

Headed for Another Transportation Delay

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The 2004 Conference on Virginia's Future sponsored by the Virginia Chamber of Commerce and the Virginia Business Council at the Jefferson Hotel in Richmond last week was billed as "an invaluable opportunity to highlight Virginia's economic successes and chart a path for our continued prosperity." With a lineup of speakers that included Governor Mark Warner and the presumed candidates for governor next year for their respective parties, Lt. Governor Tim Kaine and Attorney General Jerry Kilgore, along with two members of the General Assembly, it was inevitable that the discussion would turn to near-term considerations including the General Assembly session that gets underway on January 12 of next year.

Governor Warner had some good news about Virginia's economic recovery that is leading the Nation. He announced that 11,000 new jobs are being added in Northern Virginia. In fact, the economic recovery of the state is being driven by Northern Virginia and the growth of homeland security federal monies that are being spent in the region. He cautioned against indefinitely counting on federal spending that is also driving up the national debt.

Of course transportation was a major issue of discussion at a conference focused on economic growth. Urban areas need relief from congestion, and rural areas need the economic lifeline of roads to grow their local economies. But with all members of the House of Delegates and the governor's office open for election in 2005 there is virtually no hope for additional revenue for transportation projects.

The gasoline tax that was once thought of as the appropriate user fee to pay for roads was called "antiquated" by Speaker Howell. And the Speaker of the House said that there was no "appetite" for new taxes. Governor Warner was reported as using identical language in his talk with reporters after the conference. The Speaker and the Attorney General favor the use of existing general funds to support transportation.

Both gubernatorial candidates Kilgore and Kaine support a constitutional amendment to protect the Transportation Trust Fund from raids to pay for other government services. But the locked door seems to be in one direction as there is no protection proposed for education, health, public safety or other general fund dollars against raids for transportation projects.

There were calls for innovation by all speakers. Mass transit alternatives received some endorsements. The straightest talk came not from the political leaders but from the head bureaucrat who has received accolades from all sides for his reforms at the Virginia Department of Transportation, Commissioner Philip Shucet. He pointed out that the many changes proposed may make some improvement on the margins. In the end, he said, something has to be done about the bottom line. It's not looking like 2005 will be the year.

Along with other legislators, I am continuing to look for ways to move forward a transportation agenda, but it is increasingly looking like we are in for another transportation delay.