

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

Pavlov's Pols

Politicians act as if the only solution to traffic congestion were building expensive roads and rail lines. Perhaps they should stop salivating over higher taxes and read the VTrans2025 report.

By James A. Bacon

In one of history's most famous scientific experiments, the Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov rang a bell while presenting a dog with a piece of meat. Over time, conditioned to associate the bell with the meat, the dog began salivating when hearing the bell -- even when there was no meat. Sometimes I wonder if Virginia's legislators are the victims of some Pavlovian experiment gone awry.

By linking the phrases "transportation crisis" and "build more roads", industry lobbyists and editorial pundits have turned our lawmakers into slavering advocates of more spending and higher taxes. So deeply has this conditioned response embedded itself in the legislative psyche that lawmakers don't even bother to justify the need to build more roads. They go straight from "transportation crisis" to "raising taxes" in a reflexive arc that bypasses the cognitive process entirely.

The 2005 session of the General Assembly approved a \$828 transportation funding package, and that's just a down payment. Because most of the funds represent a one-time injection into the system, many legislators are still clamoring for a "long term" solution. Indeed, Senate Finance Chair John Chichester, R-Fredericksburg and his enablers

in the state Senate have every hope of ramming through a tax hike next year.

Reflecting Virginia's time-honored planning methodology, the [VTrans2025 study](#) lists \$108 billion in "unmet transportation needs" through the year 2025 -- over and above the \$95 billion in transportation revenues projected from existing revenue sources. The study cites \$74 billion in highway projects and \$31 billion in rail/public transit projects



that have no identifiable funding source. If these needs were fully financed, they would cost Virginians an extra \$5 billion a year.

That's the part of the VTrans2025 study that our leading politicians understood. They act as if they stopped reading at that point.

This may come as a blinding revelation, but there *are* alternatives to building more roads and mass transit projects. The fact that the General Assembly has systematically ignored these alternatives does not mean that they do not exist. They do.

VTrans2025, published under the signature of Transportation Secretary Whitt Clement, reflects the best thinking of the

state's transportation professionals. Among other observations, the report highlights the intimate connection between the pattern of land use and transportation. In Virginia, responsibility for planning transportation resides with the state, while the job of planning land use belongs to the localities. As the report says:

This gives rise to a number of problems -- traffic generated by development may exceed the transportation system's capacity; land development patterns and building site designs may not accommodate alternate travel modes; and transportation investment decisions may accelerate development in an area that might not otherwise have developed in the same way or same place. *This is a fundamental problem and until the governance issue is addressed, no transportation plan can completely address the issue.* (My emphasis.)

I have yet to read a single quote by a single legislator acknowledging that the pattern of land use is a fundamental force, along with population growth, in driving the exponential increase in traffic. Unless this basic reality is addressed, spending more money on transportation projects does little more than funnel money into the pockets of developers, land speculators and the construction industry. Of course, given the tax-and-build lobby's massive contributions to

the General Assembly, maybe that's the point.

Besides advocating the coordination of transportation and land use planning, VTrans2025 explores various policy alternatives. "Strategies to address congestion include: increasing system capacity (e.g. expanding roads, adding more transit); operating the system more efficiently (e.g. signal system synchronization); and reducing system demand (e.g. van pools and telemarketing)."

Here are some of the options specifically cited in the report:

- **Monitoring the transportation network.** "Information can be relayed to system operators to facilitate the dissipation of congestion during peak travel times or following crashes and other non-routine events."
- **Providing information to travelers.** "Information can be conveyed to travelers and commercial carriers regarding work zones, congestion, weather conditions, and other potential hazards both before and during a trip to influence decisions when to start, what route to take, and which mode to use."
- **Improving Traffic Signal Systems.** "Signals can be actualized, synchronized and optimized to facilitate movement of vehicles along a corridor. ... Advanced signal systems can control access to components of the system (e.g. ramp metering), such as HOV lanes or congested interstate facilities."
- **Reducing demand.** "Technology can eliminate the need for some trips. ... Telecommuting, also called

teleworking, is performing work away from the primary office, permitting some employees to avoid commuting altogether."

VTrans2025 cites a federal study indicating that an investment in information-technology infrastructure can yield an \$8 benefit for every \$1 invested. By way of specific examples, the report described a success story in Tysons Corner in which a traffic-light optimization project saved motorists an estimated \$20 million a year in congested-related costs.

Wow, those sound like some interesting ideas -- and they don't come close to exhausting the possibilities. (For details, read my back columns on transportation options or EM Risse's columns about land use.) One would expect that our legislators, in their diligence to spare taxpayers from raising taxes any more than necessary, would turn over every stone in the hope of finding cost-effective alternatives to laying rail lines and asphalt.

Well, not in the 2005 session, they didn't. Here's what passes for bold, innovative thinking: The General Assembly created a \$75 million local partnership fund and a \$50 million public-private partnership fund which the state can tap to partner with localities or the private sector to *add more transportation capacity*.

Largely behind the scenes, VDOT has invested modest sums in alternative projects, such as building a "smart" transportation system that alerts motorists to congestion, and an advanced computer model that forecasts the impact of land use decisions on the transportation system. Virginia Department of Transportation Commissioner Philip

Shucet has proposed creating a \$1 million seed fund to stimulate telework and other demand-mitigation strategies. These are all worthy initiatives, but they have generated little interest in the legislature, much less an movement to expand demand-side alternatives.

I would like to introduce a simple economic principle to the lawyer-solons who run the General Assembly. It's called Return on Investment (ROI). No one in either government or business has enough money to do all the things they want. When business executives are confronted with alternative ways to deploy scarce capital, they select those projects expected to generate the highest return on investment. Virginia should apply the same business logic to its transportation policy: Invest the Commonwealth's finite resources in those congestion-mitigation strategies that yield the highest return on investment or, put another way, that yield the greatest reduction in traffic congestion per dollar spent.

Legislators need to know: What is the rate of return on widening a particular stretch of interstate, or extending the METRO line to Dulles? How does that ROI compare to optimizing traffic light sequencing along heavily traveled thoroughfares... metering the entrance ramps onto interstates... providing information services that alert subscribers to traffic congestion along their routes to and from work... and promoting a telework/hoteling strategy that takes commuters off the road?

Most salient of all, what would be the ROI from expanding VDOT's computer model of the state transportation network so it could calculate the impact of land use decisions in any local-

ity? Just imagine the possibilities if planners, developers and citizen groups were armed with reliable information about the impact of land use decisions-- not just in the immediate vicinity of a project but across the regional transportation grid. Just this one innovation conceivably could offset the need for billions of dollars in highway projects.

Until we've inventoried all plausible alternatives and conducted a comparative ROI analysis, lawmakers are driving blindfolded. That \$108 billion in "unmet needs" could well evaporate if non-conventional strategies dampened, or even reversed, the anticipated growth in traffic.

It is the height of irresponsibility for Chichester and other self-styled "fiscal conservatives" to foist another massive tax increase on the state based on the as-yet-unsubstantiated premise that building more roads is the most cost-effective way to mitigate traffic congestion. If our elected officials can do no better, I see little to distinguish them from Pavlov's dog.... except that the dog is less likely to bite the hand that feeds him.

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