

How to Read an Opinion Column

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Why I Taught These Sources

Few issues in Virginia politics generate as much heat among lawmakers as transportation. The struggle over how to deal with ever-worsening traffic can be found in many areas of the state: the choked highways and tunnels of Hampton Roads, the tractor-trailer clogged lanes of Interstate 81, and the commuter-generated parking lots of Interstate 66, Interstate 95 as well as the Washington Beltway.

The issue allows for many topics regarding the proper level of government service to the public. Should more money be raised to pay for transportation? If so, should it be directed to roads or to other transit options, like railways, busses, bicycle lanes, and the like? How should the state's transportation resources be divided among north and south, urban and rural?

For me, transportation issues are about as exciting as government policy-making can get. Students often have first-hand experiences regarding the different quality of roads and traffic in different parts of the state. Many have often had experiences with mass transit at some points in their lives. Some have experienced the conditions of roads in other states and sometimes other countries. They can grasp the taxing tradeoffs that involve this issue: the dollar tax that can pay for public services, and the time tax that is paid when the roads are clogged and it takes extra time to go anywhere.

Thinking about these issues in the context of opinion columns can give students the means of evaluating the competing policy views from the perspectives of their own experiences and those of their fellow classmates. Unlike the ideological issues that sometimes dominate political discussions, reading transportation opinion columns from the state's top policy makers can give students a sense of the policy basis of the state's partisan divide, and the extent to which vital public policy issues can be very difficult to resolve.

How I Introduce These Sources

I introduce the students to the two opinion columns after providing students with an introduction to Virginia's transportation situation. Key issues to explore with the class before embarking on this case study include asking students to grade the state's handling of key matters relating to transportation. Do we have an "A" system of roads in our community? How would we determine what is an "A" system of roads? How do they compare to elsewhere? Given the experience nearly all students have as passengers and eventually as drivers, this is a topic that can generate a lot of discussion. I then repeat the process of asking for students to report grades for Virginia or Amtrak passenger railroads, airports, etc.

Depending on how much the students offer about their range of experiences across transit options and locales, I will often supplement the conversation with information about the different transit problems of different parts of the state, with particular focus on the Washington, D.C. suburbs, Hampton Roads, and the very dangerous tractor trailer overloading found along Interstate 81. I provide comparisons about state levels of support for highway construction and maintenance. (Virginia has a relatively low gasoline tax compared to neighboring jurisdictions, and the growing fuel efficiency of vehicles means that this is both a

relatively small and a declining source of revenue). Virginia also collects less in tolls per capita compared to many neighboring states, which can speed up traffic flow but can also limit the money the state can budget for transportation purposes. (Anyone who has driven I-95 through Delaware, for example, is hard pressed to imagine any highway anywhere where one has to pay more per mile to drive).

International comparisons are also useful for this discussion. Would high speed trains, like those found in Europe, be worth-while expenditures? If so, what cities should be on the routes, and which ones should not be? Why? Should spending on highways be cut in favor of mass transit?

In addition to the class discussion, I have students read Handout #1: “*As Candidates Ponder Taxes and Traffic, Specifics of Road Proposals Remain Elusive*” which is a *Washington Post* transportation news story on the 2009 governor’s race and gives students a basic understanding of the political debate.

Reading the Sources

After the students have read the *Washington Post* news story and we have talked about transit policy along the lines discussed above, I have the students read the opinion column by Governor Kaine, Handout #2: “*Virginia’s Unbuilt Road to Progress*.” (I start with Kaine’s column because it was published first). I ask them to talk about the differences between the news story and the opinion column, and hopefully the students can sharpen their skills as news consumers through this exercise. I then ask them to outline the main points Kaine makes in his column. I then ask them how persuaded they are by these arguments. What doesn’t he talk about?

I then have them analyze the Howell opinion column, Handout #3: “*Virginia Republicans Kept Their Promises on Transportation*,” the same way: outline the main points, and determine how persuaded they are by these arguments. Again, students are asked to consider what this writer chooses to talk about and chooses NOT to talk about. Then, with columns under their belts, the students are asked to think about which writer seems most persuasive and why.

Reflections

Students who have been exposed to the heavily opinionated talk shows on cable and the hyper-ventilated posts of bloggers can be surprised by this different format for expressing one’s views. In the cold print of an article of this length, bluster can only get one so far: it’s the evidence that can make the difference between being persuasive or not in the opinion column format. Of course, one needs to stick to the main points: rarely do opinion columns run over 700 to 750 words, and these opinion pieces are each under 700 words. A close analysis reveals how each side pumps up its arguments and undermines the other party’s views. The utility of facts for public discourse are an important lesson as well. Each politician is at his most persuasive when the words move from partisan attacks to more substantive policy disagreements. This debate sheds light on the question of the gap between what people want from government and how much they are willing to pay to meet those demands.

One of my personal goals as a teacher is to focus on the quality of public discourse. In my view, too much hot air fills the cable shows and online policy discussions. (In fact, I find that many of my students discuss policy issues with the heat they have seen on cable). At a minimum, an analysis of intelligent opinion columns—even when penned with a measure of partisan venom—can demonstrate the utility of evidence for making the case. I also like this collection because it

focuses on a key Virginia policy issue with which nearly every student will have significant personal experience.

With this background, students are prepared to research and write opinion columns of their own. Depending on the level of students involved, one might insist the topic be about some aspect of transportation. A teacher could provide research materials to make the assignment more manageable. Another option would be to give the students a topic or two to write about in their own columns on a range of state issues.

Materials

- Handout #1: *“As Candidates Ponder Taxes and Traffic, Specifics of Road Proposals Remain Elusive”*
- Handout #2: *“Virginia's Unbuilt Road to Progress”*
- Handout #3: *“Virginia Republicans Kept Their Promises on Transportation”*

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As Candidates Ponder Taxes and Traffic, Specifics of Road Proposals Remain Elusive

By Amy Gardner and Rosalind S. Helderman

Washington Post Staff Writers

Wednesday, July 29, 2009, page A1

The transportation crisis in Virginia has gotten so bad that highway officials have eliminated 1,400 projects, closed 18 rest stops and cut \$2 billion in construction funds. There is so little money that this is how much Fairfax County will get next year to ease its incessant traffic problems: \$0. Alexandria will get the same. Ditto for Arlington, Loudoun, and Prince William counties.

In response, R. Creigh Deeds, the Democratic candidate for governor, has pledged to come up with a solution in his first year in office but has offered no funding plan. He vows not to, saying that any proposal would be divisive and limit his ability to bring lawmakers together to agree on a solution once he's elected.

Republican Robert F. McDonnell has said he won't raise taxes for roads but has proposed putting hundreds of millions toward the problem largely by diverting money from schools and other priorities. His approach has been criticized as unrealistic -- much of it has been tried and easily rejected before, and his plan to toll some interstates counters federal law.

Their strategies are based on appealing to two powerful constituencies: the huge number of voters in Northern Virginia and elsewhere desperate for relief from clogged roads and those unwilling to consider a tax increase during a recession.

The worsening situation has put pressure on each man to convince voters that his approach would provide the breakthrough that has eluded leaders of both parties for more than a decade. But their stances leave the commuters, carpoolers and business owners who want a solution with little material to judge which candidate is more likely to provide it.

"Both of these candidates have a challenge politically," said Gordon C. Morse, a Democratic speechwriter who backs Deeds. "But they have an obligation to the people of Virginia to talk about this in serious, adult terms. For God's sake, let's have a grown-up discussion about this thing."

Morse, who worked in the 1980s for Democrat Gerald L. Baliles, the last governor to win major transportation changes, called McDonnell's plan "not remotely serious" because it suggests that roads can be built without raising new money. But he said Deeds is "winking and nodding" on whether his proposals would require raising taxes.

Former Republican congressman Tom Davis, who supports McDonnell's plan, shared a desire for a campaign that leads to solutions. "Ever since Governor Baliles 20 years ago, all we've had is a lot of talk and a lot of promises and a lot of nothing," Davis said. "All the improvements you're seeing being done now are being done by tolls or by federal money. We're out of money at the state level."

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Virginia isn't quite out of money, but its balances are heading that way. The state spends less than \$1 billion a year on road construction, down from nearly \$1.5 billion two years ago. More than half of that money will go to maintaining roads this year.

State transportation officials say \$1 billion to \$2 billion in additional funds is needed each year; \$1 billion is in "immediate need" for the paving of interstate and primary roads; and \$3.7 billion is needed to replace "deficient" bridges.

Moreover, the largest source of state and federal funding for roads -- gasoline taxes -- is declining because of the economic downturn and because motorists are driving more fuel-efficient cars.

As if to underscore the crisis as the governor's race heats up, the Virginia Department of Transportation said Monday that it had issued pink slips to 600 employees. The plan is for the department to employ no more than 7,500 a year -- down from 8,500 last July and 10,500 seven years ago.

The issue took center stage last weekend, when the two candidates met for their first debate, at the Homestead resort in Hot Springs. There, McDonnell reiterated his belief that now is not the time to raise taxes in Virginia, where unemployment reached 7.2 percent last month, its highest level since 1983, and which has a business-friendly climate in large part because of its low taxes.

The centerpiece of McDonnell's proposal is to privatize the 300 state-run liquor stores -- a move that he said would generate about \$500 million in one-time money that could be put toward transportation.

But in selling the stores, critics said, Virginia would forfeit about \$100 million in annual revenue now directed into the state's general fund, which pays for public schools, human services, prisons and other core services. McDonnell also proposed redirecting a portion of future growth in revenue from state port operations -- another raid, some said, of the general fund.

"It's a disaster," said Republican Martin E. Williams, a former state senator from Newport News and former chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, who decided to endorse Deeds last week after seeing McDonnell's plan.

"I hadn't made up my mind yet for Creigh, but then I saw that plan," Williams said. "You're not going to go in there and rob \$5 billion out of the general fund over 10 years and think people are going to let that happen. What's the use of putting down a plan that isn't ever going to happen?"

Although Deeds has not said how he would pay for roads, he has laid out a few conditions for a workable solution, the most notable being that the plan must include a long-term source of funding. Absent a radical solution, such as a major new tolling system or wholesale privatization of state highways, the only likely source of "long-term revenue" is new taxes.

Deeds's lack of specificity has increasingly come under attack, as has the presumption that he plans to propose a tax increase but won't say so.

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"Do we really want a governor who gets elected by deceiving the public?" asked House Speaker William J. Howell (R-Stafford). "It's very disingenuous for Democrats to criticize Bob's plan when at least he's got a plan."

Deeds says his approach is the only way to push meaningful change through a divided legislature. "I think right now a specific funding source would be a lightning rod," he said after the debate Saturday. "And I'm not prepared to throw up any lightning rods. A lot of things will be on the table."

Deeds likens his approach to that of Baliles, who did not outline specific funding proposals for roads during his 1985 campaign. Instead, he established a bipartisan commission to study the issue shortly after taking office and then spent months pressing the commission's recommendations, which included an increase in gas and sales taxes. By September, Baliles had successfully built public pressure behind the commission's report.

But the circumstances are different for Deeds. Baliles was working with a legislature controlled by his party. Transportation was not the defining issue of his election. And he was not facing the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

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Virginia's Unbuilt Road to Progress

By Tim Kaine

Washington Post (Opinion Column)

Sunday, June 14, 2009

When I ran for governor, I told Virginians that I wanted to find transportation solutions -- more road, rail and public transit options and better linkages between land use and transportation planning. In my last months in office, I am doing what I hoped to be doing -- attending ribbon cuttings and unveiling contracts for transit systems, bridge replacements and expanded Amtrak service. Yet these announcements are quite different from how I envisioned them. The difference between the plan and the reality tells an interesting story about transportation today and points out sizable continuing challenges for the commonwealth.

To put it bluntly, Virginia -- because of the Republican-led House of Delegates -- has decided that we should not invest more state dollars in transportation. My efforts to get more money for statewide or regional needs have been rebuffed by Republican legislators -- and investment in roads has actually been shrinking. We have made massive cuts to our road program, especially for urban and rural roads that do not qualify for federal funding.

With citizens across our state asking for better transportation to attract jobs and fight congestion, the legislature's response has essentially been: "We don't care."

Thank goodness our federal government recognizes the value of infrastructure investments again. Because of a president and Congress committed to this spending, projects such as the Fairfax County Parkway and replacing the Robertson Bridge in Danville are underway. Rail to Dulles and light rail in Norfolk are moving forward. We are pursuing higher-speed rail in the Interstate 95 corridor. But as far as a state commitment goes, Virginia has been AWOL.

While the willingness to find new state funding has been lacking for many years, there have still been some positive developments in how we approach transportation:

First, Virginia knows how to do public-private partnerships. Big projects such as rail to Dulles and high-occupancy toll lanes on the Beltway show that innovative partnerships can be forged. These mechanisms have limits -- they don't work so well in less-traveled areas or for basic maintenance. However, by investing some state dollars, we can attract financing to help us expand in groundbreaking ways.

Second, we are rebalancing our system by putting more money into rail and public transit. Dedicated funding for Metro, VRE and expanded Amtrak service has increased in recent years, sometimes by diverting money that would have been spent on roads in the past. We are investing in freight rail to reduce road congestion. And the new federal commitment to high-speed rail corridors offers Virginia exciting opportunities. These investments ensure that Virginia receives both the economic and environmental benefits of moving away from an overreliance on cars and trucks.

Third, we see that a big part of our transportation challenge is making better land-use decisions. Better land use was the core of my transportation platform when I ran for governor in 2005 --

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and we have moved far down the field with better road design standards, traffic impact statements that must be prepared before major land-use decisions are made, authority for local governments to assess impact fees for transportation and forthcoming stormwater regulations that will reduce overpaving. Such measures have stopped our congestion from getting worse -- as was the case when a state traffic impact statement helped persuade Loudoun to turn down a development proposal to allow more than 20,000 new homes that would have overwhelmed regional roads.

These changes have been important and generally bipartisan in nature. But they do not eliminate the need to find more revenue. Our system has been primarily funded by a very low gasoline tax -- 17.5 cents per gallon -- that has stayed constant since 1986 even while fuel efficiency standards and construction costs have risen. This funding source will continue to erode with the newly announced agreement to increase vehicle mileage standards nationwide. The unwillingness of the legislature to find new broad-based revenue sources to address our increased need is weakening our ability to build the smart 21st-century network that will keep Virginia competitive for years to come.

Personally, it is gratifying to see a president for whom I worked so hard embrace a priority that Virginia's House of Delegates majority does not embrace. No nation can grow out of the economic doldrums with a declining infrastructure. But stimulus dollars and other federal spending can vary and disappear. The question remains in 2009: What will Virginia do to fund transportation?

As I enter my last seven months as governor, I am pleased to see important projects moving in some parts of the commonwealth thanks to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and other federal programs. While I never thought I would say this, we could really make some progress if our state legislature had a commitment to Virginia's infrastructure that came close to matching the federal government's.

The writer is governor of Virginia.

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Virginia Republicans Kept Their Promises on Transportation

By William J. Howell

Washington Post (Opinion Column)

Sunday, June 21, 2009

In a commentary on this page last week, Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine attempted to tag Republicans in the House of Delegates with sole responsibility for every failing of Virginia's transportation system ["Virginia's Unbuilt Road to Progress," June 14]. In his view, credit for all progress on transportation belongs to his administration and the federal government under President Obama. Although the partisan hard-liners Mr. Kaine serves as Democratic National Committee chairman might concur with this distortion, an objective review of the facts tells a different story.

As a candidate for governor, Tim Kaine promised not to raise taxes, to enact major changes to land-use planning to help reduce congestion and to protect dollars dedicated for the Transportation Trust Fund. Mr. Kaine broke the first promise six days after taking office by unveiling a transportation plan funded by a massive tax increase. He kept the second largely because of the persistence of House Republicans. Frustratingly, he might have kept the third promise had he spent an ounce of political capital in garnering support among Democratic legislators, who have steadfastly refused to act.

Mr. Kaine professes his commitment to transportation, but Virginia was the very last state to apply for federal stimulus dollars ["Va. Is Last State to Request Stimulus Funds for Roads," Metro, June 17]. While Mr. Kaine repeatedly has turned transportation into a wedge issue for partisan advantage, many of the improvements made this decade can be traced directly to the leadership of House Republicans.

First, long-overdue changes linking transportation decisions to land-use planning were integral parts of House Republican transportation packages during the 2006 regular and special sessions and were enacted into law in 2007. These changes include transportation impact fees, urban development areas and greater local control of road projects and maintenance. While Mr. Kaine talked about similar changes in 2005, he never made them the centerpiece of his transportation packages and instead focused predominantly on a job-killing mix of tax increases.

Second, public-private partnerships for transportation -- which Mr. Kaine now heralds -- are possible because of the landmark Public-Private Transportation Act, sponsored by Republicans. Such partnerships have been an integral component of every House Republican transportation package this decade. More recently, our initiatives to expand tolling concessions such as market-based high-occupancy toll lanes have been blocked by Mr. Kaine and his Democratic allies. Their acknowledged reason for rejecting such reforms: They did not include broad-based tax increases.

Third, in 2005, it was House Republicans who introduced a \$1 billion transportation funding package as part of the 2004-06 state budget, with \$850 million of that proposal ending up in that year's final spending blueprint at our insistence. Also that year, House Republicans introduced and led the General Assembly to pass legislation dedicating an ongoing source of revenue to support rail improvements for the first time in Virginia history.

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Fourth, in 2007, it was House Republicans who enacted a number of the transportation initiatives we had been promoting for years. As a result, next year Virginia will issue more than \$550 million for transportation projects from the \$3 billion in bonds the General Assembly authorized in 2007. The road, rail and transit improvements -- for which Mr. Kaine now takes full credit -- can be directly traced to these Republican initiatives.

Fifth, this year it was Republicans who stood alone in advancing new transportation funding. Our plan, allowing Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads to retain a portion of revenue from economic growth for regional transportation improvements, was summarily rejected by Democrats in the state Senate.

Finally, when Gov. Kaine called a special session in 2008 to consider his final transportation tax plan, not a single member of the Democrat-majority Senate would even introduce it. And when delegates were given an opportunity to vote for his plan, it failed to receive a single vote. Not one Democratic legislator voted for Gov. Kaine's last transportation tax plan, the sole reason for which he had called the special session.

This November Virginians will elect a new governor. We should all hope that their choice is not wedded to the one-note mantra of higher taxes but is instead open to comprehensive and innovative solutions, like the ones once promised -- but not delivered -- by his predecessor.

The writer is a Republican and the speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates.