

Paying the Piper with Recycled Ideas

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A recent drive to and from Northern Virginia on I-95 on a "good traffic day" still left our heads swimming at the sight of the tens-of-thousands of vehicles creeping along, in one direction or the other (apparently dependent upon which way the HOV lanes were open), at "stop" up to about 35 m.p.h., for great distances, mostly north of Quantico. We recall our own marvel at the original 1940s-era Shirley Highway, in that same Northern Virginia corridor (VA's first such, and predecessor of I-95). As we observe what seems like continuous, on-going, construction to further expand lane capacity, one cannot help but wonder where all this ends? Will our grandchildren travel in self-directed auto-pilot vehicles on even more new dedicated lanes? What about the truckers, caught up in today's elephant-walk lines? Or the commuter, and long-distance, buses; HOV lanes are not immune to delays. And the snow birds and other senior citizens, their RV's, etc.?

Our reflective thoughts included recall of 1960s criticism of the then-proposed Washington Metro system: "Too expensive; nobody will actually ride it". Likewise, there was plenty of skepticism about Virginia Railway Express commuter train ridership. And bus use in urban areas; we are amazed at the expansion of urban bus transit in NoVA, more so at the fact that people are using them. Last to come into the VA portfolio is intercity passenger rail (Amtrak), which is now growing rapidly. But we have yet to solve some of the cargo-transport challenges. One of the major cargo haulers of yesteryear was water transport on the Bay and eastern VA rivers. We will need all of the above and more in the future. "Old ideas" are being recycled, and some are working.

Prior to the national commitment (circa 1916) to construct and maintain a publicly-financed highway system, open to all -- accessible at any time- with roads in every direction -- many states -- especially eastern Virginia -- had a rather remarkable 19th-century-early-20th intermodal transportation system, predominantly rail and water, much of which was privately-owned, privately-capitalized, tax-paying, and did a fairly good job of moving people and cargo. Yet such system(s) were not expansive enough, nor fast enough, and were regularly criticized by patrons for their shortcomings, of which there were many. All this was augmented by a network of mostly locally-maintained county roads, which were likewise problematical. Aviation was yet to make a significant commercial entry upon the scene. But we did have a multi-modal network that worked.

Today we have unwittingly promised more than we can deliver. Highway users still desire to take to the road without constraint and without regard to public cost. This arrangement is increasingly proving to be unsustainable. Somehow, all this has to be paid for, one way or another, whether by direct user-fees (e.g. tolls, fuel taxes, etc.) or indirectly by tapping into sales taxes and other general fund revenues. It behooves us to examine all travel and transport options

before making major new public construction commitments. Policy makers would do well to consider what makes the most sense overall. Will they be up to the challenge of making such objective assessments? The public interest would be well served if they would do so.
