

BACON'S REBELLION

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Loudoun Lightning Rod

VDOT sparked a storm last week when it released a traffic-impact analysis of development planned in Loudoun County. Agree or disagree with the findings, the debate is healthy.

by James A. Bacon

One of Gov. Timothy M. Kaine's greatest legislative victories this year was enacting a law requiring the Virginia Department of Transportation to analyze the traffic impact of rezoning cases in fast-growth counties. The expectation is that county officials will curtail development in places where added traffic would overwhelm the transportation system.

Officially, the law doesn't go into effect until next year, but the Kainiacs jump-started the process by running a pilot study in Loudoun County. It was a timely intervention. Straddling the Northern Virginia growth frontier, Loudoun will make crucial decisions this fall affecting proposals to add 23,000 housing units to the 5,000 already allowed in the Dulles South planning area. VDOT's "preliminary review" showed that the expanded housing would inundate local roads, creating atrocious driving conditions for miles around and spilling deep into Fairfax and Prince William counties.

The analysis didn't have the effect that some had hoped for, however. Developers and pro-growth supervisors immediately knocked holes in the report, describing it as a "distortion" and a political stunt. The VDOT review

did not, to put it mildly, quell the traffic controversy.

But the analysis did do one thing: It focused the attention of everyone -- developers, citizens, the media, county officials -- on the traffic issue. The scenario of gridlock radiating out from Loudoun County in 20 years, even if only a possibility, was too scary to ignore.



Indeed, judging by the furor in Loudoun County, I would suggest that the politics of growth and rezoning in Virginia may be entering a new phase. VDOT traffic analyses *do* carry weight, and they will become an important factor in future rezoning debates. Warring interest groups may contest VDOT findings, but that's OK. The traffic impact of big real estate projects will be discussed in greater detail. Local officials, I expect, will sift through traffic issues more carefully and will consider a wider range of transportation financing and planning alternatives than they have before. For the citizenry of Virginia, it's a no-lose situation.

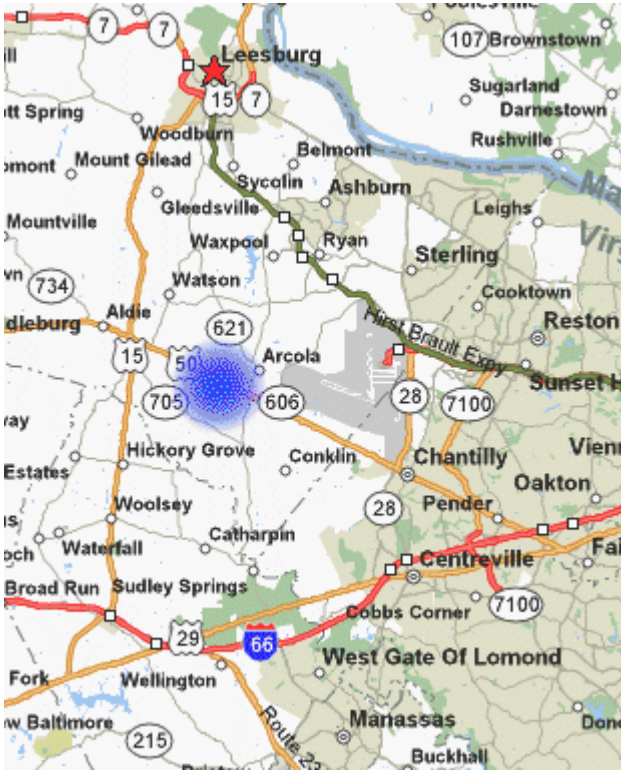
At issue in Loudoun is the fate of Dulles South, a sparsely populated area west of Washington Dulles International Airport, which has undergone multiple revisions in county plans. In 1997, the Board of Supervisors

designated the area as a "transition" zone between the suburban development near Dulles Airport and the bucolic horse country to the west. By 2001, county plans called for an average of two houses per acre and more than half the land set aside as open space.

Since then, a new, more growth-friendly board has been elected. In addition, a handful of major property owners -- Greenvest, the Toll Brothers, Winchester Homes, the Van Metre Companies and others -- have consolidated ownership of about 85 percent of the land in the Upper Foley and Broad Run subareas of Dulles South. At the urging of these property owners, the county is contemplating a major increase in density: from about 5,000 housing units to as many as 28,000 housing units.

The Piedmont Environmental Council and allied citizen groups sounded the klaxons. Last October, the PEC distributed a traffic-impact analysis that concluded:

The Greenvest proposal will bring development to an area far in excess of what has been planned and forecast through the [Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments] travel demand model. While road improvements are also proposed, they are vastly insufficient to address the impacts. In fact, the regional plan, without the Greenvest amendments, already shows growth in excess of road capacity for many roadways.



The blue dot shows the approximate location of the Upper Foley and Broad Run sub-areas where Loudoun County is considering an increase in the number of housing units from 5,000 to 23,000.

pers all over Northern Virginia. The story suddenly got much bigger than a local, Loudoun County planning controversy.

But the developers quickly struck back. Greenvest, the company leading the charge, criticized the VDOT analysis on numerous grounds.

First, VDOT failed to take into account the hundreds of millions of dollars in traffic improvements that developers have promised to build, says Packie Crown, vice president of planning/zoning. In planning its project, Greenvest did something that neither Loudoun County nor VDOT had ever done before: It took an inventory of all the road projects in and around Dulles South that developers had proposed, bonded, proffered or included in Community Development Authorities, and found that a staggering \$700 million to \$750 million of improvements had been committed to.

Second, VDOT listed only corridors where traffic congestion would get worse. In Greenvest's analysis, traffic corridors to the west would *improve* as the Dulles South improvements diverted traffic from Rt. 15.

Third, Greenvest argued, VDOT presented its conclusions without any context. Sure, six hours of stop-and-go traffic sounded horrendous. But what was the alternative? Says Crown: "The county has been issuing 5,500 to 6,000 building permits a year over the past five years. The county staff and [Council of Governments] project that 80,000 new homes are needed by 2010." Those people have to live somewhere.

Wherever they located, those 28,000 households projected for Dulles South still would generate 250,000 to 300,000 trips. What

Pro-growth forces can dismiss the PEC report as biased because the PEC has a history of fighting development in Loudoun County. But it's harder to brush off an analysis by VDOT, which has no vested stake in the outcome of the planning battle.

Using information supplied by the Loudoun County staff, VDOT conducted an analysis of the changes to Loudoun's plan for South Dulles. By VDOT's calculations, the increase in the number of housing units to 28,000 would generate an additional 250,000 to 300,000 automobile trips per day. While Loudoun County's previous analysis looked only at the impact on Loudoun roads, VDOT contended that negative traffic impacts would spill into neighboring Fairfax and Prince William counties.

In a [letter](#) to Loudoun's planning director Julie Pastor, Dennis C. Morrison, VDOT's district administrator, stated that by 2025:

- Route 50 at the intersection of Rt. 28 in Fairfax County would experience six hours of stop-and-go traffic daily.
- Portions of Braddock Road near Pleasant Valley Road in Fairfax County would experience six hours of top-and-go traffic daily.
- The Dulles Greenway would experience two to six hours of stop-and-go traffic daily.
- Interstate 66 in the vicinity of Rt. 29 in Prince William County would experience two to six hours of stop-and-go traffic.

The *Washington Post* quoted VDOT spokesperson Joan Morris as saying that mitigation of the congestion could "easily" reach hundreds of millions of dollars. Not surprisingly, the VDOT letter generated headlines in newspa-

traffic impact would they have if they lived in existing Loudoun communities such as Leesburg, Ashburn, Sterling or South Riding -- or, worse, if they leapfrogged west to Clarke County or even West Virginia, driving greater distances and clogging even longer stretches of road? How many miles would the gridlock extend under those scenarios? VDOT didn't say.

Furthermore, under questioning by a hostile board of supervisors last week, Morris, the VDOT manager, conceded that he hadn't even analyzed what would happen if 5,000 houses were built in South Dulles, as allowed under existing zoning -- with *no* contribution by developers to transportation improvements.

Of course, the dueling assumptions and methodologies doesn't end there. Ed Gorski, a former county planner and now the Loudoun County land use officer for the PEC, defends the VDOT study. If anything, he says, VDOT made conservative assumptions. "I think they underestimated what's going to happen. They assumed an average commute length of 13 miles. ... Thirteen miles barely gets you down the road to Dulles airport to the west, or I-66 to the south. A 20- to 25-mile commute would impact a lot more roads."

Gorski has a point. The average commute for Leesburg, for instance, is 26.5 minutes -- twice the length postulated by VDOT for South Dulles. Very few Dulles South residents would work locally -- most would commute to employment centers to the north, to Leesburg/Ashburn/Sterling, or to the east in Fairfax County.

Moreover, in defense of VDOT's methodology, Gorski asserts

that the agency assumed that most of the improvements listed in the Loudoun County transportation plan *would* be built -- and that includes the road network that the Dulles South developers would spend \$750 million upgrading. However, Greenvest's Crown denies that's the case.

Round and round the arguments go, one response leading to another... and yet another. Who's right? Greenvest? The PEC? I don't know. But at some point, after enough coverage in the newspapers (and e-zines), enough prattling by pundits and enough posturing by the politicians, the facts will get sorted out. And that's the point. At the end of the day, county boards of supervisors will make zoning decisions on the basis of better information than they've been getting. And that's progress.

-- July 24, 2006

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