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# The Dulles Metro station isn't the problem. The Toll Road increases are.

By Robert Clarke Brown

At last, Northern Virginia's elected officials have gotten what they wanted. The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority has acceded to U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood's request to change the original Dulles Metrorail project alignment — an alignment agreed to just four years ago by all parties — and to build an inferior station at Dulles International Airport. Unfortunately, getting what they wanted won't fix the real problem facing Northern Virginians.

That's because the problem confronting Dulles Metrorail is not the project's cost but high tolls. As the airports authority has repeatedly demonstrated, a world-class underground station at Dulles would increase the cost of using the Dulles Toll Road by no more than 10 percent. Irrespective of which airport station is built, Dulles Toll Road drivers will be paying a double-digit toll for a trip less than a decade after Dulles Metrorail is completed.

Under the current funding plan, almost 100 percent of the cost of Phase 2 of the Dulles Metrorail project is to be paid from local sources: one-fourth from Fairfax and Loudoun counties and the airports authority, and three-fourths from Dulles Toll Road revenue. There is no state grant assistance. There is no federal grant assistance.

No other transit megaproject in the United States is 100 percent locally funded. In fact, most have combined state and federal assistance of at least one-third of costs.

It should hardly be a shock, then, that the tolls needed to support Dulles Metrorail will be eye-popping. To be sure, the secretary's process, by reducing Phase 2 costs (and shifting $400 million of costs to Fairfax and Loudoun), will have some mitigating effect on tolls. But even at the $2.8 billion cost the secretary has found acceptable, today's $2 toll is projected to be $13 in 20 years, $17 in 30 years.

Though tolls are the real issue, the discussions in the secretary's conference room focused almost exclusively on project costs, and particularly on the Dulles station. The Dulles underground station has made for great political theater — big dollar number, easy to understand, easy to ridicule.

But now the time for political theater is over, and it's time to build the project — and squarely and honestly address the problem of high tolls.

The cost reduction and cost-shifting directed by the secretary was a valuable first step in controlling toll increases — but it was only a first step. What Dulles Metrorail needs now is meaningful participation by the U.S. Department of Transportation and by Virginia.

The airports authority has requested a substantial loan from DOT's Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA) program, which would have a profound effect on toll rates. The popular program is oversubscribed, so the competition for TIFIA loans is fierce. But the airports authority has offered to pay the “credit subsidy” — a cost akin to a mortgage origination fee that is normally picked up by the federal government — so that its request could be granted without crowding out other worthy applicants. In the past, the department has accepted such payments from TIFIA borrowers, but it has refused the airports authority’s offer.

Instead, DOT has decided to provide TIFIA assistance to the counties for the privatization of the Metrorail parking garages. Perhaps the department thought TIFIA for these projects would make it easier to persuade Fairfax and Loudoun to swallow the additional financial burden, although it’s not clear that developers in wealthy Northern Virginia need federal support or that these two wealthy counties need federal help in attracting private developers. But whatever the reasons, DOT’s bottom line is this: Yes to federal assistance for private parking garage developers; no to federal assistance for Northern Virginia’s heavily burdened toll payers.

Virginia’s representatives were perhaps the most vocal participants in the meetings with the secretary. They were relentless advocates for cost reductions. But other than pounding the table for lower costs, Richmond had little to offer Northern Virginians.

After much tugging and pulling, Virginia seems to have agreed to inject $150 million into this $3 billion project (though the governor is reluctant to give a firm commitment even for that puny amount). Yet the state has no reluctance to make hefty contributions to other large state projects.

The day after the airports authority voted to change the airport station, Virginia announced that it would provide approximately $400 million to the $2 billion midtown tunnel project in Norfolk — for the explicit purpose of reducing toll rates. Virginia also has injected $400 million into the $2 billion Beltway HOT lanes project (which got a $600 million TIFIA loan). Both of those projects are privatized.

Most Northern Virginians want Dulles Metrorail, for both the transportation service it will provide and the economic development it will stimulate, and are willing to contribute to its cost. But across Virginia and around the nation, other communities are getting major state and federal support for transportation infrastructure. Once they begin paying double-digit tolls, Northern Virginians may wonder why the federal government and their own governor are leaving them to fend for themselves.

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