

Moving a Transportation Agenda

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In November, 2002, voters in Northern Virginia and Tidewater decisively defeated referenda to raise the sales tax by a half-cent in Northern Virginia and a full cent in Tidewater to support transportation initiatives. At about the same time, voters in Miami-Dade County, Florida, overwhelmingly approved a half-cent sales tax increase to support transportation. What can Virginians learn from the Miami-Dade County experience as we confront unmet transportation needs?

First, the success in Miami-Dade County came after several failed initiatives beginning in 1976. But the leaders learned from past failures. As reported in a June, 2004, issue of *Passenger Transport*, the county in 2002 "started with a clean slate in developing the initiative by holding transportation summits with the public..." The campaign to sell a referendum was managed by local staff and not political operatives. The campaign was "neighborhood-based, volunteer-driven, and information-focused." More than 350 full-time volunteers took part.

The message was kept simple: "On November 5, voting 'yes' for the People's Transportation Plan means: More Transit, More Choices, More Jobs, Only for Transportation."

In contrast, the Virginia referenda were planned by a small group of elected officials with limited involvement of the business community and no involvement of the general public. The campaigns to sell the referenda were run by political operatives who ran them much like partisan political elections. Many stakeholders were never consulted. There was a distrust of state government and especially the Virginia Department of Transportation, and nothing was done to build trust.

The Miami-Dade County experience of having to try several times before passing a referendum is not unique. In fact, it is most often the case with transportation referenda. Walking away from a failed referendum as seems to be the case in Virginia is not wise. A careful evaluation of what went wrong is in order as well as a review of successful referenda in other localities.

I have made suggestions in a letter to Governor Mark Warner that it is time for a Transportation Summit in Virginia to clearly and definitively define the unmet needs in all transportation modes: highways, mass transit, air, and sea ports. From the Summit a blue-ribbon commission needs to go to work to develop proposed solutions to these needs. Taxes may be among the possible solutions, but so too should be the use of technology, demand pricing, tolls, greater use of mass transit, and others.

All constituent groups need to take part in the Summit and in the panel. That includes the smart growth group and environmental groups. With a better definition of the problem and a consensus on the solutions, we can move forward in Virginia to improve our transportation infrastructure.