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'Finding' Money

Four local delegates discuss need for state funding for transportation.

By Bonnie Hobbs, Centre View

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[Printable Version]

Oh, if only everyone in the state legislature could get along as well as did the four local delegates talking about transportation recently with the Sully District Council. Dels. Tim Hugo (R-40), Chuck Caputo (D-67), Ken Plum (D-36) and Tom Rust (R-86) all agreed that transportation will take center stage at the upcoming General Assembly session and that it's imperative to find a constant source of funding.

"All of us are looking forward to a hopefully productive session that begins Jan. 10 and ends Feb. 24," said Caputo. "And there's no question in anybody's mind that transportation funding is the number-one issue."

What's needed, he said, is a "reliable, continuous, dedicated stream to fund our road construction, rapid transit and maintenance." However, added Caputo, "Some legislators, like myself, feel that new revenues are required, but that the money shouldn't be taken from education, public safety and the environment."

He and the other delegates discussed their positions on traffic-funding during the Dec. 20 meeting of the Sully District Council of Citizens Associations and its Land-Use Committee. Attendees included Sully District Council President Mark McConn, Land-Use Chairman Jeff Parnes — who's also the Sully District representative on the Transportation Advisory Committee, West Fairfax County Citizens Association (WFCCA) President Ted Troscianecki and At-Large Fairfax County Planning Commissioner Jim Hart.

"All of us are looking for some sort of compromise," said Hugo. He noted that, last session, he sought some road money from the General Fund and bonds.

"The Virginia budget has been healthy in its growth and has doubled in the past eight years, and funding for education and the Chesapeake Bay has increased," said Hugo. Furthermore, he said, Gov. Tim Kaine recently announced that Virginia will have a $1 billion surplus.

"My background is transportation," said Hugo. "I did it in Congress for over a decade. I believe in what roads do for the infrastructure and quality of life. And it's important that the delegates up here work together on this — and I think we are."

Most of all, he stressed, "Although Gov. Kaine recently suggested letting people fight it out in the next round of elections, we can't wait 'til July 2008. It's incumbent upon us delegates to find some funding now."

Plum said most authorities familiar with the state's transportation plight believe that $1 billion a year is needed to really make a difference. "We need $400 million or $500 million a year in Northern Virginia and $200 million to $300 million a year in Hampton Roads," he said.

And although education funding has increased of late, said Plum, it's still not enough. "We're trying to catch up from [previous years] when we cut this funding," he said. Agreeing with Caputo on transportation, he said, "We need a reliable, steady stream of revenue."

HOWEVER, as for dipping into the General Fund, said Plum, "We have other obligations [for this money]. If we sell the school and college funding short, you end up paying for it out of your property taxes. If we sell mental-health funding short, we'll have 1,000 people on a waiting list to get into a group home."

He said the legislators need to agree that "we need — not a tax increase — but taxes that relate to the use of the roads. We need to think about it as traffic-congestion relief. But we can't build enough roads to get us out of it."

"I work on the extension of Dulles rail, and we need to plan on funding rail to Centreville right now," continued Plum. "I share this bipartisan notion [of everyone working together toward a solution]. I want us to make a serious effort at long-term relief for traffic congestion."

Rust discussed a bill he and others tried to get passed last year and will revive again this session. "We intend to work with Tim [Hugo] on his bills, and we've met with our delegates here — and we have a good, solid number of people behind this one bill."

He, too, said $1 billion per year is needed statewide for transportation, but he then presented the following facts: "This year, we'll take $450 million out of the Construction Fund and put it into road maintenance," said Rust. "And by 2011, we'll have to start turning back federal money because we won't be able to match it with enough state funds."

"By 2015, we won't be able to accept any federal money at all," he continued. "And 70 percent of our road projects now are [partially] federally funded. So how do we find the money? By having a long-term, sustainable, funding source." He then recommended adoption of the following measures:

* An increase in real-estate tax on commercial and industrial property, since these uses generate and attract traffic;

* A grantor's tax — People selling farms and other property would pay an extra 40 cents per $100;

* A 2-percent restaurant, hotel/motel and rental-car tax; and

* A $100 increase on the cost of a new driver's license, to obtain some revenue from the 90,000 people who move to Virginia each year. Virginia teens who've taken a driver's-education course would be exempt.

"So the money would come from business/commercial-property tax, new residents and tourists," said Rust. With this plan, he said, $50 million would go to the Metro, $30 million to VRE and 45 percent of the remaining revenue would go back to the local government. The rest would go to

other transportation projects selected by the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority.

"But this bill isn't statewide and it's new revenue," cautioned Rust. "We hope to get a statewide component and get compromises to hopefully get something done. Last year, 21 Northern Virginia business organizations came down to Richmond and supported this bill."

He said he doesn't care who gets credit for the bill, but he believes that something like it is going to have to come forward. "But nobody wants to pay for it; everybody wants somebody else to pay for it," said Rust. "But the business community — which is bearing the brunt of these costs — has said it will support it, [and so has] the chairman of the [House] Finance Committee."

Sully District Council's Jeff Parnes said, "I really think we need a state solution to solve what's a state problem. Our kids don't all go to school in Northern Virginia, and we want them to be safe wherever they drive. This [proposal involves] other people's money, and I think the problem won't be solved until it includes some of mine."

"EVERYONE WANTS the perfect bill, but we've got to look for a good compromise and a good bill," replied Hugo. "And it's not going to be easy. I think we all should look again at Tom's bill. It's a big issue, but it's a quality-of-life issue."

"I hope there's a meeting like this going on in the Tidewater," added Rust. "But I don't see a general tax increase being acceptable to the House of Delegates."

"I think we need straight talk from our elected officials," said Parnes.

"Sign this man up to speak to the Finance Committee," answered Rust.

Caputo said he previously voted against the bill because it would have taken $878.6 million/year from the General Fund to provide the revenues to fund it — and it would have taken money from education, law enforcement and health and human services.

"But I've since teamed up with Rust and [Del. Dave] Albo [R-42nd] and others on this bill and will press to have it passed," said Caputo. "It needs 12 votes on the Finance Committee to move it on to the full House of Delegates. We have to get something done. There's no more putting it off."

Addressing all four delegates, WFCCA's Ted Troscianecki said he wasn't particularly optimistic when he first walked into the meeting, but felt much better after hearing what they had to say. "In Northern Virginia, we need a loaf of bread — but we'll take half a loaf — because right now, we're getting nothing," he said. "We need results. But I'm heartened that you get the sense of urgency and agree on an approach." And if the delegates could get Hampton Roads to agree, said Troscianecki, that would be even better.

He said his organization and others would also pledge their support if a truly workable plan is proposed. However, he advised, "Please, show some level of a common front, so they don't laugh you out of Richmond, as they have in past sessions because you can't get your act together."

Virginia Run's Jay Johnson asked what could be done to reduce the demand for roads, and Hugo said he'd continue promoting telework.

Planning Commissioner Hart wondered what could be done to link a jurisdiction's growth control to the transportation infrastructure.

Plum said one solution might be allowing residential growth in greater density near transportation nodes. But, said Rust, "If there were rail to Centreville and someone tried to put up 25, 50-story buildings there, people would come out of the woodwork to oppose it."

Nonetheless, Sully District Council's Mark McConn told the delegates, "Something has to be done, and you've got to work together. Or in the next election, you're going to be held accountable."

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