

Our Transportation System is in Crisis - 113

According to the Washington Post dated April 30, 2008, US Federal transportation officials are planning to approve an extension of Metrorail to Dulles International Airport. This transit system will serve the Dulles Corridor, a 37-km long suburban area in the Washington, DC region of Northern Virginia that includes Dulles International Airport. Virginia plans to construct a rapid rail line in this corridor at a cost of more than US\$5 billion dollars.

The article said that such a decision would represent a sharp reversal by US Transport Secretary, Mary Peters, and Federal Transit Authority (FTA) chief, James S. Simpson, who said in January that the project was unfit for federal funding. At that time, their objections included the project's escalating cost, concerns about its management by the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA), and reservations about the ability of the under-funded Metro system to operate the line. It continued that officials with knowledge of the federal decision said Peters was behind the reversal despite objections from the FTA staff, which she oversees; also that several sources said they might never know what caused federal regulators to ease up after coming down so hard on the project.

This rapid rail project would extend the Orange Line of the existing DC Metrorail an additional 37 km from West Falls Church to Tyson's Corner, the airport and Loudoun County. The contract calls explicitly for an above-ground segment through Tyson's Corner, and according to the Washington Post, effectively silences local efforts supporting a tunnel to encourage a more pedestrian-friendly, aesthetic revamping of Northern Virginia's largest business district. The initial phase is scheduled for completion in 2013.

The second phase is expected to finish by 2016.

Critics have also questioned the decision to allow the MWAA to manage the project on behalf of the state. They have accused this organization of a conflict of interest, saying its desire to quickly build a rail link to the airport might take precedence over other options. The MWAA is also exempt from certain public-records requirements, said critics, who pointed out that much of the contract negotiation with the private building consortium Dulles Transit Partners was done in secret. "We remain strongly opposed to MWAA control of this project because of their lack of accountability," said Stewart Schwartz, executive director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, as reported in the Washington Post dated June 7, 2007. Schwartz has been a strong supporter of a tunnel. He also thinks the above-ground stations through Tyson's are being designed without regard to the goal of encouraging ridership and building mixed-use, urban-style communities. "What's the point of doing it if we don't do it right?" he said.

Supporters say the line would ease congestion through Virginia's biggest jobs corridor and keep the economy humming with the transformation of suburban Tyson's Corner into a thriving downtown.

A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Transportation Research Board (TRB) by William Vincent and Gabriel Roth in January 2006, states that in 1997 when this rapid rail project was recommended by the Dulles Corridor Transportation study, the cost estimate was US\$1.45 billion, with an expected total of 114,500 daily trips. But, in 1999, a supplement to this study recommended beginning with enhanced express bus services, followed by Bus Rapid Transit

(BRT), and ultimately rapid rail. In April 2000 the Draft Environmental Impact Statement done for the Federal Transit Authority (FTA) concluded that the rapid rail project would attract only 86,900 total daily trips and the cost estimate was revised to US\$3.246 billion, more than double the earlier figure. The Final Environmental Impact Statement done in 2005 gave a further revised cost estimate of US\$4.36 billion to attract only 47,800 daily trips.

Further, the proposed rapid rail alignment is in the median of an existing four-lane highway, and includes stations in the highway median. These stations would be a substantial distance from local activity centres, and this reduces the attractiveness of transit as a travel option, because a transfer is required to get from the station to the activity centre. Moreover, the location in the highway median makes transit-oriented development extremely difficult around the station.

The authors concluded by suggesting that building rapid rail as planned would be a significant misallocation of resources, as it fails to maximize the number of new transit trips that can be generated, because too much is being spent to attract each new transit rider. It also takes resources away from other potential transit projects that could better serve the region.

So even in the first-world countries major decisions affecting the public are often made in secret, and can be reversed in a short period when expedient. And citizens' and experts' concerns and ideas can be completely ignored. In this regard, could we be considered to have reached first-world status?

e-mail: info@ccost.org