

## **More Grim Realities**

Kenneth R. "Ken" Plum

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Making good on his promise to bring reality to transportation planning, Governor Mark Warner announced a revised schedule of transportation projects last week. The brand-new Virginia Department of Transportation Commissioner Philip Shucet got to deliver the bad news. In "truing up" construction projects and schedules and the cash to pay for them, the revised six-year program of \$7.2 billion is \$2.9 billion less than the program approved December 2001, a reduction of 29 percent.

Some will try to put a negative spin on the action of the Governor by saying that he cut the highway budget by nearly a third; actually, what the Governor did was to take a politicized wish list and reduce it to the realities of the cash we have to spend.

For the last several years VDOT has been under great political pressure to keep estimated project costs low and schedules overly optimistic. While some politicians gained short-term bragging rights about their transportation plans, for the long-term VDOT's reputation was tarnished with huge cost overruns and missed schedules.

As painful as the process might be, it is completely necessary. We cannot plan for the future of our transportation system without knowing realistically where we are. Governor Warner deserves high marks for insisting that realistic revenue projections and cost estimates be used and that project scheduling reflect good business practices and funds that are available.

For our immediate area, the expected widening of Route 7 west of Reston Parkway to Loudoun County will be delayed. Plans to add a third lane on Route 7 from Reston Parkway to Tysons Corner have been removed. A total of 179 projects were dropped from the plan statewide due to inadequate funding.

As bad as the picture may appear to be with this revision of the six-year plan, it will only get worse if the General Assembly does not provide additional revenue for transportation. As Republican State Senator Kevin Miller pointed out in the last session of the General Assembly, the gasoline tax as the major source of transportation funding has not been raised since 1986 when cars used more gasoline than they do now.

The six-year plan relies on borrowing \$1.2 billion through Federal Reimbursement Anticipation Notes (FRANs). While borrowing helps with the total projects in the immediate phase of the plan, the FRANs are borrowing against monies that will then not be available in the future.

The good news is that the Dulles Corridor Rail Project will not be affected. It can continue as scheduled because its financing does not come from the Transportation Trust Fund. The project continues on schedule for completion by 2010. It is a bright spot in an otherwise bleak picture for transportation. Maybe the other reality that the state needs to face at this time is that roads will not solve our problems and that a greater reliance on mass transit is needed.