

Running on empty

May 26 2004 – Daily Press

So let's say - just for fun - that every voter/driver in Hampton Roads suddenly did a mind-meld, became of one opinion on transportation and resolved to tackle the issue with sufficient public money to act immediately.

We'd still be stuck for years and years and years.

Roads do not get built overnight. They don't even get started overnight. You have to decide where it will go, buy the land, draw the blueprints, put out the bids and hope the unexpected doesn't jump in.

It is a long, involved process.

Which is a long, involved way of saying that Hampton Roads is already in one heck of a jam.

Because as it stands, we can't even get to step one. With all the hoopla over (finally) a stabilized state budget and the new money for education, the sad reality is that the General Assembly took a bye on transportation funding.

It didn't start out that way. The governor proposed a transportation package. So did the House and the Senate. The Senate's version was the most ambitious, proposing nearly a billion dollars for new highway construction.

But in the end, legislators compromised: Education won; transportation lost.

Fine. Compromises are the stuff of representative democracy.

Just one thing: We still need the roads.

According to the just-released "State of Transportation" report, completed by the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, highway conditions - already unpredictable and frustrating - will steadily deteriorate between now and 2026.

The average rush-hour speed on Interstate 64, now close to 55 mph, will get cut in half to 25 mph.

Water-crossings (we're surrounded by water, you know) will be far worse. During rush hour, you might get 5 mph.

Road conditions will be more dangerous (more older drivers), and the threat to transportation-related commerce (i.e. the ports) will grow.

Just to give you a clear idea of what we're talking about, here's a list of some of the major projects that are unfunded:

The Hampton Roads Third Crossing

A second tube at Norfolk's Midtown Tunnel

I-64 widening from Route 199 to the New Kent County line

Hampton Roads Center Parkway extension

Route 17 widening

Warwick Boulevard widening

You may notice that this list includes a couple of major projects (I-64, the Third Crossing) that would have been funded by the 2002 regional transportation referendum - which failed.

Incredibly, there are still people who crow about their opposition to the referendum. But it has to be conceded that their success was directly tied to a broad lack of public confidence in the Virginia Department of Transportation.

That has to be turned around, and there's growing evidence - primarily thanks to the leadership of VDOT commissioner Philip Shucet - that the agency is moving in a more conscientious and responsive direction.

Even so, it will still need money - otherwise, the region's steady growth rate will simply overwhelm the existing infrastructure.

Or, to put it in stark terms, in 1970, nearly 342,000 vehicles were registered in Hampton Roads; by 2030, if the projections hold, this region will be home to 1.6 million vehicles.

That's 1.6 million vehicles that may, in fact, make for dandy front-yard planters unless we get serious about transportation funding.

Which means hiking the gas tax. Yes, even hiking it in face of higher fuel costs.

And/or it means tolls on interstate highways and new tunnels and bridges.

Bonds could potentially play a role, so long as we agree on a suitable dedicated revenue source (like tolls).

Of course, there is another alternative: exchange our cars for mass transit and lifestyle choices that require shorter commutes in the morning. But even this approach involves huge costs and would be years in the making. There's nothing magical or easy about it, but consider this additional benefit: It would lessen our reliance on a commodity (oil) that rests in the ground of unstable regions of the world and costs the lives of young American men and women to protect.

Just a thought.

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