Working together to ease traffic

By Layla Wilder

Transportation concerns in western Fairfax County, exacerbated by growth in eastern Loudoun County, have led residents to develop partnerships across county lines.

Now, residents are asking the Fairfax and Loudoun boards of supervisors to work collaboratively as well.

Mark McConn, president of the Sully District Council and a member of the Western Fairfax County Citizens Association, said both his civic organizations are preparing letters to Sully District Supervisor Michael Frey (R), and county Chairman Gerry Connolly (D-at large), asking them to initiate "interjurisdictional meetings."

The area's bad traffic problems are worse because of disproportionate development across the region and roads that bottleneck at county lines, McConn said.

McConn said their letters are backed by several residents in eastern Loudoun.

Some of those leaders say that structure for collaboration already exists through the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority and the Northern Virginia Regional Commission – groups created to facilitate better regional planning.

"The difficulty is that there is no money to make road improvements," said Scott York (I-at large), chairman of the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors.

A newly elected Loudoun County board that promises to be less pro-growth was the catalyst for the letters, McConn said.

"We hope their views will help make frequent meetings successful," he said.

"I'm in favor of anything that helps our board work closely with adjoining jurisdictions to solve our shared issues," said Steve Hines, an eastern Loudoun County resident and a member of Families for Dulles South, an organization formed to discourage large-scale development on Route 50.

While he thinks it's difficult for county officials to work too closely together because constituent needs in every jurisdiction are unique, "more communication is never a bad idea," Supervisor Frey said.

Frey's district, one of the least developed areas of Fairfax County, borders one of Loudoun's densest and fastest-developing areas.

When the former Loudoun County supervisors were considering proposals to allow more than 33,000 homes and a George Mason University campus on the Route 50 stretch of eastern Loudoun in 2006, several civic organizations in the Sully District and eastern Loudoun teamed up to protest.

The developers' request was defeated, but residents of both counties remain concerned about the handful of proposals pending and approved along Route 50, which has been widened to six lanes with new development in Loudoun but becomes a four-lane road at the Fairfax County line.

The lack of regional planning on Wiehle Avenue and the Occoquan Bridge are other examples of bad planning that causes congestion, said Jeffery Parnes, first vice president of the Sully District Council.

Better communication among Northern Virginia jurisdictions "is long overdue," said Corey Stewart (R-at large), chairman of the Prince William Board of County Supervisors, noting that the NVTA or NVRC could do more to facilitate better planning.

"The transportation network in Northern Virginia is like a living organism, and the development in one area affects the entire organism," Stewart said. "We need to cooperate much more closely, especially in the land use process."

Parnes, who supports the meetings, thinks the NVTA may be able to play a sufficient role in regional planning, but only if they really "take the bull by the horns."

Tasked with divvying up transportation revenue generated by the state's newest transportation solution, the NVTA approved the first part of its six-year transportation plan in January.

Two of the more costly projects on the list include widening Route 7 and the Prince William County Parkway. Also included is funding for pedestrian improvements and parking garages, projects that got slammed by local business leaders for being not being regional enough.

State representatives with constituents across county lines should be the ones spearheading regional planning, Parnes said.