

Fast rail on table to ease traffic

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March 15 2004

If you think traffic problems are unique to Hampton Roads, think again.



I'm reminded of this every year when warm weather moves into the region. There's nothing I love more than packing an overnight bag with my husband, throwing a good book on the passenger seat and jumping in the car. One of my favorite spots to visit is Washington.

But it seems like every time we even think about heading up that way the fear of getting caught in the "Mixing Bowl" project mess or daily Richmond traffic detours our plans. And don't get me started on New York City, Baltimore or Boston traffic.

It seems like no matter how many millions of dollars are thrown into interstate improvements, there will always be too many cars clogging up too few roads. The only way to solve the problem is to take some of those vehicles off the highway. Where to put them is the problem.

Virginia's Department of Rail and Public Transportation may have a solution.

For the past few years they've been studying the feasibility of providing direct high-speed rail service from Richmond to South Hampton Roads that would ultimately connect to other high profile cities like D.C. and New York.

"With growing traffic congestion in the I-64 and I-95 northeast corridors, we need to look at transportation alternatives," said Karen J. Rae, the public transportation department director.

They're currently studying two different corridors - one that runs from Richmond to Virginia Beach and Norfolk via Petersburg and Suffolk and another that uses the existing Amtrak route from Richmond to Williamsburg to Newport News. Stations could be added in Newport News and Williamsburg.

Basically it's an inter-city rail system designed to take local people, quickly, outside the region for personal or business trips.

Think about what that would do to the traffic problems during tourist season. There could be fewer cars on Interstate 64 between Richmond and Newport News - where I get stuck every year. There could also be less traffic from Norfolk and Virginia Beach to the

Peninsula, perhaps ultimately unclogging some of the bridge-tunnels.

To help fully scope out this project, the department is looking for input, so it is scheduling some public meetings.

A Williamsburg meeting, the only one on the Peninsula, will be on March 24 from 4 to 7 p.m. in the city's community building at 401 N. Boundary St.

If you can't make the meeting, you can share your comments online at www.rich2hrrail.info or by sending e-mail to comments@rich2hrrail.info

"It's really important for (the department) to know what the public thinks," Rae said. "This is a great opportunity for them to shape their transportation future."

MERCURY UPDATE

VDOT keeps telling us that it will continue to work to improve the area surrounding the Interstate 64 Mercury Boulevard interchange project, where traffic patterns have been changed to make way for construction. So far, it looks like the department is trying to live up to its word.

Katherine Goff, spokeswoman for the project, said crews are lengthening the merge lane at Hampton Roads Center Parkway to give motorists more room to merge from the parkway and onto the interstate.

FUEL

As gas prices continue to creep toward record highs, don't forget about www.gaspricewatch.com, where you can type in your ZIP

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