

Fair Share?

Kenneth R. "Ken" Plum

(Appeared on November 20, 2002 in the *Reston Connection*)

Several years ago I participated on a panel at a meeting in Roanoke of Chamber of Commerce executives from throughout the state. I was asked along with two legislators from downstate to discuss the legislative process and the needs and interests of the regions we represented.

The first panel member to speak was one of my colleagues in the House of Delegates from southwest Virginia. He lamented the double-digit unemployment in his area and the continued economic decline. The reason for his region's woes: they do not get their fair share of revenue from the state. In fact, according to him, most of the state money flows to already rich Northern Virginia.

The next panel speaker was a member of the State Senate. While his area was not as bad off economically as the first speaker, he did speak of the great needs in his region for investments in infrastructure to upgrade unpaved roads and replace outdated school buildings. The reason it was not happening: you guessed it! His region was not getting its fair share from Richmond. He joined with the theme that state money was going to bail out rich suburbs like Northern Virginia that had created their own problems by growing too fast without proper planning.

And for my part of the panel presentation, I expressed the belief of many people in Northern Virginia that we do not get our fair share of state assistance. I pointed out that the state pie in most funding categories is totally inadequate to meet the needs throughout the Commonwealth. That is why each region gets such a small slice. And while my region may get what looks like a larger slice, or more dollars, in actuality it gets a smaller percentage than the region's population or wealth might warrant in many categories.

From my extensive travels throughout the Commonwealth over a couple of decades I can tell you that no region of the state is getting the amount of state funding it wants, needs, or feels is fair. Some argue the actual number of dollars when that argument is to their advantage or the percentage of total dollars when that argument works best. And everyone is partially right. Virginia has among the lowest per capita spending in the nation and starves its local governments of needed assistance.

With the failure of the transportation referendum we are told by some legislators that they are going to Richmond and get our "fair" share. They need to look closely at the numbers and understand what they are getting into. With a quarter of the state's population and a third of its revenue, we already get more than 40 percent of the road and 75 percent of the transit funding available from the state. What region is likely to join with us to give us more funding than we already receive when it would mean less money for them and for everyone else?

As one local official observed, even if we could get more money through changing the transportation funding formula it would not be enough to fix one interchange in Northern Virginia. There simply is not enough money to go around; that's why no one is getting a "fair" share.