

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

A Curious Lapse of Memory

Lawmakers never mention it when talking about traffic congestion, but real VDOT spending has more than doubled the rate of population growth over the past 10 years.

By James A. Bacon

In the 2001 cult movie *Memento*, the protagonist Leonard Shelby suffers a brain disorder that renders him incapable of forming new, long-term memories. Obsessed with finding the men who murdered his wife and bludgeoned his head, causing his condition, he tattoos his findings on his body so he doesn't have to retrace his steps with each new day.

I have no evidence that Senate Finance Chair John H. Chichester, R-Fredericksburg, has suffered a debilitating blow to the cranium, but he does seem handicapped by maladies oddly similar to those of Leonard Shelby. As the most powerful lawmaker in the Virginia state senate, Chichester zealously pursues new revenues for transportation as if previous spending hikes have been obliterated from his memory.

When Chichester wakes up in the morning and squints at himself in the mirror, it would do him good to see these two clues stitched into his chest:

TEN-YEAR VDOT SPENDING INCREASE - 33 PERCENT *

TEN-YEAR POPULATION INCREASE - 12.8 PERCENT

How would these numbers help Chichester in his quest? They would demonstrate that *state spending on highway*



maintenance and construction has outstripped the increase in Virginia's population by more

than a two-to-one margin over a sustained period of time--a period during which traffic congestion has only gotten worse.

If forced to ponder the meaning of these numbers on a daily basis, it eventually might occur to Mr. Chichester--as I wish it would occur also to his cohorts in the state Senate and House of Delegates, whose memories seem equally afflicted--that raising more money... to fund more transportation projects... using the same approach the Commonwealth has employed over the past 20 years... would accomplish

little more than drain taxpayers' pockets.

Proponents of higher taxes for transportation cite a variety of metrics for justifying the need to raise more revenue and undertake more projects. The increase in automobile fuel efficiency, they whine, means that motorists are driving more without paying more in gasoline taxes. The number of lane-miles of road, they sniffle, has not kept pace with the increase in population. What they never bother to mention is that over the years, the Virginia Department of

* In little teeny letters following an asterisk--perhaps on the ankle--the tattoo would add the proviso: "in inflation-adjusted dollars."

In absolute dollars VDOT spending will have increased 60 percent over the 10-year period ending in fiscal 2006. In the most recent comparable 10-year period for which statistics are available, 1994 to 2004, the consumer price index increased a tad more than 27 percent, implying an inflation-adjusted increase of 33 percent for VDOT.

Of course, that's just a guesstimate. On the one hand, the Producer Price Index increased only 14.9 percent over a comparable period (1993-2003). On the other, with China driving up global prices of cement, asphalt, steel and other raw materials, the rate of inflation for construction undoubtedly has been higher. Bottom line: We're dealing in rough numbers.

Transportation has *somehow* managed together to cobble together funding sources from *somewhere* to pay for massively expanded spending.

Here is what the General Assembly has budgeted over the past 10 years, according to the [Department of Planning and Budget website](#):

VDOT Budget (in \$ millions)	
FY 1997	1,856
FY 1998	2,003
FY 1999	2,436
FY 2000	2,354
FY 2001	2,515
FY 2002	2,609
FY 2003	2,565
FY 2004	2,991
FY 2005	2,848
FY 2006	2,969

Actual spending may not always have matched authorized budgets, especially in recessionary years when the Warner administration had to make emergency spending cuts. But over the long run, spending has climbed relentlessly. Whatever problems there are with Virginia's transportation system, they are demonstrably *not* a lack of money.

For all of VDOT's failures at estimating project costs and bringing in projects on time, bureaucratic ineptitude is not the cause of Virginia's transportation woes. Clearly, an inability to bring in projects on budget and on time hasn't helped VDOT keep up with its ambitious construction schedule. But VDOT Commissioner Philip Shucet is steadily improving VDOT's project performance, and he's done it while cutting payroll and saving millions of dollars in overhead.

Shucet deserves kudos all around for improving VDOT performance, but saving a few hun-

dred million dollars--or even a couple of billion dollars--won't make a dent in the \$70 billion in projected "unmet needs" that the [VTrans2025 transportation plan](#) has identified in Virginia over the next 20 years.

The fundamental problem is a *failed transportation model*: the belief that the way to reduce traffic congestion is to lay more asphalt or extend a METRO line another few miles without changing the forces--primarily land use--that influence the frequency and distance of car trips.

I have made the point so many times that I surely must weary my readers in repeating it: *Virginia cannot build its way out of traffic congestion caused by dysfunctional development patterns*. But Virginia's lawmakers, like Leonard Shelby, appear to have a brain disorder that makes them incapable of remembering the most elementary facts. So, they need to be reminded over and over again.

Let's walk through the numbers. Feel free to tattoo this information on the forehead of your friendly legislative representative. (The numbers I'm about to recite come from the [Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles website](#).)

In the decade between 1994 and 2003, Virginia's population rose from 6.55 million to an estimated 7.39 million, a 12.8 percent jump. VDOT spending has increased at four times that rate. Why, then, is traffic congestion getting worse, not better?

One frequently cited culprit is the increasing number of cars on the roads. The spread of middle-class affluence has made it affordable for more people to purchase and maintain an automobile. While Virginia's population

increased 30 percent in the two decades between 1971 and 1990, the number of licensed motorists surged 80 percent. In other words, a significant amount of the increased driving on Virginia's roads--and the ensuing increase in traffic congestion during that period--arguably was a felicitous consequence of prosperity.

While rising incomes may have contributed to increased traffic in the 1970s and 1980s, it has long since ceased to be a factor. By the 1990s, almost everyone who wanted a car already had a car. The number of licensed drivers, expressed as a percentage of the total population, flattened out. Indeed, it has even declined modestly over the past few years.

Licensed Drivers as % of Virginia Population

1992	74.6
1993	74.2
1994	73.9
1995	73.8
1996	74.4
1997	74.5
1998	71.4
1999	71.9
2000	71.1
2001	70.9
2002	71.1
2003	71.1

What, then, has been the driving force of traffic congestion? Simple: People have been driving more. In 1992, Virginians logged an average of 13,285 miles per motorist. By 2001, they racked up an incredible 17,055 miles per motorist--an increase of 28 percent *per driver!*

That is an astounding increase for a single decade. It is obtuse not to inquire why Virginians are driving so much more, and reckless not to ask whether the trend will continue. Indeed, I would characterize it as down-

right irresponsible for self-styled "fiscal conservatives" to blindly hurl billions of tax dollars at Virginia's transportation system without understanding the social and economic forces causing the traffic congestion. That's not statesmanship. That's not fiscal integrity. It's pandering.

Readers of of Bacon's Rebellion--either of my column or Ed Risse's "The Shape of the Future" column--know the answer. The past 10 years have witnessed an acceleration of what is commonly referred to as "sprawl," a scattered, land-intensive pattern of development that makes it impossible to participate fully in contemporary suburban society without driving to virtually every destination. As Ed and I have argued *ad nauseum*--see Ed's latest, "[The Commuting Problem](#)," in the current edition of Bacon's Rebellion--it is utter folly to pour more money into building more roads, or even building new mass transit projects, until state and local governments address the flawed taxation policies, zoning codes, allocation of state transportation dollars and other root causes of traffic congestion.

Sadly, Virginia's lawmakers--Republicans and Democrats alike--have no coherent body of thought to guide them in setting transportation policy. They absorb the self-serving pleadings of special interests, the uninformed scribblings of newspaper pundits and the ignorant mutterings of random citizens motivated enough to attend the occasional public hearing. The track record of our politicians has been abysmal. For years now, the politicians have claimed that begging, borrowing or stealing more money to build more projects would improve transportation mobility--or, at least, slow Virginia's descent into gridlock. So far, they have

been proven consistently wrong.

Based on their public statements to date, leading lawmakers show no awareness of the basic data cited in this column. To all appearances, they lack even the institutional memory of their own actions. When was the last time any member of the General Assembly acknowledged how much VDOT spending has surged over the past 10 years?

Either our politicians don't know what the facts are, or they don't care. In either case, their mental processes are as fractured and confused as Leonard Shelby's.

At least Shelby had an excuse: Someone had hammered him on the head. Maybe that's what Virginia's legislators need: a good hammering in the polls this fall. That's one thing they won't forget.

-- January 17, 2005

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