



<http://www.dailypress.com/news/opinion/dp-94687sy0mar29,0,1341688.story?coll=dp-opinion-editorials>

## Opinion

### **The alternative**

#### **Picture a future without rail, and you have an ugly picture**

March 29, 2006

The cost doesn't appear to be an issue. The tradeoffs have hardly been discussed. The powers of Northern Virginia want to run a rail line out to Dulles International Airport, and that's that.

The latest development came with Gov. Timothy M. Kaine's formal announcement on Monday that control of the Dulles Toll Road - and, therefore, its toll revenue - has been transferred to the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority. The authority, in turn, will use the money to help cover the proposed new rail line's construction costs, which happen to be bumping up against \$4 billion.

Yes, \$4 billion.

You know what? No one attending the press conference - which, in addition to Democrat Kaine, included Republican Sen. John W. Warner, Republican Reps. Thomas M. Davis and Frank R. Wolf and Democratic Rep. James P. Moran - can say for certain how many people will take advantage of this new rail line.

And they certainly weren't considering how the \$4 billion might be spent otherwise.

Kaine even made expansive noises about running the rail line "all the way to Dulles Airport and into Loudoun County," which seems to suggest even more ambitious hopes.

Rail. No one should doubt the power of trains to stir romantic feelings, even among politicians. If only we could all be whisked about in style and comfort to our appointed destination.

It's not all fantasy. Anyone who has ridden France's TGV or Japan's Shinkansen will tell you that for speed, efficiency and comfort, fast rail sure beats the aggravation and expense of sitting in traffic.

So it can be done, if the political will exists to raise the necessary bucks.

Which raises the obvious question: If Northern Virginia can get a \$4 billion rail line run out to Dulles - a rail line based on less than overwhelming justification - why can't rail be part of the answer to the growing transportation demands of Virginia's urban corridor?

## The alternative

Picture a future without rail, and you have an ugly picture

March 29, 2006

At present, Virginia (like the rest of America) relies upon automobiles and the roads to run them on to get from place to place. But the political consensus - a consensus that has existed in Virginia since the 1920s - to maintain and build roads with tax revenue appears tenuous at best.

That fact is quite evident in Richmond right now, as members of the General Assembly continue to glare at each other, stuck for a way out of the current stalemate over transportation funding between the state Senate and the House of Delegates. The Senate (governor, too) would provide a \$1 billion a year, long-term fix and pay for it with revenue derived from a variety of new taxes.

The House prefers a short-term fix compatible with the Republican majority's no-tax sloganeering and continues to maintain a white-knuckle grip on that position.

What if the House prevails? If it does, the opportunity for long-term transportation funding - upon which the advancement of major regional projects depends - will be lost. Virginia will be quite literally stuck. Sen. Warner even warned on Monday that Virginia risks losing federal road funds unless the General Assembly reaches a budget agreement on transportation funding.

Is it possible that Virginia may be approaching one of those moments - usually better fixed retrospectively - when a mixture of political failure, new living patterns and social expectation converge to put new ideas in motion?

Consider, for instance, the recent news that Caroline and King George counties are now among the 10 fast-growing counties in the nation. The Northern Virginia suburbs - or exburbs, if you prefer - have begun to reach the outer markers of the Richmond region.

A similar pattern has been at work on the Peninsula. As development incrementally, but steadily, moves westward up Interstate 64, more and more tracts between here and Richmond will be filled. The corridor along I-64 will inevitably grow more dense with subdivisions, retail shopping, office parks and all the rest.

Whether you think this is good, bad or indifferent may not make much difference. The general trend lines and the disinclination - at least, in Virginia - to have government intervene to shape growth may make inevitable the emergence of one grand urbanized strip, running from Washington to Richmond to Hampton Roads.

Somewhere along the way, with roads more congested than ever, the prospect of rail may become compelling. Some visionaries believe rail already has a claim on the future, that heavy reliance on automobiles involves a diminishing logic.

"Virginians for High Speed Rail," a nonprofit rail advocacy group, pegs the cost of a reliable, fast rail service from Washington to Richmond to Newport News at an amount

## The alternative

Picture a future without rail, and you have an ugly picture

March 29, 2006

well below the soaring estimates for building the line out to Dulles airfield.

If that's the case, maybe that \$4 billion could be better spent. (Just a thought.)

Failing that, maybe it will dawn on one of our "leaders" that the time has come to start looking at Virginia's urban corridor as the one thing it is quickly becoming and then do some serious thinking about how Virginians will move within it.

###