

By Stewart Schwartz
Highway Robbery

The sales tax represents everything that is wrong with transportation and development planning in northern Virginia. It is as if we haven't learned anything from the experience of Los Angeles, Houston, Atlanta or any other city that has tried to build its way out of congestion.

We also haven't learned much from the last time Virginia raised its sales tax to earmark ½ cent to transportation -- 16 years ago under the Baliles administration. Billions of dollars later and the construction of many new and widened roads in northern Virginia, and we still suffer from traffic congestion.

“Road Projects Wouldn't End N.VA's Misery,” said a recent Washington Post headline. One reason is induced traffic -- 50 to 90% of new road lanes will fill up in as little as 5 years. They widened I-270 widened from 6 lanes to 12 lanes to last 20 years, but it filled-up in less than eight. The expansion of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge to 12 lanes through historic Old Town is symbolic enough of our misguided policies. Rather than cut traffic, it will move ever-higher volumes into bottlenecks in our neighborhoods along Route 1, Telegraph, Duke Street, and beyond.

Even though the number of lane-miles of highway we are building is keeping up with population growth, the amount of driving is increasing at up to three times the rate of population growth. This is due to suburban sprawl -- the scattering of development such that people are given no choice but to drive. The tax would increase driving, sprawl and air pollution. It is time to end this cycle, to promote smarter growth planning and to reduce the growth in driving.

Rather than take action to promote better growth management, the same boosters who pushed the last ½ cent increase, who pushed the Fairfax County Parkway, who pushed for the speculative expansion of Route 28, and who lobbied for the 12-lane Woodrow Wilson Bridge, are behind the latest lobbying effort. Led by developer “Til” Hazel and dominated by money from real estate, construction and developers they have already raised over \$700,000, and are expected to raise at least \$2 million to sell the public on this tax increase.

This is about fueling another cycle of suburban sprawl and poorly planned development. The sales tax would fund widening of Route 1, I-95 and the Beltway, and yes, probably new connectors between Eisenhower and Duke Street. The concern is that with Prince William and Fairfax approving development without regard to its impact or accessibility to transit, we will have thousands more cars seeking to cut through Alexandria.

The voters will find some transit in the tax hike package -- intended by the proponents to win the support of Alexandria's elected officials and voters. But neither the transit share nor Alexandria's share is worth the risk of Alexandria taxpayers subsidizing outer suburban highways and a package that will increase, not decrease, traffic.

Transit is only earmarked for 22.6% of the entire \$5 billion package. \$350 million of the \$1.1 billion earmarked for transit is not additional money -- it would simply reduce the contributions promised by commercial landowners for the cost of the project. A paltry \$12.5 million per year would go toward the \$6.2 billion in essential maintenance, railcar and platform expansion needs of Metrorail.

Alexandria would fund one bus garage and some buses, fund the expansion of Eisenhower Avenue and probably connectors to Duke Street, receive some share of Route 1 transit and some residual benefit from Metro rail car and VRE rail car purchases. All told, the City would receive just \$9 to \$11 million per year

of the earmarked funds. This is not worth Alexandria signing-up a regime that will be dominated by the six jurisdictions outside the Beltway and by Fairfax and Prince William in particular. It is also not worth Alexandria becoming a donor of its tax base for outer suburban road construction.

While a total of \$11 billion in additional spending is proposed for transportation both here and in Hampton Roads, the state budget for education, health care, environmental protection and other essential services are facing drastic cuts. The Governor recently ruled out tax increases to meet the shortfall, and on WTOP radio, he effectively ruled out more referenda. When asked if we would see more referendums like the one for transportation, he said, "Let's take this one time exemption and offer this regional referendum ... [and] I do not want to be up here campaigning every year." Contrary to promises being made to education supporters in northern Virginia, it appears that state options for additional funding have been foreclosed. But not foreclosed are diversions of other state funds from northern Virginia, should the tax pass.

It is also argued that the transit money Alexandria receives will free up local money for education. Yet, the sales tax projects are a wish list that will start \$15 billion or more in projects and consume even more local and state funds, not less. Rather than force Alexandria to support the tax increase by promising a one-time local share for transit, northern Virginia and the state should reform funding formulas that force local governments to provide large local shares for transit but not for roads.

The sales tax is the wrong approach to our transportation problems and a bad deal for Alexandria. Instead of blindly increasing capacity, it's time we turned to better land use planning and other measures to reduce the amount that people have to drive. The environmental, planning, transit and architecture communities have long proposed better solutions for the region in reports such as "A New Approach" in 1993, and "Network of Livable Communities," and "Better Way to Grow" by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation in 1996.

The steps we need to take include: continued revitalization of Washington, DC; development and jobs for Prince George's County at their 13 empty Metro stations; more walkable communities with real town centers; focusing office development at empty transit stations in Fairfax; and making Tyson's Corner function by making it more walkable. In addition, we need rapid incident management for accidents, state benefits for transit use, transportation pricing tied to the amount someone uses the system, and other short-term means to reduce the growth in driving. Please go to www.nosprawl.org and www.smartergrowth.net to learn more.

Alexandria and its pedestrian-friendly communities is a model for what this region needs. Let's not fuel another round of traffic and sprawl in this, the home of our nation's capital. It's time we did better. Alexandria voters should reject the sales tax increase and demand better solutions.

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