefit. I do not believe it is acceptable to deny the residents of one of the most diverse areas of our region the reliable and efficient bus service that the Express Lanes would make possible. Furthermore, each segment of the current Express Lanes network – I-495, I-95 and I-66 – all provide a dedicated source of funding for transit improvements, which this segment of I-495 also currently lacks. Extending the Express Lanes would serve the communities around this segment of I-495 who are currently treated differently than the rest of Northern Virginia.

The proposed extension furthers our region's goal to provide safe, efficient and reliable transit service in multiple ways. Most notably, it may provide a dedicated source of revenue for transit improvements for the entire corridor. The funding from other currently operating Express Lanes segments has been used to provide more frequent bus service along those corridors, and the 495 NEXT project's proposed transit benefit would provide new bus service over the American Legion Bridge. This type of service on this segment of I-495 would be a gamechanger for residents who live there as well as for businesses around the region. Furthermore, a complete and seamless Express Lanes network would benefit bus riders across the region as it would move the most people along lanes that do not suffer from the same congestion as the traditional lanes. For example, during rush hour Virginia's I-95 Express Lanes move more than twice as many people per hour per lane compared to the I-95 general purpose lanes.

As you all are aware, with a large population of hybrid workers, our region's transit service providers are struggling to attract riders on a consistent basis. Commuters now have the opportunity to be more selective about their commuting options when they are only required to be in the office 3-4 days per week. In order to get these commuters out of single-occupancy vehicles (SOVs) and back into carpools, vanpools or buses, we must provide more convenient, reliable and faster travel options. That is not possible when these options must travel on the same congested roadways as SOVs. We should be looking at completing our region's Express Lanes network as a way to also promote transit and other high occupancy vehicle (HOV) options like carpools and vanpools.

Extending the Express Lanes would incentivize transit ridership and establish a customer base for potential future rail service without precluding the extension of Metrorail. The Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation completed a study of this segment of I-495 in 2023 and recommended four new bus routes crossing between Maryland and Virginia with the opening of the Express Lanes totaling over 8,000 daily riders. The Express Lanes would also enhance frequency for existing routes and promote additional routes through Fairfax County, Alexandria, and Arlington.

The economic development case for this extension is very clear as well. People need efficient means to get from their homes to their places of employment and other local destinations and it is clear that this part of our region is hindered by congestion as well as insufficient HOV alternatives. Extending the Express Lanes to MD 210 will improve the lives of commuters. It also will provide more efficient access to job centers for people in this area who do not have reliable access to a vehicle. Providing more equitable transit and HOV options in this area will provide an economic benefit to the residents and businesses around the region who employ them.

Removing the portion of this project east of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge would only create a problem exactly like the one we are dealing with at the American Legion Bridge. If we as a region continue to have as a goal reducing the number of SOVs on our roads, then providing the infrastructure to create multiple options for those drivers on one of our most heavily congested roadways is how we achieve it. This can be accomplished through a complete Express Lanes network that provides lanes without the same congestion and bottlenecks that the traditional lanes experience. I am a strong supporter of the Metrorail extension, which is unfortunately unfunded and likely still decades away. To be clear, VDOT has publicly committed to the preservation of future rail across the Woodrow Wilson Bridge in the legally binding environmental approval process and any future public-private partnership agreement.

In addition, we cannot wait until congestion on the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and its approaches deteriorate back to the conditions that existed before the bridge was replaced. I remember very well the daily congestion that brought travel in this area to a halt before the bridge was replaced more than a decade ago. Without finding ways to encourage carpooling and transit use, we will be back to that condition, squandering in the process the essential federal investment made to replace the bridge.

The region deserves to, at the very least, see a full analysis of what the I-495 Southside project can provide. Removing it, or altering its boundaries, will prevent the full and transparent review of the project. I strongly recommend you oppose any action to alter or remove the I-495 Southside project from the Visualize 2050 long range plan.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeff McKay". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jeff" and last name "McKay" clearly legible.

Jeffrey C. McKay

CC: Members, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
The Honorable W. Sheppard Miller III, Secretary of Transportation
Stephen Brich, Commonwealth Transportation Commissioner
Jennifer DeBruhl, Director, Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation
Bryan J. Hill, County Executive
Gregg Steverson, Acting Director, Fairfax County Department of Transportation