Virginia Pushes For 'Outer Beltway' That Critics Say Isn't Needed

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Martin Di Caro

Virginia transportation officials are pressing ahead with plans for a major north-south highway connecting I-95 in Prince William to Rt. 7 in Loudoun County, even as VDOT figures show the far greater demand for lane capacity lies on east-west routes, with the exception of Rt. 28 where it intersects I-66.

The Virginia Department of Transportation has released its traffic study for the proposed 'north-south corridor of statewide significance,' a 45-mile, multilane highway running west of both Dulles Airport and Manassas Battlefield and also connecting I-66 and Rt. 50. The study, based on population and job growth projections, found that if the new highway—the bi-county parkway—is not built traffic would increase significantly on some north-south routes. (The study's executive summary is below.)

"By 2040 we anticipate the bi-county parkway is going to have 45,000 to 61,000 cars per day using the facility between Route 66 and Route 50," said Maria Sinner, VDOT's transportation and land use director in Prince William County.

Without the new highway "Gum Spring Road, Virginia Rt. 659, anticipates to increase in traffic anywhere from 70 percent to 203 percent," Sinner said. "Rt. 15 is going to increase an additional 11 to 20 percent higher, depending on the segment."

The debate over where Virginia should focus its congestion relief efforts centers on mountains of VDOT statistics showing which roads have the most traffic. Opponents of the proposal to spend an estimated $1 billion to construct another north-south highway—referred to by critics as an "outer beltway"—point to these figures to support their argument.

In Prince William, Rt. 15 (from Rt. 234 to the Loudoun County line) carries about 15,000 vehicles per day, according2011 VDOT traffic tables. Two other north-south routes, Rt. 234 (from Rt. 29 to Rt. 659) and Rt. 659 (from Rt. 234 to the Loudoun line), carry even fewer cars daily.

The major east-west route in Prince William in the general study area of the north-south corridor, however, is significantly more crowded. I-66 (from Gainesville to Rt. 234) carries about 60,000 vehicles per day. The exception is the north-south Rt. 28 and its 54,000 daily vehicles. Rt. 28

carries traffic into Fairfax County to I-66 where travelers either turn onto the interstate for east-west movement or continue on Route 28.

“If they are saying that they need this road because of the pressures on Rt. 28 then this investment would be a complete failure, because their own [study] shows there is minimal effect on Rt. 28 north of I-66 if this road were to be built,” said Stewart Schwartz of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, a vocal opponent of the proposed bi-county parkway. VDOT’s traffic study found that Rt. 28 would see a one to two percent increase in traffic if the new highway is not constructed.

In Loudoun County, the north-south Rt. 659 carries between 8,000 and 16,000 vehicles per day, depending on the segment, while the east-west roadway Rt. 50 carries between 15,000 and 40,000, depending on the segment. Again, Rt. 28 in Loudoun is a north-south highway that carries as much traffic as the east-west routes, but Schwartz says those cars are traveling to job centers near and east of Dulles Airport. The proposed “outer beltway” would lie west of Dulles.

“If you look at current traffic numbers immediately around where this highway would be built around Manassas Battlefield, the traffic volumes north-south are very low, and the dominant traffic problem that we all recognize is on roads like I-66 and Rt. 50,” he said.

State transportation officials say they are attempting to tackle both east-west and north-south issues, pointing to plans to expand I-66 along with its interchanges at Rts. 15 and 28. It’s not an either-or proposition.

“We need to do both,” Sinner said.

Supporters of building the 45-mile highway in the “corridor of statewide significance” also argue a new north-south highway can improve east-west traveling. A driver in Loudoun or western Fairfax trying to get to I-95 today might take Rt. 267 east to I-495 to I-95. A better connection south to I-95 would alleviate that east-west movement, this argument goes.

Moreover, planners say the case for a new north-south highway in Northern Virginia is obvious when you consider the impact of job and population growth in the region in 20 to 30 years.

Schwartz counters those projections fail to make a convincing case. “A lot of the projections are based on horse trading in between the counties and optimistic thinking.”

The zombie outer beltway returns

By Stewart Schwartz *(Guest Contributor)* August 5, 2011 53
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Proposed alignments. Image by VDOT.

Zombies are notoriously hard to get rid of. They keep coming back. The same is true of a 1950s concept for an outer beltway that has been revived by Virginia Secretary of Transportation Sean Connaughton.

In response, the Coalition for Smarter Growth has launched a petition campaign arguing that the outer beltway would waste scarce taxpayer resources, intrude upon Manassas National Battlefield, and induce more traffic congestion than it solves.

If we don't act now to call for different solutions, Secretary Connaughton will force the outer beltway through with minimal public involvement or analysis of alternatives, as he did recently for another questionable highway near Charlottesville.

A little history: The zombie outer beltway has had many names and a colorful past. In the late 1980s it was the Washington Bypass, a controversial and costly proposal for a complete outer loop highway through Maryland and Virginia. That proposal was eventually dropped.

In the late 1990s two individual segments of the original loop plan were pursued, the InterCounty Connector (ICC) in Maryland, and the Western Transportation Corridor (WTC) in Virginia. The proposed WTC would have run between I-95 in Stafford and Route 7 in Leesburg.

In 2001 highway proponents pushed for a new northern Potomac River bridge between Virginia and Montgomery County that would be part of a proposed road called the Techway. Congressman Frank Wolf (R-VA) halted that effort after concluding the new bridge would harm communities on both sides of the river.

In 2002 voters in Northern Virginia rejected a proposal for a dedicated transportation sales tax in a public referendum, in part because the tax would have funded multiple segments of the outer beltway.

Finally, in 2005 and again in 2011, VDOT has proposed what they call the Tri-County Parkway, a new highway to run between I-66 in Prince William and Route 50 in Loudoun. Their preferred alignment for the Tri-County Parkway runs along the western boundary of Manassas National Battlefield. It is the same alignment studied in 1997 as the Western Transportation Corridor.

It is this highway that Secretary Connaughton has made a top priority, by designating it as a new Corridor of Statewide Significance. It is this highway that the Coalition for Smarter Growth opposes today.

Instead of building yet another wasteful highway that induces more traffic and more sprawl, VDOT should focus our tax dollars on more important transportation needs. They should also avoid harming the historic Manassas Battlefield, which would be impacted by the Tri-County Parkway.

The Coalition has performed an exhaustive study of the parkway / outer beltway, and found that the major traffic problems in its vicinity are on radial east-west commuter routes, not on north-south roads. The parkway won't relieve any congestion because it doesn't serve travel paths that are congested.

This table, based on information from VDOT traffic counts, compares traffic volumes on roads in the vicinity of the Tri-County Parkway. It clearly demonstrates that radial corridors have dramatically higher volumes than any north-south routes.

Only Route 28, which connects to the strong job centers on the east side of Dulles Airport, carries significant north-south traffic. Among north-south roads west of the airport and in the vicinity of the proposed Tri-County Parkway, Route 659 carries just 9,100 vehicles per day (VPD) from Prince William to Loudoun, and Route 15 carries just 15,000. In contrast, I-66 carries up to 63,000 VPD in Prince William, and Route 50 carries up to 40,000 VPD between Loudoun and Route 28.

In 2005 the Coalition for Smarter Growth commissioned a national traffic modeling expert, Norm Marshall of Smart Mobility, Inc., to analyze VDOT's Tri-County Parkway study. He demonstrated significant flaws in that study, finding that the new highway would induce new development and traffic, but not reduce congestion. Marshall recommended a more efficient set of solutions focusing on land use, conservation, transit, and demand management.

A more recent review of the Loudoun County Transportation plan by Lucy Gibson of Smart Mobility found that transportation engineers were overestimating north-south traffic compared to east-west traffic volumes.

Overall it is clear that the push for the new outer beltway is driven at least in part by those seeking to spark more development in western Prince William and Loudoun Counties, rather than focusing our scarce transportation funds on existing congestion problems. The Tri-County Parkway is an unnecessary and costly diversion from more rational transportation planning. We urge you to sign the petition against it.

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Stewart Schwartz is Executive Director and a founder of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, which he built into the leading smart growth organization in the Washington, DC region, addressing the interconnected issues of land use, transportation, urban design, housing, and energy. A retired Navy Captain with 24 years of active and reserve service, he earned a BA and JD from the University of Virginia and an MA from Georgetown University.