

Assembly set to focus on transportation

[BY HUGH LESSIG](#) –Daily Press 12-27-04
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RICHMOND -- For all the drama of the 2004 General Assembly session, one important issue never reached center stage: transportation.

Legislators grappled with tax increases, a new budget and greater demands from educators and health care providers. The needs of Virginia's sagging highway network were eventually pushed onto the shoulder.

That probably explains why politicians in general - and Tidewater lawmakers in particular - are brimming with ideas as they approach the 2005 session, which begins Jan. 12.

Many want greater legal protection for the transportation trust fund. Others favor more public-private financing. There isn't much of an appetite for a gas tax increase, and legislative leaders have all but ruled one out anyway.

But expect transportation to grab headlines come January.

"This is the most important issue currently facing Virginia," said Sen. Bill Bolling, R-Hanover.

Bolling was among several veteran lawmakers who outlined a multi-pronged approach to transportation for the upcoming session. Among his ideas: a constitutional amendment to prevent lawmakers from raiding the transportation trust fund for other purposes, spending the budget surplus on transportation needs, expanding public-private financing and allowing local governments to make more decisions.

Sen. Marty Williams, R-Newport News, chairs the Senate Transportation Committee. He said an informal group of lawmakers has been meeting to discuss new initiatives.

"We will propose actions that will increase revenue to the trust fund by approximately \$300 million per year," he said.

While that amount may appear small when it comes to road building, Williams said he didn't think VDOT "could provide the management necessary to add much more than this to the program."

Del. Phillip A. Hamilton, R-Newport News, favors the constitutional amendment plus another measure: allocating one-third of the tax on insurance premiums to the trust fund. That was approved by the 2000 General Assembly but was never enacted on an ongoing basis.

Hamilton doesn't support a gas tax increase, but says additional money could come from increasing the titling tax for vehicle purchases from 3 percent to 3.25 percent. He would also consider boosting fees for safety inspections, vehicle registrations and driver's licenses.

Several lawmakers liked the idea of public-private financing, but were quick to add that such projects come with a price.

"People will have to realize that public-private transportation partnerships mean tolls and other payments that ensure the private partnerships make a profit," said Del. Mamyne E. BaCote, D-Newport News. "That's the only reason they would do it."

Echoing that view was Del. G. Glenn Oder, R-Newport News, a member of the House Transportation Committee. Oder was among those lawmakers who have a more conceptual goal in mind: restoring confidence in the Virginia Department of Transportation.

"The cost-saving measures identified in the audit of the Hampton Roads District must quickly be implemented," he said. "Additionally, any cost-saving measures identified in that audit that can be applied statewide must also be implemented as quickly as possible."

Gov. Mark R. Warner has already weighed in with an \$824 million transportation plan to boost public-private financing, wipe out debt and encourage more localities to take over road building.

Del. S. Chris Jones, R-Suffolk, called the plan "a start."

Sen. Mamie Locke, D-Hampton, said she needed to study Warner's proposals.

"The bottom line," she said, "is the General Assembly cannot sit back and do nothing."

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