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Dulles Rail Boondoggle Exposes Flaws in Federal Transportation Policy

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Among the 85 largest metropolitan areas in the country, the Washington, D.C., region has the distinction of having the seventh-worst traffic congestion in the nation, as measured by the Texas Transportation Institute in its most recent annual report on urban mobility.[1] This would not surprise anyone living in the area: Along the region's major transportation corridors, gridlock is a common occurrence throughout the week. Very little road capacity has been added over the past several decades despite large increases in the population, licensed drivers, jobs, and businesses—not to mention the billions of dollars ineffectively spent by a hodge-podge of overlapping government transportation bureaucracies.

Having already squandered vast sums of tax dollars, many of these same bureaucracies, along with their supporters in the business and environmental communities, are now pushing aggressively for the biggest boondoggle of them all: the Dulles rail extension project, which would ultimately add 23 miles of new rail line to link downtown Washington with the Dulles airport in distant Loudoun County. Estimated to cost $5.1 billion, the new rail line is strongly supported by the region's elected officials and business community despite the project's own estimates that show it would do little to relieve congestion, pollution, or energy use in the corridor where it would operate, let alone in the region as a whole. Congress and the Administration should deny the project federal funding.

High Cost, Little to No Benefit. The new rail line would link with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's existing rail system (METRO) at Falls Church in suburban Virginia. Estimated to cost $3.4 billion three years ago, it is now projected to cost $5.1 billion but would likely clock in at somewhere between $7.5 billion and $10 billion if ultimately built.

The project's own projections reveal the lack of any benefit that would justify its enormous cost:[2]

- By the project's completion in 2025, traffic volumes on the ten highway links in the corridor would be reduced by only 1.5 percent compared to levels that would occur without the extension.
- The negligible gain in traffic relief would be erased by 2027, given projected traffic growth rates. In effect, $5.1 billion (in current dollars) would be spent for two years of trivial traffic relief.
- The capital cost per new rider attracted to transit from a car (daily rider annualized) exceeds $15,000. That is enough to lease each new transit rider two BMW 328i convertibles for life and still return a few thousand dollars to the taxpayer. By this measure, the Dulles extension would be one of the most expensive new transit projects ever conceived.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/SmartGrowth/wm1824.cfm

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- Net energy savings by 2025 (measured in energy saved per BTU as car usage declines and transit usage rises) would be 0.5 percent for the full Dulles project, and the Wiehle Avenue link (Phase I) would actually increase energy usage.

While detailed analysis of Dulles rail's own projections indicate little or no meaningful benefit in congestion relief, a broader look at the region suggests that the massive investment already made in rail transit has had little influence on commercial development in the community despite claims to the contrary. Indeed, Virginia's four most prosperous commercial and residential areas—Tysons Corner, Reston, the Loudoun/Dulles tech corridor, and McLean—have one important thing in common: None is served by the existing rail transit system!

A Bureaucratic Nightmare. As voters in the area already know, a large part the metropolitan area's congestion problem stems from the mismanagement of the region's transportation system by a collection of duplicative bureaucracies, which now includes three state Departments of Transportation (DOT), one federal DOT, freelancing members of the U.S. Congress and their staffs, a metropolitan planning organization, a new regional transportation authority recently empowered to raise taxes, a dozen or so counties and cities, and a meddlesome business community that supports wasteful transportation schemes that promise lucrative real estate development opportunities but little congestion relief, of which the Dulles rail extension proposal is a prime example.

As if there were not enough cooks already mucking around in the region's congestion "broth," the Dulles rail project would expand this exotic layering of bureaucratic confusion by placing responsibility for financing, construction, and (possibly) operation of the project in the hands of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA). As an independent public authority with no experience in rail transit, the MWAA operates an airport known for inconveniencing passengers trying to get from the airport's perimeter to their flight. Perhaps it was for these reasons that the U.S. DOT's Inspector General (IG) expressed skepticism about MWAA's involvement. Making reference to Boston's mismanagement of its infamous "Big Dig" tunnel project, the IG noted, "These lessons are relevant in light of MWAA's lack of experience in managing a mass transit project."[3]

Political Dynamics. Perhaps these factors were behind the concerns expressed by James Simpson, Administrator of the U.S. Federal Transit Administration, when he wrote Virginia Governor Tim Kaine in late January 2008 to inform him that federal funding for the Dulles rail project was in jeopardy. Specifically, Simpson noted that in its current form, the project would receive a "medium-low" rating, essentially making it ineligible for up to $1.5 billion in federal subsidies that Virginia was expecting for Phase 1 of the project. Phase 1 of the Dulles rail extension project would add the first 11.6 miles of new rail line, extending west from Falls Church, VA, to Wiehle Avenue in Reston, VA—several miles short of the airport. The estimated cost of Phase 1 has risen from $1.52 billion in December 2004 to $2.55 billion today.

To the extent that Mr. Simpson was influenced by the IG's report, he is to be commended for recognizing that federal grants are not meant for fulfilling the multi-modal dreams of regional bureaucrats with little experience in surface transportation. Instead, federal tax dollars should be directed at cost-effective solutions to national and regional mobility problems. As the above data show, the Dulles rail project would provide no meaningful

1. David Schrank and Tim Lomax, *The 2007 Urban Mobility Report*, The Texas Transportation Institute, The Texas A&M University System, September 2007, at *http://tti.tamu.edu/documents/mobility_report_2007.pdf.*
2. The information presented below is reported in, or calculated from, data presented in *Final Environmental Impact Statement and Section 4(f) Evaluation*, Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority, Dulles Corridor Metrorail Project, *Final Environmental Impact Statement and Section 4(f) Evaluation*, December 2004, available at *www.dullesmetro.com/community/impact_report.cfm.*
3. Ken Orski, "Toro! Toro!" Guest Column, *Bacon's Rebellion: The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy*, February 1, 2008, available at *www.baconsrebellion.com/Issues08/02-11/Orski.php.*

congestion relief to the Washington region in general or to Northern Virginia in particular.

Nonetheless, most of the region's elected officials, including its Washington congressional delegation, enthusiastically support the project and are pressuring the Bush Administration to spend the money anyway. This is understandable in the age of earmarks, when "bringing home the bacon"—as opposed to providing meaningful congestion relief—is increasingly seen as a core duty for a region's elected officials. However, in an unusual twist to what is otherwise a regional dispute, some members of the House leadership, all from distant districts, have recently weighed in with their support for the project despite its high costs and minuscule benefits.[4]

Conclusion. Whatever the reasons for the leadership's involvement, and however the project fares in its quest for taxpayer support, the Dulles rail project has exposed the counterproductive political process that surrounds the nation's transportation policymaking, especially when Congress gets involved. For these reasons, devolving the federal transportation program—and the responsibility for funding it—back to the states should be a high priority for the next Administration and Congress.

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4. Amy Gardner, "2 Top Republicans Try to Jump-Start Dulles Rail Plan, Raising Some Hopes," *The Washington Post* (Virginia Edition), February 16, 2008, p. B-10, available at *www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/15/AR2008021503359.html?sub=AR.*