

# BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

## The Dog that Didn't Bark

**Like the hound of Holmesian lore, former VDOT Commissioner Philip Shucet is keeping unusually quiet. That's a clue for deciphering the shifting momentum of the transportation debate.**

By James A. Bacon

Unlike earlier this year, when he gave passionate speeches calling for higher taxes, Philip Shucet will be sitting on the political sidelines of the transportation debate.

The former Virginia Department of Transportation commissioner still believes that Virginia needs to raise another \$1 billion a year to deal with its transportation woes, but he realizes that Virginia politics has reached a gridlock of its own. That's why he declined a request from a lobbying group (which he prefers not to identify) to contribute money and help ramp up the P.R. machine one more time.

It's time, Shucet says, to step back, take a deep breath and re-think how to reach that goal.

"What happened in the 2006 [General Assembly] session?" he asks. "Well, we went out and raised a lot of money. We did a lot of advertising. We lined up speakers hither and yon to talk about the dire condition of our roads and the threat to our future mobility. (Goodness knows that I was right in the thick of making these speeches and squarely on board with the initiative.) We threw rocks at the Republican members of the House. And in the

end, we created a divide just as broad – if not broader – than existed in 2002. That didn't get us anywhere. If we spend even more money to keep doing the same thing over and over again, why should we expect the outcome to be any different? "

More money isn't the only thing that Virginia's transportation system needs, Shucet argues.



Lawmakers need to re-think they way they prioritize the spending of transportation dollars, and VDOT needs to get more creative about making operational efficiencies to the transportation system. Instead of fighting to a standstill over taxes, why not find common ground with the House on other reforms that need to be made?

When Shucet speaks about transportation, people listen. He built enormous credibility as VDOT commissioner by bringing in more construction projects on time and on budget -- with fewer employees and a leaner organization. As it happens, Shucet's change in thinking comes at the same time as a major policy shift by Gov. Timothy M. Kaine, who now advocates a similar half-a-loaf strategy for the upcoming special transportation session of the

General Assembly.

In [a blogger conference](#) 11 days ago, the Governor laid out his new priorities: (1) reform and privatization of the Virginia Department of Transportation; (2) making the connection between transportation and land use planning; and (3) dedicated modest new revenue streams such as automobile insurance premiums and traffic abuser fees to transportation.

Clearly, the politics of transportation have taken a marked turn to the right. While the January General Assembly session commenced with a major push to raise some \$1 billion in new taxes for transportation, the special session scheduled for later this month will table any talk of a broad-based, statewide tax increase. Instead, lawmakers will focus on restructuring VDOT, making the system work better and, possibly, regional taxes.

While political and business elites still want to raise taxes, many lawmakers have concluded that the citizenry does not. The public antipathy to taxes came through clearly six weeks ago in a *Times-Dispatch* [opinion poll](#). Large majorities of those polled opposed higher taxes in general, and even larger majorities opposed the specific revenue generators proposed earlier this year: (a) an added sales tax on cars, (b) higher fees on insurance premiums, (c) an increase in motor-vehicle registration fees, and (d) a wholesale tax on gasoline.

Shucet, having left his lofty perch as VDOT commissioner to

help run a Virginia Beach home-building company, has been hearing the same sentiments in his everyday conversations. He described his new thinking to me last month during a lengthy conversation over breakfast in Virginia Beach. It was a friendly chat, not an interview, so I didn't take notes. But he delineated his thoughts in e-mail correspondence since then.

Writes Shucet:

I've talked to folks I work with, neighbors, people in the grocery store and at a variety of meetings, and what I hear them saying turns out to pretty closely mirror what a few General Assembly members keep repeating.

'Until I can be convinced that government is spending my money wisely, I'm not in favor of giving them any more.'

'I'm struggling to get through my life one day at a time. I can't afford to give up any more money in taxes for anything.'

'Leave me alone. If I have to leave earlier to get to work, I'll handle it. But, don't ask me for more money. I don't have it to give.'

At some point this thought hit me – what if [Virginia Beach Del.] Leo Wardrup and others aren't just trying to be cantankerous and hard to get along with? What if they really are repeating what they hear from their constituents?"

Also changing Shucet's perspective has been his year-long stint as president of the Dragas Companies, a home-building firm

specializing in in-fill development and condominium communities.

As VDOT commissioner, Shucet fully understood that leap-frogging, disconnected development would generate longer automobile trips than more compact patterns of development. But his experience as a home builder, he says, has "sharpened my senses" to the relationship between land use and transportation. "I spent 35 years looking at life through a transportation lens. Now, I have new glasses. I'm seeing new views more clearly."

"Here in Hampton Roads, people who comprise our core workforce are finding it more difficult to live in the cities where they work," Shucet says. "As a result, they are being forced to live farther and farther away from their jobs" -- which means they have to drive farther to work, contributing to congestion on more miles of roadway.

That trend has to be reversed. [Dragas] looks for opportunities to increase the value of vacant land that is already situated along existing infrastructure. By rezoning that land and increasing densities, we can use our knowledge and know-how to bring products to market that are affordable for at- or near-median income individuals.

Transportation planning is largely a study of how people get from origins to destinations. By building homes, we're creating origins and destinations. ... This company has always understood the careful balance between the use of land for transportation and residential purposes. By seeking out opportunities

for infill development, we've kept our origins and destinations in places where infrastructure already exists. ...

We do take a hard look at how the expected traffic affects our developments, not because we have to, but because we know it's the right thing to do. If a local improvement needs to be made, such as a turning lane or a traffic signal, we take care of that. But, by focusing on infill developments, we're making localized adjustments. That's a different approach altogether from creating new Greenfield developments that may or may not be served by existing transportation facilities.

**G**iven his new perspective on political and fiscal realities, what approach to transportation does Shucet think Virginia lawmakers should adopt now?

Considering the fiscal constraints to adding new capacity, Virginia should focus on increasing the carrying capacity of existing roads by making operational improvements.

Think of it this way. There's a cost to building new road capacity: about \$2 million to build a single lane of Interstate highway, \$2.5 million to build a lane-mile of urban arterial, about \$40 million to build a standard Interstate exchange. And those numbers don't include the acquisition of right of way. By increasing the capacity of existing roads, it may be possible to avoid hundreds of millions of dollars of construction. Writes Shucet:

What if we dedicated ourselves to a rigorous and relentless one-year program to implement just a few congestion mitigation strategies on the Interstates and major urban arterials in targeted areas, and measured their effectiveness in terms of adding capacity to existing roads? (Remember, congestion mitigated is capacity gained.)

Technology exists to integrate, synchronize and control traffic signals from a single source. What if we implemented a program that shifted current dollars to better fund inter-locality signal synchronization? For instance, here in Hampton Roads what if Virginia Beach, Norfolk, Portsmouth and Chesapeake had funds from the state to ... better integrate and control signals on the most critical urban streets during peak periods? (Not on every street, only the most critical.)

What if improved signal timing and control from a single source across city lines resulted in the effective gain of one mile of new street capacity, without any new construction? That would be equivalent to a gain of \$2.5 million of new construction, without any construction actually taking place.

What if a pilot project in Northern Virginia indicated that clearing incidents five to ten minutes faster resulted in the equivalent gain of five miles of new interstate highway construction (without any construction taking place)?

What if just a few grants were made to the largest employers in urban areas to move five to ten percent of their employees to a flex-time schedule getting those same employees off roads during peak morning and evening periods? What if the real gain in capacity – just from moving five to ten percent of the trips to off-peak periods – was the equivalent of ten new miles of construction?

Shucet thinks it's possible to make significant gains in traffic capacity. But don't take it on faith. Implement, measure and frequently report the results. Fund the kinds of projects that generate high returns on investment. De-fund the projects that don't.

In the not-too-distant future, Shucet says, maintenance obligations will absorb all state dollars available for new construction and Virginia will have no choice but to "bite the bullet" on new taxes. When that time comes, he argues, it will be easier to sell a tax increase if the Commonwealth has made every effort to maximize existing roadway capacity.

In the meantime, lawmakers should take a broader view of transportation planning and investments.

What if we reformed the administration of transportation altogether? Let's put the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation back together with VDOT.

Let's create a Virginia Department of Surface Transportation.

Let's revise formulas that limit the amount of money currently available for other

modes of transportation.

Let's revise the duties of the [Commonwealth Transportation Board] away from approving projects, and shift them to approving integrated plans.

What if the CTB were charged to review and approve the collective 20-year plans for the Hampton Roads, Richmond and Northern Virginia regions? How might that review affect plans for mobility in the I-64 and I-95 corridors? I don't know the answer to that. But, I do know that moving the CTB to an overall planning oversight level (as opposed to worrying about individual projects) would result in CTB members asking a different set of questions, and more than likely establishing a different set of priorities.

Remember, the CTB members can be the smartest folks in the world, but their authority is limited to that given to them in the Code. If we revised their authority away from projects to long-term planning, then that's where the members will concentrate their time.

In the long run, he contends, the system still will need more money. "The end game will eventually be -- and should be -- a combination of tax-supported revenue, tolls and private capital."

But when he steps back and makes himself look at things openly, Shucet says, he acknowledges, "There are additional things we can do with the money we have to reduce congestion."

I agree with most of Shucet's thinking -- although I would add a post script: The recommendations he proffers, though all very good, represent an incomplete

list.

Yes, maintenance costs eventually will consume Virginia's entire road-building budget. We can -- and should -- delay the inevitable by outsourcing highway maintenance and stretching our dollars, but sooner or later, we'll run out of efficiencies. Eventually, we'll have to raise more.

But, but, but... it's crucial how we raise that money. We need to move to a market-based system in which people pay the full costs associated with their use of the roads. If politicians sever the connection between miles traveled and money paid -- as would be the case by raising taxes on car registrations or insurance premiums -- motorists will always demand more transportation capacity. (The exact same logic applies to other modes of travel, such as buses and rail.)

Secondly, it's vital that Virginia localities reform their dysfunctional land use patterns. There is no sense in adding transportation capacity that wouldn't be needed in the first place if we evolved communities with a better balance of jobs, housing, retail and amenities, and if our communities were designed to be more pedestrian and transit friendly.

Until we get those fundamentals right, more money is wasted: We will build the wrong projects in the wrong places and spend way more money than we need to. It may take several more years until we can figure out how to fix the root transportation problems. Until then, Shucet's ideas provide a reasonable focus for the here and now.

-- **September 11, 2006**

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