

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

New Man, New Ideas

Tim Kaine's victory will transform Virginia's dead-end debate over how to raise more money and build more roads. The big new theme: How to manage travel demand.

Tim Kaine won the 2005 gubernatorial contest by campaigning as Mark Warner Redux: If you liked the last four years, a vote for Kaine was a vote for four more. Yet the Governor-elect is taking Virginia's transportation policy, the top issue on the 2006 legislative agenda, in a very different direction.

The votes had barely been counted last week when Kaine promised to hold summits around the state with the goal of building a statewide coalition for his transportation program. Where Warner has treated transportation as a fiscal problem -- his reform of the Virginia Department of Transportation stressed completing new construction projects on budget and on time -- Kaine sees it as largely a planning problem.

Kaine wants to address what he deems the underlying cause of traffic congestion: the disconnect between transportation and land use planning. A top priority will be to enact an idea, articulated late in his campaign, to give local governments more power to block rezoning requests for real estate projects that would generate more traffic than the transportation system could handle.

Kaine did not run as a radical, but his transportation plan arguably represents the most dra-

matic change in thinking about transportation in Virginia since the implementation of the Interstate highway system a half century ago. Previous governors -- and that includes Warner -- had barely uttered the words "land use" in public, much less expended political capital on an issue as abstract as the transportation-land use interface.



Kaine has charged way ahead of public opinion and the conventional wisdom. News and editorial coverage of the transporta-

tion crisis in Virginia has overwhelmingly viewed traffic congestion as a matter of insufficient supply. If roads are crowded, built more roads -- and raise taxes if need be to pay for them. But Kaine doesn't buy into the tax-and-build paradigm. As the Kaine for Governor website states plainly: "Trying to tax and pave our way out of traffic won't work."

The land-use gambit is risky both politically and practically. Politically, because the idea of giving local governments more power to block development is sure to arouse the wrath of the special interests arrayed around the practice of Business as Usual. Practically, because Kaine's proposed solution could create problems of its own. If local governments use the proposed new powers to restrict the

supply of new housing, they could well aggravate a housing shortage that has reached crisis proportions already, especially in Northern Virginia where the anti-growth backlash is strongest and the housing shortage the most severe.

But the potential payoff is enormous, too. As readers of the *Bacon's Rebellion* blog may recall, I initially responded very negatively to Kaine's proposal -- so negatively that I declared that Kaine had just lost my vote! I still worry about the potential impact of his proposal on the affordability and accessibility of housing. But as I've thought the issue through, I've come to believe that Kaine's idea -- *if properly formulated* -- could become a powerful force for positive change.

Kaine learned an important lesson in 2002 when voters in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads rejected proposals, which he'd backed, to raise regional taxes to augment local road and rail construction programs. According to the [Kaine campaign website](#), voters did not trust the politicians in Richmond to spend new money as promised -- on transportation only -- did not trust VDOT to use the money efficiently, and did not believe state and local leaders could solve transportation problems by planning and building roads the same way they always had. Stated the website: "The message was crystal clear—don't throw money at a broken system. Fix the system."

In Kaine's estimation, state and local governments need to do a

better job of matching transportation planning with land use planning. "For too long in Virginia, we have made transportation and development decisions separate from each other," states the Kaine transportation document. "We can all point to examples of new homes or shopping centers that were built on roads not ready to handle the traffic, leaving drivers stuck waiting for the state to play catch-up in building or widening roads. ... We can't continue to do things the same way and expect them to turn out differently."

The Kaine campaign offered listed a number of proposals for combating traffic congestion, including the following:

- **Utilize Existing Infrastructure.** Kaine would encourage developers to do more in-fill development and redevelopment, citing a property tax abatement program the city of Richmond has used successfully to spur renovations of existing buildings. "By encouraging more activity near our job center," the Kaine plan says, "we help slow down the need for expansive road development in the far suburbs of our city."
- **Make existing corridors more efficient.** Instead of adding lanes to roads, protect the integrity of transportation corridors by limiting the number of intersections and curb cuts that interfere with traffic flow. Also, upgrade traffic lights to respond dynamically to changes in traffic conditions.
- **Manage demand.** Instead of adding transportation capacity, reduce travel demand. Encourage telecommuting, employ HOT lane

tolls with congestion pricing, and stagger work schedules so people can commute at different times of day.

- **Conduct traffic impact statements.** When a developer asks a locality to rezone land for a project, require him to submit a traffic impact statement. Likewise, require VDOT to conduct traffic-impact studies of its own road construction projects.
- **Allow local governments to deny rezoning when roads are insufficient.** "Localities should not be compelled to accept large new developments that overwhelm the local road infrastructure unless there is a funded infrastructure plan in place."

The first three bullets encompass ideas that I have called for in *Bacon's Rebellion*. I could not be much happier with these parts of the Kaine transportation plan if I'd written them myself. My concern with the last item is this: Localities have contributed in large measure to the scarcity of affordable and accessible housing in Virginia by using their existing powers to restrict the supply of new housing. Give them more power, I fear, and they will restrict the supply even more.

Here's the problem: Local governments face electoral pressure to keep tax rates low. The near-universal response is to encourage commercial real estate development, which pays more in taxes than its tenants demand in services, and to curtail residential real estate, which attracts renters and home buyers who cost more than they pay in taxes. Giving localities more power to restrict residential growth on the grounds of traffic

congestion will make it even easier to block much-needed residential development. But newcomers have to live somewhere.

Fortunately, the housing-transportation trade-off may be solvable. Here's the key: Any move to grant local governments more power to block development projects must take into account the fact that *the impact of a project upon local traffic conditions can vary widely, depending upon how it is designed.*

Ideally, communities should have a balance of houses to live in, offices to work in, and places to shop. Kaine's transportation plan acknowledges this basic truth: "By building communities where people can live, work and shop," it says, "we will reduce the amount of time we spend traveling from place to place during the day."

If a project contributes to the rounding out of what *Bacon's Rebellion* columnist EM Risse calls a "balanced community," its impact will be far more benign than a development that accentuates the imbalance. For a real-world example, a project that would add condominiums to Tysons Corner would restore a modicum of balance to that highly out-of-balance jobs center. Residents who lived in Tysons County would have to drive only a short distance to work, relieving the burden on Interstate 495, I-66 and other traffic arteries to get them there. Any rational legislation would favor such a development rather than penalize it.

Similarly, communities should be designed to accommodate alternate modes of transportation, such as walking, biking and mass transit. Projects that cre-

ate pedestrian-friendly street-scapes and make mass transit more accessible will tend to generate fewer automobile trips than those that ignore these essentials.

There exists a body of thought that communities can be designed from the ground up to mitigate the local traffic impact. A fascinating experiment is occurring right now in Fairfax County, where Pulte Homes wants to put 6,000 people on 56 acres next to the Vienna Metro station. As a condition of getting the land rezoned at higher densities, Pulte must demonstrate that it can reduce the number of residential rush-hour trips by 47 percent and office-generated trips by 25 percent compared to comparable development at traditional, lower densities.

As Bob Burke reports for [Road to Ruin](#), Pulte Homes has identified a wide range of alternatives for reducing traffic:

- Limit condo purchasers to one parking space and charging for a second space.
- Give vanpools free preferential parking at desirable locations; provide vanpool subsidies for residents.
- Make sure the right retail mix emerges – including a small grocery store, child care, banks and ATMs, dry cleaning, cafes and restaurants, that are readily accessible on foot.
- Improve walking and biking pathways between Metro and the surrounding neighborhoods, and provide bike racks in convenient spots next to the condos and apartment buildings and the retail areas.

- Create free retail space for a bike shop where bikes can be purchased or repaired, and make 'loaner' bikes available to residents.
- Market the project and its transit-oriented lifestyle to current Metro riders; and encourage employers there to offer transit benefits to their employees.
- Create 'SchoolPool' program to help families with children attending the same school share transportation; encourage students at nearby Oakton High School to carpool, walk or bike.
- Work with shared-car providers such as FlexCar and ZipCar to provide discounted memberships.

And that list does not begin to exhaust all the possibilities.

If the MetroWest experiment proves successful, it could provide a model for other developers around Virginia. If Tim Kaine's legislation is crafted properly, it will not simply block development projects that threaten to overwhelm local roads and streets -- it will prod localities and developers into the kind of dialogue that is taking place between Fairfax County and Pulte Homes.

Rather than providing localities a stick for beating away unwanted new projects, Tim Kaine's legislation could provide carrots for developers to submit projects with a low traffic footprint. Good legislation would reward projects that restore a balance of housing, jobs and amenities to a community. Good legislation would give special consideration to projects that display creative thinking on how to reduce residents' dependence upon automobile trips. Not every devel-

oper will have access to Metro Rail like Pulte Homes, but any developer can incorporate buses, vans, carpooling, telecommuting and a host of other strategies into their designs.

Democrat Tim Kaine, whom his opponent attempted to brand as a "liberal," has already presented a small-government vision for transportation at odds with those who would solve traffic congestion by throwing more money at it. He has an opportunity to confound his critics yet again by tweaking his transportation plan to transform developers from a part of the problem into part of the solution. Let us hope that the General Assembly Republicans can see the virtue in a transportation policy built upon public parsimony and private creativity.

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