

With road taxes rejected, let's think our way out of traffic jams

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SPRINGFIELD--Now that the tax referendum battle is over, it's time to seriously discuss creative alternatives to help move commuters and encourage economic growth.

No new tax money will be on the table. The state is not going to funnel more money to transportation in the near term. Changing the distribution formula through legislation in Richmond will take time.

New short-range and long-range strategies are needed. Here are a few.

Virginia should stop spreading its federal transportation dollars to many projects and concentrate those dollars on only a few. When one federal dollar is added to a transportation project, the total cost of that project increases by at least 30 percent because of increased regulations and time-consuming delays.

Focusing federal funds on a few projects will free up state and local funds, thus reducing the costs of the projects where federal money is not used. The total overall transportation money will remain the same and roads without federal dollars will be built more quickly and less expensively.

The Greenway, the private toll road from Fairfax County to Leesburg, should become the norm here in Virginia. Tolls are user fees, not taxes. The state should encourage private companies to build new toll roads. Extra lanes on Interstate 81 are ideal candidates, and companies like Koch are interested.

State and local leaders should actively encourage public-private partnerships in various congestion-relief projects. The private sector can be a great addition to solving specific congestion problems if it is brought to the table and asked for creative ideas.

Let's open up our current HOV lanes to those willing to pay a toll to use them. This makes sense, and it costs next to nothing. Electronic sensors can determine how many cars are on these lanes, and toll booths can open and close depending upon the traffic congestion in these corridors. This can become reality in a matter of a few months, and it would be a moneymaker for the state.

Allow the private sector to build and operate High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes in our congested corridors. The Virginia Department of Transportation has turned down this idea in the past, but HOT lanes work in other parts of the country. We should try them here in Virginia.

Building rail from Tysons Corner in Fairfax County to Dulles Airport and rail projects in other congested corridors in our state need to be re-evaluated. The tax money these rail projects require sucks up needed funds from other areas. A Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system, well thought out and possibly privately funded, rates a professionally independent review.

Rail is a huge financial failure all over the country. The current projected price per rider for the Tysons to Dulles project, in excess of \$200,000 for each rider, is simply outrageous. A BRT system would cost about 75 percent less and should be reconsidered as a realistic rail alternative.

Why don't we open up the left pull-off emergency lane on Interstate 95 south of Springfield during rush hour just as is done on U.S. 66? This extra lane is built and would significantly

relieve traffic congestion on this truly nightmare corridor. Similar ideas would work in other parts of the state.

State and local transportation departments should design more reversible lanes that can be used during rush hour. Much too often, four lanes are built and only two are used going in one direction during rush hour. Three of those four lanes could be "open" during rush hour at little extra cost and move 50 percent more traffic.

How often do we find inadequate left-turn lanes where traffic backs up into the main traffic lanes? Let's lengthen those lanes and solve congestion bottlenecks with little cost.

The design of the Wilson Bridge across the Potomac needs to be brought back to the table. Why build such an expensive bridge with all those bells and whistles? The money now planned to be poured into this bridge takes funds from other needed projects. Indeed, a \$1 toll on this bridge would pay for it in about 15 years, and the continued toll could be used to keep the bridge repaired and would help pay for needed improvements leading to the bridge from both directions.

Let's consider double-decking major congested metropolitan corridors rather than widening existing roads and causing so much hassle, court cases, time and cost.

Technology needs to be a bigger piece of the solution to our current congestion nightmare. Former Secretary of Technology Donald Upson has several ideas along these lines that could be part of an overall traffic-relief plan. Rosemarie and Ray Pelletier in Leesburg have all sorts of creative ideas for using technology and public-private partnerships in helping to relieve congestion.

So much can be done to improve our traffic mess if we stop thinking in the past and begin thinking creatively. Many of these ideas are not costly and would help move people more efficiently.

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