McAuliffe Metro Taxes Favor Transit Over Roads

As the McAuliffe administration is winding down, they rolled out a proposal to establish a dedicated funding source for the Washington DC Metro. If this plan is approved by the General Assembly, it would once again look to automobile drivers and taxpayers in Loudoun County to subsidize a transit system many of them rarely use, if at all. If that's not enough to dampen enthusiasm among Loudouners for the McAuliffe plan, it gets worse. A hefty portion, roughly one third, of monies now earmarked for the most critical road improvement projects in Loudoun would be diverted to pay for the Metro.

In the past, shared contributions to Metro were guided by a regional formula that, by design, balanced the payment with the usage among the three entities served by Metro; the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia. The new, proposed McAuliffe Metro tax increase would impose a disproportionately large burden on Loudoun County.

There is no doubt many elected officials, especially those representing areas east of Fairfax County, think Metro money should come from the federal government or Richmond. By proposing local tax monies as the dedicated source of Metro money however, the McAuliffe's plan sends a clear message that "it's your problem Northern Virginia, so you fund the fix."

McAuliffe's proposal comes at a high cost to Loudoun County drivers, businesses, and families. The various McAuliffe-proposed Northern Virginia Metro tax increases include an increased hotel tax, a higher gas tax, a tax on selling real estate, and diverting monies away from local road and bridge projects in Loudoun and into funding of the Metro system overall.

Loudoun County and other localities in Northern Virginia now pay special taxes into the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority (NVTA) to fund Northern Virginia transportation projects, and we are seeing real progress and planning toward making overdue road improvements a reality. The Loudoun Board of Supervisors recently prioritized nine Loudoun County projects for NVTA funding over the next six years. These are deemed to be the most urgently needed to relieve congested roads and improve safety in Loudoun County.

For those waiting patiently for improvements to Loudoun County roads, cutting back one third of NVTA road funding will stall or cancel many of these Loudoun County projects: Northstar Boulevard; Evergreen Mills Road; Prentice Drive; Shellhorn Road; Town of Hillsboro Traffic Calming; Dulles West Boulevard; Route 28 Northbound; Widen US 15 to four lanes from Battlefield Parkway to Montresor Road; Evergreen Mills Road Realignments - Reservoir Road and Watson Road. Defunding important projects means going without or funding these roads with local dollars which might otherwise be spent on education, mental health services, or public safety to name a few.

Establishing a steady flow of cash to Metro is not a cure for the deep rooted problems that plague the system. Funding Metro isn’t fixing the decades-old issues in management and labor practices. Representative Comstock has recently proposed conditioning increased federal funding on Metro undergoing serious reforms of labor and management. This is extremely important; any other approach is applying aid when major surgery is necessary.

The decision on whether new Metro funding will come from the federal government, Virginia, Maryland, or, if it comes at all, ought to weigh what benefit the Metro system delivers. Prior to opting into the Metro system, Loudoun County hired the Robert Charles Lesser Company to assess the economic effect of the Metro Silverline expansion into Loudoun County. In the summary of this elaborate and professionally conducted study done by the Robert Charles Lesser Company, which is posted on Loudoun's government website, RCLCO said, "…*RCLCO has not found any credible evidence to indicate that the extension of rail transit brings new development to an entire region."* This is not exactly a strong economic argument in support of spending big on transit to realize a tangible financial return.

In contrast to the RCLCO conclusion, the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission (NVTC), which has a distinctly pro-transit mission, this past September posted a summary of benefits it attributes to Metro and the Virginia Railway Express, (VRE), stating, "The additional 85,000 households and 130,500 jobs that the two rail systems make possible in Northern Virginia generate over $600 million each year in sales and income tax revenues that flow to Richmond." NVTC has not yet released the "study" from which these rather amazing conclusions were drawn.

I asked retired transportation economist and constituent, Rob Martin, to review the NVTC summary which is available on the NVTC website, and to comment on the methodology. Rob was shocked to learn that three months after rolling out the NVTC promotional summary, the "study" itself is not available to be viewed.

The points Rob Martin makes are these: "The information contained in the (NVTC) press release does not justify those claims." He also says "…if

Metrorail were to shut down, VA could invest another $300 million or so a year in better roads and bus service which may well eliminate the loss of jobs and households…", and according to his opinion, "Closing Metro might lead to another Tyson's Corner being created in other areas with equally good highway access. Route 28 in Loudoun County is a good example of significant development without rail access, but good highway access." Looking more to the future, Martin states, "Further, they (NVTC) ignore all the factors working against Metro regaining ridership, including growth in alternate work schedules, telework, availability of Uber and Lyfft, and the advent of autonomous vehicles."

Loudouners are already paying sky high tolls to subsidize Metro and driving on overcrowded roads. We don't need a plan that would raise taxes and shut down critically needed road projects to further subsidize Metro.

Where should Metro funding come from? First, Metro fares should be increased enough to at least cover operating costs. Second, cutting service during low use periods would reduce operating costs. Third, right now, Washington DC, Arlington, Maryland, and other Metro station-area developers are the big winners as they rake in vast profits from their high-rise development. They are profiting, they should pay.

Dave LaRock is a member of the Virginia House of Delegates representing parts of western Loudoun County

Dave is a member of the House Transportation Committee and sits on the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission