

Most Northern Virginians consider congestion the area's No. 1 problem. Every year it gets worse. So why have policymakers done so little about it? Five reasons:

First, transportation improvements are big-ticket items that take years to benefit the public. If a politician votes to spend more on transportation, there'll be nothing to show for it by the next election. Before the public sees any construction, years of work must go into assessments, engineering, and contract negotiation.

Even Metro improvements can take a long time. Purchasing new rail cars, for example, may require only a year, but redesigning the system to add as many eight-car trains as possible meant getting started way before riders began experiencing sardine-can conditions.

Second, because transportation improvements can't happen by the next election, politicians are attracted to borrowing as a financing scheme. This avoids voter reaction to taking money from other priorities for roads or to increasing taxes.

Unfortunately, this something-for-nothing strategy has been dangerously over-used. Over 13 percent of our transportation budget now goes to debt service on past projects instead of meeting current needs. It could reach 20 percent within 5 years, in alarming contrast to 10 years ago when it was less than 2 percent of the state's transportation budget. Gov. Mark Warner has proposed using part of this year's general surplus to pay off a substantial amount of transportation debt; meanwhile, though, other politicians propose that the state take on even more debt.

Third, the need to reform the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) is used as a convenient excuse not to raise the resources needed to do the job. In fact, the most critical reforms enacted in the past three years now ensure that VDOT cannot be directed to fudge figures so that politicians can promise what cannot be delivered. Before these reforms, a third of the six-year transportation plan had to be cut in 2002 when it was discovered the money wasn't there to pay for it.

Fourth, politicians have been backed into a corner by their own inaction: Whatever they vote for now, it won't be enough. No new state funds have been directed to transportation for 17 years, and during those same 17 years, traffic on Virginia roads grew three times faster than the state's population, and the annual cost of highway maintenance tripled. Transit ridership is now the second-highest in the nation. The backlog of statewide transportation needs through 2025 has mushroomed to \$200 billion, with \$15 billion needed immediately in Northern Virginia.

Fifth, the role of user fees has been lost in the zeal to cut taxes. Cars go 30 percent farther on a gallon of gas than they did 17 years ago, but drivers pay no more for their extra road use. Other states maintained user contributions with periodic gas-tax increases. If Virginia had done the same, more than \$2 billion in transportation improvements would be in place today. And all those traveling through the commonwealth—not just Virginians—would have paid for them.

Transportation improvements warrant funding through general tax dollars. Everyone benefits when they support needed economic growth and when alternatives reduce pollution. But the economics of charging users cannot be ignored. For example:

Titling taxes track inflation and reflect ability to pay.

License fees and tags tap all equally.

The road-use tax reaches interstate commercial activity.

The farebox tracks actual usage, and the gas tax is a user fee that ensures nonresidents contribute.

Public-private partnerships serve market niches willing to pay for better service.

There is no one answer. Multiple sources must be part of a comprehensive solution, protected by a constitutional amendment so transportation funds won't be diverted. Continued VDOT reform and prioritizing statewide needs also are needed to increase the return on the dollar. However, the most critical issue is for Virginia lawmakers to act responsibly. It's time to set aside political fears and excuses, reject window dressing, and do our job. It's time for lasting solutions to the voters' No. 1 issue.

Congestion affects all Virginians, and every year it gets worse. Most Northern Virginians say they consider congestion the area's No. 1 problem. So why have policymakers done so little about it? Three reasons:

First, politicians get no immediate reward for taking on transportation issues. Transportation improvements are big-ticket items that can take years to show their benefits to the public. In other words, voters don't see positive results by the next election.

Even Metro improvements can take a long time. Purchasing new rail cars, for example, may require only a year, but redesigning the system to add as many eight-car trains as possible meant getting started way before riders began experiencing sardine-can conditions.

Second, politicians prefer to avoid pain. Because they can't deliver visible transportation improvements in one election cycle, many politicians see borrowing as an attractive financing scheme. Voters don't like it when money is diverted from other priorities to pay for roads, and they don't like it when their taxes are increased. So politicians opt for the something-for-nothing strategy.

The result is that 13 percent of Virginia's transportation budget now goes to debt service for past projects. This figure could reach 20 percent in five years, in alarming contrast to just 10 years ago, when debt service represented less than 2 percent of the state's transportation budget. Gov. Mark Warner has proposed using part of this year's general surplus to pay off a substantial amount of transportation debt; meanwhile, though, other politicians propose that the state take on even more debt.

Third, the need for transportation improvements will never go away, so a "kill the messenger" mentality prevails. A critical reform enacted in the past three years now ensures that the Virginia Department of Transportation cannot be directed to fudge figures so that politicians can promise what cannot be delivered. In 2002, before the reform, a third of the six-year transportation plan had to be cut when it was discovered the

money wasn't there to pay for it. That should never happen again.

However, honest accounting alone won't solve the funding shortfall. No new state funds have been directed to transportation for 17 years, and during those same 17 years, traffic on Virginia roads has grown three times faster than the state's population, and the annual cost of highway maintenance has tripled. Metro ridership also has grown to be the second-highest in the nation. The backlog of transportation needs statewide through 2025 has mushroomed to \$200 billion, with \$15 billion needed immediately in Northern Virginia. But politicians have been backed into a corner by their own inaction: Whatever they vote for now, it won't be enough.

As long as we continue to confuse the role of user fees with taxes, our transportation funding problems will be insolvable. Cars go 30 percent farther on a gallon of gas than they did 17 years ago, but drivers pay no more for their extra road use. Other states maintained user contributions with periodic gas-tax increases. If Virginia had done the same, more than \$2 billion in transportation improvements would be in place today. And all those traveling through the commonwealth—not just Virginians—would have paid for them.

Transportation improvements warrant funding through general tax dollars, as is done for education and public safety. But the economics of charging users also cannot be ignored. For example:

Titling taxes track inflation and reflect the consumer's ability to pay.

License fees and tags tap all equally.

The road-use tax reaches interstate commercial activity.

The farebox tracks actual usage, and the gas tax is related to use and ensures that nonresidents make a contribution.

Public-private partnerships serve niches in markets that are willing to pay for better service.

The critical issue is for Virginia lawmakers to act without window dressing or finger-pointing. Virginians needs responsible action from their politicians. NEEDS A CONCLUDING SENTENCE.