

Alternatives for Improving Roadway Services in Fairfax County Study

Comments by TAC Members

Ed Tennyson

We have no serious problems with VDOT. At our Civic Association, the only problem was that of getting snow ploughs to dump excess snow in out-of-the-way places, not where school kids board buses or on shoveled sidewalks.

What I thought we agreed on was that our Chair or Vice Chair would summarize our position on March 1st to the effect that:

- (1) The County DOT did a masterful job analyzing the situation
- (2) The County's course of action will depend on judgments only they can make, to wit:
 - (a) Will the Commonwealth raise the motor fuels tax to fund VDOT?
 - (b) Does the County want to augment VDOT funding to get more or better service?
 - (c) Any County assumption of responsibility will add to County costs.

Kevin Morse

1. The Braddock District has received positive feedback on the plowing of secondary roads this season but still feels that there is room for improvement at the neighborhood street level. They would also like to have more input on service delivery to the neighborhoods.
2. Inadequate grass cutting of the roadway medians.
3. Requests have been received for lowering the speed limits on **portions** of secondary roads. Is there a way to give the County more authority in considering these requests, short of taking over the roads?

Harry Zimmerman

Here is my offering of things we might want to do differently if County had more control of secondary roads including "operations": Provided in no particular order.

- Being able to be more responsive to local concerns or constituent needs. Not only timeliness but basic decision-making on entitlement or eligibility.
- Having more discretion on maintenance spending and priorities.
- Freedom from VDOT policies for eligibility or criteria for enhancements such as traffic calming, street signs, parking restrictions, etc.
- Ability to provide more way-finding signage to help the drivers in Fairfax County find their way around and particularly post advance signs that advise drivers of what street is

coming at the next intersection. This is especially frustrating on multi-lane roads or any road where there are long turn lanes or queues or where there are physical separations but no warning ahead of time as to whether or not the driver should enter the turn lane or get in the queue when approaching an as yet unidentified intersection.

- Changing or experimenting with traffic signal timing to improve traffic flows at problem spots. This is mostly a responsiveness issue and being able to accommodate local needs or concerns without being stymied by VDOT policies or concerns over setting precedents. This could be really critical with all the BRAC moves occurring this year in Fairfax County and the resulting traffic pattern changes that will need more rapid response to signal timing changes, OR the ability to simply and quickly experiment with different signal timing scenarios.
- Changes to lane controls. For example there are intersection where a combined right turn and thru lane actually delays traffic flow because there is no right turn on red if a driver in that lane needs to go straight. Definitely location-specific depending on the circumstances but County could experiment with that too.
- Providing advance indication signs when approaching a set of highway access ramps as to which side of the road each of the access ramps will be on (e.g., is it a right or left exit).
- Ability to remove signs that restrict movements unnecessarily and those that seem inappropriate such as No U-turns or No Turn on Red at locations where they make no sense.

Much of this is common sense but, for whatever set of reasons, we have not had much luck with VDOT in any of these areas.

Traffic needs in Fairfax are different than those elsewhere in the state consequently, state-wide rules and policies don't necessarily serve our residents and visitors well. As one simple example, way-finding signage is a big deal in this part of the state because of the density of tourist population throughout most of the year and persistent traffic congestion that makes last minute lane changes dangerous and an impediment to smooth traffic flow. Criteria and standards that might be suitable for other parts of the state really don't work well here resulting in confusion, last minute lane changes, and slow traffic flow while people from out of town try to find their way around.

Frank Cohn

A Mount Vernon District presentation:

The following is a summary of responses received from members of the Transportation Committee, Mount Vernon Council of Citizens Association (MVCCA), and from local Citizen Associations concerning problems with VDOT maintenance and operations.

1. VDOT is not responsive to requests forwarded by the MVCCA.

A number of years ago, a resolution was passed by the MVCCA Council and forwarded to VDOT, to provide the citizenry with a priority maintenance schedule for the re-paving of neighborhood streets. VDOT was requested to provide such information at least one year in advance, and preferably three years in advance. As of now, this request has been consistently ignored and the Council did not even receive the courtesy of a reply, as to why such a schedule cannot be furnished. The information would have been useful to alert citizen associations when maintenance could be expected and if a deferral was pending, political intervention for more funding would have been useful. Of course, presently there are no funds available and there exists an abysmal deterioration of roadways which equals third country conditions. Examples of deteriorated roadways which have long passed their required re-paving operation in the Mount Vernon District are on stretches of the following roads: : Old Mill Road, Morningside Drive, Fort Hunt Road, Parkers Lane, Hoes Road, Pohick Road, Silverbrook Road, Fairfax County Parkway between Route #123 and Hoes Road, among others.

2. VDOT ignores community requests.

When the Mount Vernon Hospital requested improvement of Holland Road as an access road to the hospital, VDOT responded well. However, in the process of upgrading Holland Road, it shed responsibility for a portion of Holland Road which was designated 'original' Holland Road; VDOT declared that portion of Holland Road as a private road, without a public hearing, for which it could shed its maintenance responsibility. This occurred without regard to the Gum Springs community which is dependent on that portion of Holland road for access to connecting side streets. The protestations of members of the Gum Springs Community have been ignored as VDOT considers that part of Holland Road as abandoned.

3. VDOT is inattentive to fine-tuning traffic requirements in neighborhoods.

Here is one example: A 'No Right Turn on Red' sign exists southbound on Fort Hunt Road at Shenandoah Road. A suggestion was offered to add a sign 'When Pedestrians are Present'. This added sign would provide a more efficient traffic flow condition since most of the time pedestrians are not present and a clear view of traffic is available. This suggestion has been ignored.

A second example: The traffic light at the intersection of Sherwood Hall Lane and Parkers Lane is on a two-way cycle. The suggestion was made to change it to a three-way cycle since the outlet from the Burke and Herbert Bank is at an offset opposite Parkers Lane and thereby poses a hazard when right-of-way priorities are misunderstood. The suggestion has been ignored.

A third example: The traffic light on Route #1 at Buckman (South) also controls the entrance to a small shopping center. But the light is so close to Radford Road that the uninformed driver can easily believe that the light controls the Route #1 and Radford intersection. It does not; to

activate the light, a car must travel just through the intersection to await an arrow for entering the shopping center. Drivers in the know who are traveling south on Highway #1 ignore the light completely and wait for northbound traffic to provide a gap for a turn; they are sometimes assisted when northbound traffic stops at the light. Those who do not know, wait for the signal to change, but they have not actuated the cycle. Impatient drivers behind them make the turn in a hazardous manner by disregarding the stopped vehicle in front. Compounding the problem is the fact that the light may turn red for southbound traffic on Route #1, but remains green for northbound traffic, thereby misleading southbound drivers into thinking that it is safe to turn. Repeated reminders to police and to VDOT of this safety problem have been ignored for years. A fourth example: The traffic light at the intersection of Sherwood Hall Lane and Fordson Road is considered a nuisance by the residents of the Gum Springs community. The timing of the cycles is at issue. It works well at night when little traffic is flowing, but its short cycle for turning traffic from Sherwood Hall Lane is causing backups and presents an accident hazard due to impatient drivers. Numerous complaints by the citizenry to VDOT, to adjust the timing of the cycle, have been ignored.

4. VDOT engages in poor contracting procedures for snow removal

Experience at Fordson Road during the last snow storm can validate this complaint. A contract for snow removal was awarded to a contractor who possessed only two dilapidated pick-up trucks with a rigged plow attachment. Their work was totally ineffectual and made the roadway worse rather than better. After complaints, VDOT had to dispatch a more efficient truck to remove the accumulated snow and ice. In the prior year, the contractor cracked the curbing at the intersection of Fordson and Douglas. Supervision was lacking and the curbing has still not been repaired.

5. VDOT fails to show initiatives, to be innovative with less costly interventions.

First example: Northbound Route #1 traffic has only two lanes after passing the Backlick Road intersection. Often a car stops to turn left into the Burger King strip-mall. This can immobilize the left lane all the way back to the Fairfax County Parkway, particularly during rush hour. A design has surfaced which enables the creation of a turning lane for this traffic with minimal construction involved, mainly a shift of lanes. Unfortunately, no effort has been made to speedily implement this proposal which can relieve some congestion at that critical intersection, even with the pending BRAC expansion of traffic.

Second example: While the new Post Office was built on Route #1 opposite the Wyngate Housing complex, VDOT was requested to coordinate with the Post Office to secure turning lanes at that location; the request was ignored. It took years until finally a redesign was effected and with nothing much more than white paint, the turning lane was created. Some added intervention is still required to create a turning lane just a little further south at the Highland Lane intersection. Unfortunately, that will require some added funding. We had hoped that the traffic problems on Route #1 would provide some priority to relieve congestion at all choke points with the pending BRAC expansion just months away, but so far, there is no evidence of VDOT concentrating on this issue.

Third example: A request to paint dotted lines to guide traffic into proper lanes when turning north from the Fairfax County Highway into Highway #1 was quickly initiated after senior level VDOT managers were apprised of the problem. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that any

further surveying was done for this type of intervention at other locations, where multiple lanes are involved or where lighting is poor. Nighttime turns are quite difficult without such guidelines. An example of a difficult turn is the dark intersection of Telegraph Road turning east into the Fairfax County Parkway. A street light is certainly needed at that location, but pending funding for such an installation, the low cost intervention of a dotted guideline would certainly be helpful.

Fourth example: The Fairfax County Parkway is relatively new. You would think that VDOT would design and install legible signage for drivers to recognize intersections, particularly at night. But no such luck; from Rolling Road onward, you must drive westward to the Ox Road (Route #123) intersection where signing is finally again legible.

Fifth example: With the relative recent experience of providing an adequate car stacking length for northbound Route #1 traffic to turn into the new Safeway, it should have been obvious that the existing turn lane at Kings Crossing would be insufficient to support the newly, by-right built, Wal-Mart. Early intervention could have forced Wal-Mart to assist in providing an adequate turning lane, to avoid bad publicity in advance of its opening and to comply with the law, since by-right development does not imply that there is a free pass on aggravating existing traffic conditions, when the development will clearly generate added traffic. Now we are faced with a costly situation to extend the stacking lane, since traffic in one of the through lanes has a daily back-up problem. And, what will we face with the probable new construction of a Costco on Route #1 across Sherwood Hall lane? There will be problems of congestion, pedestrian walkways and location of bus stops. I hope that VDOT will check with the adjacent communities involved, before making any final decisions.

It is hoped that these observations are provided to VDOT, and that they will be processed in a spirit of self examination, to help VDOT provide a more customer friendly support in the future. As a recommendation: It might be a good idea for VDOT to consider engaging the services of an ombudsman, to interface with the public.

Steve Still

After reading through the executive summary and some other sections, I would offer these comments:

- Phased approach: An incremental approach to assume some responsibilities in phases is a lower risk and prudent approach. The broad issues are very complex and will be difficult to sort out in advance. Taking on more limited responsibility will be a good test to uncover and address issues on funding, management, start-up, and ongoing operations.
- Funding concerns: Charts ES-1 and ES-2 show that the County certainly is not receiving an excess of expenditures relative to the Urban Systems formula, particularly for secondary roads. Should the County decide to start taking on certain functions, and self-fund these with County revenues, the disparity relative to Urban Systems formula

becomes even wider. Therefore, one would hope that if the County takes on incremental services, it would receive a pro-rata amount of state funds to cover these incremental services. It would not be fair or prudent for the County to incrementally perform its own services, and then fund these services 100% from County funds.

- Identifying highest priority items: The report doesn't indicate what services are best candidates for incremental migration, or give the criteria for identifying the best candidates. Such criteria should be identified, for instance:
 - Greatest gaps in service between current VDOT levels and what the County expects, or could deliver on its own.
 - Greatest return per unit expense: what areas could the County provide greatest return relative to expense
 - High-payback, low-expense, low-risk: what areas are relatively easy to implement and have high value?

Overall, the FCDOT staff did an outstanding job on the report, and they are to be commended for their professionalism. In addition, they should be thanked for saving taxpayer funds to date by foregoing consulting fees through this initial phase.

Jenifer Joy Madden

The biggest issue here is what is stated on page 1: "As a state agency, VDOT may not have the resources available to respond to specific local requests." This, of course, is mainly because VDOT does not receive enough funding from state coffers to supply Fairfax County's needs.

While there are clear advantages to having local control of some transportation functions, as we do now with some bus stops and pedestrian facilities (and there are some others which would be helpful, such as controlling the setting of speed limits) - without complete control of all functions, it would be foolhardy for the county to assume any more of its own transportation funding. It is absolutely a slippery slope if Fairfax County does what is stated on p. 30: "the county could provide VDOT with additional funding on an annual basis with specific direction on maintenance activities to receive enhanced treatment." VDOT would be more than happy to have us come up with our own funding - but where would that process end? With further confusion over payment and responsibility, we could stand to be in a much bigger mess than we are in today - and end up paying more every year.

In fact, VDOT and Fairfax County should sit down and calculate exactly what the county ideally needs in terms of services - right down to how many mows per year. When that number has been determined, state legislators should ensure that VDOT is fully funded to meet the county's needs. If current funding streams aren't enough to pay for it, additional funds need to be located. In this process, the allocation of funding through the CTF, HMOF AND MTF needs to be studied to make there are adequate resources for transit, bike and pedestrian infrastructure - not just for car lanes. For instance, in this session Kay Kory is requesting that the Mass Transit Fund

go from 11 to 19% of total transportation funding. It is unclear whether active transportation such as pedestrian and bicycling receive their own stream of funding in any of the funds. If not, this should be addressed legislatively.

The General Assembly should change the policy of restricting the use of C and I tax revenue to transportation projects that simply increase capacity. It's ok to expand transit, but it is not sustainable for C and I used only to design and construct more roads. Money should also be available to provide infrastructure for alternate forms of transportation which reduce dependency on SOV and thereby decrease the need for more car usage of state roads.

There is strong potential that by changing the Code of Virginia, restrictions can be eased on some available tax revenue streams. These should all be explored for legislative possibilities:

--The meals tax: it is interesting to note that there are no restrictions on the use of revenues raised by a meals tax.

--The law contains a 5-year sunset provision on the local income tax for transportation. If this restriction were lifted, these revenues could be used to fund ongoing maintenance.

--The sales tax is also a potential source of funding for ongoing maintenance.

It would be helpful if VDOT would answer the following questions from its own perspective:

1. In order to provide more responsive service to Fairfax County, would it be possible for VDOT to change its districting to create a Fairfax County-only district rather than the current NoVa district? Ideally, to maximize service, the district could then be split into north and south county segments.
2. What is the status of discussions between Fairfax County and VDOT concerning the revision or creation of new urban standards? What is the timeframe for releasing a revised plan? Can TAC be privy to the discussion?
3. The Kansas DOT instituted a successful campaign to push for passage of an \$8B funding bill even though the state had a \$500M budget shortfall. After an aggressive 7-year fight - KDOT won out and the bill passed. Why can't VDOT be more proactive and less passive in fighting for its own future?
4. Can VDOT justify why the allocation per arterial lane-mile is the same for cities with high traffic volumes as it is for small cities?
5. Can VDOT justify why, if the road network in Fairfax County represents 4% of lane miles in the state and 12% of daily miles traveled, funding isn't proportionately allocated to Fairfax County?
6. What suggestions can VDOT itself make for the system to become more fair to Fairfax County?