

Getting Dulles Rail on Track

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At a recent meeting of the Dulles Corridor Rail Association the Director of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, Karen Rae, said that rail in the Dulles Corridor is "so close yet so far away." Major steps in the federal approval process have been completed including the draft of an Environmental Impact Statement and a supplemental draft based on more than 800 public comments on the original draft. Written commitments to the full 23.1 miles of the project from the Orange Line between East and West Falls Church Metro Stations to Route 772 in Loudoun County have been received from Senators John Warner and George Allen, Governor Mark Warner, Virginia Secretary of Transportation Whittington Clement, and Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority Director Jim Bennett. These are major steps that put us very close to being able to begin construction.

But reaching agreement on a financing plan seems to put us so far away. The federal government has moved away from a match of up to 80 percent of costs as provided with the original Metro construction. Now the feds match at 50 percent, and a year ago Federal Transit Authority officials advised the state that the cost of the Dulles project would require that it be funded over two federal reauthorization cycles. The first phase of the financing plan would be adequate to pay for rail to Wiehle Avenue. The phasing of the financing gave rise to concerns that the second phase of federal financing might not come available and Wiehle Avenue would become a terminal station.

Financing of the local share of rail costs in Fairfax County is to come from a special tax district of commercial landowners along the corridor who will realize the economic benefits of the project. Owners of 51 percent of the assessed land value in the corridor petitioned Fairfax County to set up the tax district, but their efforts were rebuffed when the Herndon Town Council who also was required to approve the petition conditioned their approval on the first phase going to the Herndon Monroe Station. Contrary to daily newspaper accounts, the Herndon Town Council never rejected the petition. They acted in a way that they interpreted would get rail to them quicker.

Complicating the work on the tax district has been what many consider a mean-spirited campaign on the part of two landowners to kill the tax district proposal. Behind a front organization called the Alliance for Dulles Rail, these developers have paid for misleading newspaper advertising and an eight-page tabloid that blanketed the Town of Herndon just before the Council vote with negative stories on the rail project.

Negotiations are underway in many quarters to work out the problems with the currently proposed tax district. Some propose a new petition under a new landowner group. Everyone agrees that the Congressional delegation needs to step up with stronger support and leadership. The reassuring thing is that everyone involved in these discussions starts off with unqualified support for rail to Dulles.