

Comments to Transportation Planning Board, February 18, 2009

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Some pro-growth advocates who believe that road building is the only viable solution to traffic congestion are lobbying transportation officials to use federal stimulus money to fund highway expansion projects in Northern Va. For example, the Northern Virginia Transportation Alliance (NVTA) reports that widening I-66 inside the Beltway is a top priority of “private sector transportation professionals” it recently surveyed. NVTA doesn’t name the professionals or the credentials of those who share this priority, but I’m certain that no one on Governor Kaine’s Commission on Climate Change responded to the survey.

The commission recognizes that automobile emissions contribute significantly to the GHGs that are driving climate change. So concerned was the commission about the potential impact of highway induced GHGs on global warming, it made a series of recommendations in its recent report to the governor that would if implemented dramatically reduce the scale of road building in Northern Va. The commission called for:

- a) coordinating transportation and land use as a key policy goal;
- b) promoting telework and flextime standards for eligible public and private employees;
- c) increasing state and local transit and rail funding to maintain existing infrastructure and services, meet increasing demand, and encourage local and regional land use patterns which minimize GHG emissions;
- d) targeting available transportation funds towards existing communities and designated urban development areas and promoting compact, walkable, transit oriented communities;
- e) evaluating the impact of HOT lanes on GHG emissions;
- f) adopting pay-as-you-drive go auto insurance plans;

g) requiring that environmental analysis and review of major transportation projects/networks include projections of the resulting GHG emissions.

The list goes on but the intent is obvious. According to Governor's Commission on Climate Change, Virginia needs to adopt policies that seek to reduce vehicular GHGs. Currently this mandate is not employed in northern Virginia's transportation planning process. In fact VDOT's revised Six-Year Improvement Program, 2009-2014 with emphases on major new construction projects on I-95 and the Beltway reads like a giant laundry list of ways to increase GHG emissions. Completion of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge alone entails dozens of major construction and demolition projects designed to expand road capacity. It will induce traffic around the Beltway and cost hundreds of millions of dollars over the next six years. Not only is the dollar cost prohibitive, the environmental impact is unsustainable.

But the Transportation Planning Board need not ignore the recommendations of Virginia's climate change commission. In approving projects for economic stimulus funding, it can take those recommendations to heart by deprecating projects designed to expand road capacity in favor of those that repair or restore existing infrastructure and/or expand access to public transit. By evaluating each prospective stimulus project in light of its impact on GHG emissions, not only will TPB give the lie to the cynical notion that the Governor's climate change report was an exercise in green washing, it will demonstrate that rational planning can make a difference in the fight against global warming.