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Governor Opposes Toll Increase for Metrorail

Washington Post – January 30, 2008

Virginia - A toll hike on the Dulles Toll Road is one of the last options available to pay for a Metrorail extension to Dulles International Airport without federal aid, Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (D) said Tuesday, noting that he is unlikely to support a toll increase. The governor used a radio interview and a news briefing in Washington to emphasize his stand that federal funding is imperative to the success of the proposed rail line, and that commuters may need to put pressure on the Federal Transit Administration for it to happen.

"What the federal share enables us to do is to build this and keep the tolls at a manageable level, which is appropriate for the hundreds of thousands who use this as a commuter route," Kaine said on WTOP's "Ask the Governor" program. "If you take the federal money out, my worry is that the tolls would be exorbitant."

Dulles Toll Road fees have increased to 50 cents at the exits and 75 cents at the main plaza, and more price increases are planned to help pay for the \$5 billion rail project. Kaine warned that tolls could increase even more if the federal government refuses to grant the requested \$900 million for the project. U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters and F.T.A. chief James S. Simpson told the governor and other Virginia officials last week that the project is not likely to qualify for federal funding.

The 23-mile line has been in the planning stages by local leaders for over 40 years, in an effort to connect D.C. to one of its main airports, cut congestion and increase economic development along the corridor.

Kansas Seeks Options to Fund Roads

Lawrence Journal World, KS - Jan 28, 2008

TOPEKA – State and national transportation officials told lawmakers in a briefing Monday that they need to consider a mileage charge as one of the possible new ways to pay for road construction in Kansas. Legislators were informed of the inability of the current motor fuels tax to keep up with transportation needs.

“There is no question that as a nation, we are going to have to find and invest more public dollars in our infrastructure,” said Janet Kavinoky, director of transportation infrastructure with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, during a joint session of the House and Senate Transportation and Tax Committees.

Mileage-based fees have been used in a pilot program in Oregon: charging drivers based on how much they drive. Other possible funding solutions to supplement the fuel tax suggested by transportation experts at the hearing include more tolls roads, utilizing public-private partnerships to build roads and inflation-indexed fuel taxes.

Transportation a Rocky Road in Vermont

Vermont Pres Bureau – January 28, 2008

Montpelier, Vermont – Lawmakers are criticizing Gov. James Douglas’ transportation budget revealed this week, saying even though it includes more funding to fix roads and bridges across the state, the proposal is not enough. Some legislators are concerned that the \$424 million budget will only aggravate Vermont’s deteriorating infrastructure.

In addition, cuts in local highway programs could result in higher property taxes. Rep. Sue Minter, a Waterbury Democrat condemned what she called short-term thinking. “I’m disappointed we’re not making any progress toward the future,” she said.

The state is facing a \$6 billion transportation shortfall over the next 30 years, according to a report issued by fiscal analysts for the Legislature in December. The report estimated a \$203 million annual deficit, for maintaining existing structures in “serviceable condition,” and not including any new projects.

Although the dollars shifted from the transportation fund to the general fund have dropped by \$8 million under Douglas’ term, more than \$30 million will still be diverted from transportation under the current proposal. “When are we going to stand up and fight for what’s ours?” Rep. Janice Peaslee (R-Guildhall) asked fellow members of the House Transportation Committee Wednesday.

Turnpike Concessionaire Must Spend \$2.5B in Upgrades

Capitolwire.com – January 29, 2008

Harrisburg, Penn. – The potential lessee of the Pennsylvania Turnpike would be required to complete at least \$2.5 billion in turnpike capital projects planned over the next decade, according to the governor's administration. Potential bidders have recently been discussing the parameters with Gov. Ed Rendell and administration officials, which they say will include strict state controls.

The winning bidder will pay for about half of the almost \$5 billion the Turnpike Commission plans to spend on capital improvement projects over the next ten years, said commission Chief Executive Officer Joe Brimmeir. The money will primarily be spent on a long-term project to completely reconstruct about 470 miles of the turnpike, built before 1990, Brimmeir explained. Almost 50 miles has already been reconstructed, and 15 are currently under construction.

Bidders were also informed that they would be required to spend a certain amount on maintenance and keep future toll hikes within the range previously planned by the Turnpike Commission – 25 percent in 2009 and then 3 percent annually.

Debate Rages on for JFK Congestion Charges

USA Today (editorial) – January 29, 2008

New York - Early bird specials and discount matinees are widely used in the restaurant and movie industries to encourage customers during slow times. Utilities give lower rates for off-peak electricity use, and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey uses a congestion charge during rush hours to use crowded tunnels and bridges near Manhattan.

Even though the same agency runs New York's three main airports, it is hesitant to accept the proposed congestion pricing to help travelers and cut chronic delays. The airport's hostile response is puzzling after the new authority they have been given from Washington to adjust landing fees at their discretion to encourage airlines to use larger planes and land during off-peak times.

The current landing fees are based solely on a plane's weight, which only adds to the congestion by encouraging airlines to use smaller planes. Hence, the number of small planes and regional jets landing at JFK Airport has nearly tripled over the last six years. The government's new proposal would allow airports to charge more for regional jets, urging airlines return to larger planes.

The airline's hostile reaction may be understandable given they are in the business to make money, not to make efficient use of airports and airspace. Airports, however, exist to serve travelers and communities, which makes their position hard to understand. San Francisco's airport has taken congestion pricing under consideration. While congestion pricing may not eliminate the need to renovate the air traffic control system or build additional runways, it may be the best short-term fix to aid weary travelers.



We usually don't include editorials but this one was interesting and thought provoking. The public understands variable pricing in their lives as noted by the writer. They deal with it all the time. We shouldn't be surprised that they will embrace it and adjust their lives just as they do many times a day on other matters. TW

Tracks May Be Upgraded for Commuter Line

HeraldNet, WA - Jan 28, 2008

Washington - A pilot project to switch rail lines to commuter rail lines may bring a new mode of transportation to commuters between Bellevue and Snohomish. The Seattle-based Cascadia Center at Discovery Institute, a regional group of rail advocates believes this would be an affordable and timely alternative, and is vying to keep King County from ripping up the tracks. Members of the group say it would be inexpensive to upgrade the tracks for small, quiet commuter rail trains to run down the corridor every half hour to hour.

The group estimates it would cost \$37 million to update the tracks from Snohomish to Renton enough to allow commuter trains to run along the tracks in the pilot project. Right now trains have to slow down to 25 mph along most of the corridor. With the improvements, they could travel at speeds up to 40 mph.

The test would allow transit officials to use the one-car trains on the tracks between Snohomish and Bellevue to find out if there are enough riders to warrant permanent service. If so, it would cost upwards of \$250 million to build stations, repair bridges and make other necessary improvements to turn the tracks into an actual commuter train corridor, said Bruce Agnew, executive director of Cascadia Center.

Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon, the new chairman of the Sound Transit finance committee, says he may push to use Sound Transit funds to figure out the true cost of the project. "I support preserving that corridor for commuter rail," said Reardon. "Cascadia Center has presented costs that are very, very low. The most important thing right now is to drill down the numbers."



Regardless of the merits of the Cascadia proposal, it is imperative that the true costs of such a system be ascertained as soon as possible. A proposal with an artificially low cost does the community a disservice in that it raises expectations for a solution that is not real. The time and energy agencies invest in dealing with unrealistic proposals (I get asked with some frequency to help them through it) that look inexpensive and promise much is significant. My experience is that the longer their number is out in the public and the more times it is quoted in the paper the more likely people will start to believe it actually represents credible analysis. TW

Gas Tax Increase Crashes

Concord Monitor - January 27, 2008

New Hampshire - A moderate gas-tax increase for highway and bridge repair was given the

thumbs down by New Hampshire legislators, bringing a clear message from the governor's office that the bill was doomed. The House Public Works and Highway Committee voted 9-4 against the bill, which would have raised \$44 million for transportation repair by raising the state gas tax by six cents to 24 cents per gallon.

The bill's supporters were not surprised at lawmaker's reaction, as Gov. John Lynch and Republican leaders oppose an increase. Advocates of the increase argued that the roads need to be repaired, and the gas tax is the only way to pay for the more than 4,000 miles of state highways outside the turnpike system.

Peters Applauds Tennessee's Toll Efforts

Fairview Observer, TN – January 26, 2008

NASHVILLE - U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters was in Tennessee this week, pledging her support of toll roads in the state, and elsewhere in the nation, and admonishing those who support higher gas taxes. Secretary Peters and Transportation Commissioner George Nicely proclaimed the benefits of toll roads, including three planned projects in Tennessee, compared with increasing the federal gas tax.

The public endorsements come just one week after a congressional commission unveiled a report calling for a federal gas tax increase of up to 40 cents per gallon. "We need to start having the courage to say we can make traffic better, we can give commuters the power to deliver new projects, and we can do that without taking money out of this region and sending it to Washington," said Secretary Peters.

Last year, the Tennessee Legislature voted to allow the construction of an initial toll road and toll bridge, although state law does not allow existing roadways to be converted to toll roads. Secretary Peters applauded the state's efforts in public-private toll roads and bridges. "I believe very strongly that what Gov. Bredesen and the state legislature here have done are paving the way to the future, literally, in terms of passing legislation that allows them to take advantage of private-sector investment in transportation."

Penny Increase Might Help Atlanta

Atlanta Business Chronicle – January 30, 2008

Georgia - A penny increase in the metro Atlanta sales tax to help relieve the second-worst congestion in the nation got a boost this week after a panel of key state lawmakers agreed to support allowing voters in the region to make the decision. The panel, which released its final report Jan. 30 after months of hearings, listed 18 recommendations to improve transportation funding in Georgia.

Among the recommendations were two major funding proposals: the first would replace the flat 7.5-cents-per-gallon state fuel tax with a revenue-neutral state sales tax of .6 percent to one percent. Either of these replacements would be indexed to inflation, so the state would end up with more funding for road projects (an extra \$1 billion annually or more) than with the existing

flat per-gallon tax.

Gov. Sonny Perdue says he won't consider additional funding for transportation in the region until he sees a greater efficiency at the Georgia Department of Transportation, a process which could take over a year. The penny regional sales tax has the support of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce and the George Chamber of Commerce, and would not require the governor's signature, although it must receive a two-thirds majority approval in both the Senate and the House to pass.

MnDOT Seeks \$50M for Design Flaw

Pioneer Press – January 30, 2008

Minnesota – The chief of transportation in Minnesota announced this week that her department plans to recover over \$50 million from a design flaw that resulted in delays and cost overruns on the Wakota Bridge project. During a Capitol hearing of the House Commerce and Labor Committee, Minnesota Transportation Commissioner Carol Molnau said she would seek millions to make up the difference from the original estimated cost and current cost projections from the contractor responsible for the flaw.

Just days before Tuesday's hearing, Black River Falls, Lunda Construction of Wisconsin won a \$60 million contract to construct the second, uncompleted span of the Wakota Bridge. The award brings the total cost of the twin bridges taking I-494 across the Mississippi River from South St. Paul to Newport to over \$110 million – nearly double original estimates.

In 2004, inspectors found small cracks in the yet-to-be-completed westbound bridge. Bridge designer HNTB agreed that a design flaw was to blame, and costly repairs were executed. I-494 traffic now uses that span to cross the river.

Since then, the eastbound span was redesigned, but the state and Lunda – the original contractor – could not agree on a price to build it. Finally the state put it out for rebidding, and Lunda won the contract with a higher bid than its original offer. Meanwhile HNTB and MnDOT have agreed to mediation, according to an MnDOT spokesperson.

Officials hope to begin construction on the final Wakota span by this spring and be completed by fall 2010, three years after the original due date.

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