

International Perspective on Local Issues

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A recent privately-funded study tour to Stuttgart, Germany sponsored by the Northern Virginia Regional Commission provided some interesting international perspectives on issues faced in our region of the world. Several observations were immediately apparent: The use of rail as a transportation alternative is pervasive. Travel by rail from the airport at Frankfurt to Stuttgart was swift at more than 130 mph, more luxurious than first class air flight, and on time! Cross-country and cross-continent travel is encouraged by high speed trains that run on time and that feature clean interiors with luxurious and spacious seating for relaxing and convenient tables for ease of working in transit.

Train travel was facilitated in the city by a fare collection system at the stations that permitted easy use of credit cards. Paper tickets were validated on trains by passengers inserting their tickets into a small device that cancelled the tickets. Electronic signs at the stations provided minute by minute updates on the arrival time of trains. Train lines served all the major city centers and extended from the city into population centers and into areas that were under development. The conversion of the former U.S. Army base at Scharnhäuser Park to housing for more than 20,000 people already has rail service in place.

In the cities and throughout the country walking and biking are widely used transportation alternatives. Major streets in Stuttgart have been closed and "pedestrianized." A golden statue of Mercury on a high column dominates a city plaza not unlike Reston Town Center. The plaza fills with people eating strudel and other German favorites in cafes while enjoying roving jugglers, acrobats, and musicians.

Clearly evident on the autobahns is the absence of SUV's. In a week, fewer than a dozen were spotted. Mercedes Benz, viewed in America as purely a luxury car, markets a "Smart Car," a subcompact that is limited in interior space but great for parking. More than one Smart Car was seen parked perpendicular to the curb when a small space was left in an area that otherwise was for parallel parking.

While there is clearly a commitment to invest in mass transit infrastructure, there is clearly a willingness on the part of users to pay for the operation of the system. Reportedly 85% of transit costs are recovered from the fare box. Interest in the use of mass transit is heightened by the high price of gasoline – about \$5 a gallon with more than \$3 being taxes.

Many factors distinguish our country from Germany, but clearly there are lessons to be learned from a more receptive approach to mass transit, a willingness to invest in it, and the encouragement of its use. Next week I will look at a different approach to regional governance that offers lessons for us as well.