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## **Spend the New Transportation Dollars Wisely**

By Michael W. Thompson

5/6/2013 -- Regardless of how one feels about the recent transportation law, all agree it will pour over \$1 billion of year into Virginia's aging transportation infrastructure and should build necessary capacity to meet our growing infrastructure needs.

Governor McDonnell did all elected officials, and the two candidates for Governor this year, a huge favor by moving the transportation discussion from "where are we going to get the money?" to a more management focused question of "how are we going to spend the money?"

And this is an incredibly important change in focus. Taxpayers and those who vote will be carefully looking to see if these new monies are well-spent.

If these new funds aren't spent in a way that relieves congestion and helps grow our economy then a massive failure of leadership will be the result. A good example of "wise spending" is in Northern Virginia: the years of delay and the complaints of "Lexus lanes" aimed at the recently opened High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes have disappeared as the traffic congestion in the mornings and evenings on Virginia's Capital Beltway has dramatically improved. And the rapid pace of building additional HOT lanes south from Springfield into Prince William County on I-95 shows that transportation construction can proceed quickly with well crafted public private partnerships.

The new transportation dollars need to focus on congestion relief and economic development. As traffic moves more quickly, the positive corollary impact is that pollution will be significantly reduced. It will be the job of our next Governor and his Secretary of Transportation to be sure that state monies are not wasted on unnecessary projects such as bike paths where there are few if any bike riders, garden patches that clearly don't relieve congestion, and \$1 million bus stops as has been the case in at least one jurisdiction.

This is the time for policy makers to review the important study released by the Reason Foundation in August 2006 that looked at the needs nationwide over the next 25 years to relieve congestion, both current and projected based on where people will be living. That study showed where Virginia's long term needs could be significantly helped by building a transportation spine through and to the congested areas of the state (Northern Virginia, Hampton Roads, and the I-95 corridor toward Richmond) and the areas where population growth is expected to be the greatest such as Charlottesville. This study showed that about \$14 billion was needed in 2006 dollars to build this needed spine. This \$14 billion can be easily met between federal and state spending now that the transportation funding issue in Virginia is behind us. This study should be updated and seriously considered as a long-term transportation plan that will proceed.

Let's look at other reasonable ways to spend these new found dollars:

- 1) Require new construction and maintenance funds to be made through public private partnerships as the first option if the finances work. Private companies can usually spend dollars more wisely than can government. Right to Work policies should be maintained. When this concept was instituted for the expansion of Metro in Northern Virginia, the bid for the second half of this project came in over \$100 million less than projected. And when concrete was finally allowed to compete with asphalt on road bids in Virginia the price of the first project came down by tens of millions of dollars.
- 2) Funds should be spent on relieving “choke points” around the state where traffic builds up because an intersection is out-of-date – let’s build left turn lanes and extend current left turn lanes so that traffic doesn’t “bleed” into the other lanes of traffic, etc.
- 3) Let’s properly synchronize traffic signals as has been suggested for years and let’s review these “timed lights” on a regular basis to be sure they are truly relieving congestion.
- 4) Let’s consider reversible lanes in neighborhoods where traffic is backed up in the morning and the evening in different directions. Why expand a road to four lanes when three lanes (one reversible lane) would solve the congestion problem for less money and without destroying so much land.

There are other good ideas on how to spend the transportation “windfall” in effective and efficient ways. If these new monies aren’t spent on projects that relieve congestion, fix the potholes, dissolve the “choke points” then government will prove it is not a good steward of our tax money.

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