

John C. Watkins
10th District
Senate of Virginia

Contact: Lorraine Waddill, Legislative Assistant
(804) 698-7810

January 25, 2007

JOHN WATKINS' THOUGHTS ABOUT TRANSPORTATION

This week I had originally planned to talk about some of the legislation I have proposed this year, but I thought it would be more important to talk about the most prominent issue being debated during the General Assembly—Transportation.

Transportation has been a major focus of the legislature for a number of years. Unfortunately, in spite of the hard work of legislators from both parties in both Houses of the General Assembly, the Commonwealth still has not adopted a plan to ensure that transportation needs across Virginia are properly met.

Transportation has become such a dominant issue because it affects the lives of nearly all Virginians. Many regions of the Commonwealth are suffering from traffic tie-ups from early in the morning to late at night. In the metro-Richmond area, traffic is on the rise, although not a major problem. However, if the money to keep up with the additional drivers on the road is not available, this area will eventually face the same sort of gridlock that Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads drivers experience on a daily basis. Additionally, more money is needed to keep existing roads properly maintained and ensure that bridges are inspected and kept in good repair. I do not want to see more people in the region need to take their cars in for new rims and wheel alignments because our roads are deteriorating.

The transportation proposal being discussed could change at any moment. But here are some of the highlights of the current plan at the time of this writing.

One good point of the plan is that it avoids a significant tax increase for metro-Richmond drivers. Tax increases are limited to residents of the areas with the greatest gridlock—Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads. This will protect you from seeing your hard-earned money being sent to other parts of the state to solve their local road problems.

Under the current plan, the only additional fee most local residents would pay is a \$10/year increase in auto registration fees. Additionally, a quirk in the law that taxes diesel fuel at a slightly lower rate than regular unleaded gasoline is resolved so that both types of fuel are taxed at the same rate. Additional money would come from the current

budget surplus as well as future surpluses. Finally, an additional \$250 million from other sources would be dedicated to transportation each year.

I have a number of concerns about the current plan as it has been written. I am troubled that it takes money from other parts of the budget and rededicates it to be used for transportation. If the funds were not used for transportation, that money would be used for schools, public safety and healthcare. I am also troubled that some of the tax increases being proposed for Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads include a special increase in property tax rates for commercial real estate. That places an additional strain on businesses, especially small businesses, in two of the Commonwealth's most economically important areas.

While I have real concerns about what has been proposed, I also know that road maintenance and bridge safety is not something that can be ignored. And we must ensure that we continue to expand local roads so we do not experience massive gridlock in the region in the coming years. The General Assembly simply cannot continue to let this issue go unresolved.

In the coming days, I expect the proposal I have been reviewing will see some real changes as it proceeds through the legislative process. I will be monitoring this legislation closely and will only support the final version if it appears to be in your best interest. You can be sure I will not support a plan that is unfair to you or that makes you pay for the problems of people who live over one hundred miles away in Northern Virginia or Hampton Roads. In a future column, I will let you know how this issue finally resolves.

Next week, I will write about some of the legislation that I am proposing this year to help you and your neighbors. In the meantime, please know that it is truly an honor to serve you as your voice in the Senate of Virginia. You are welcome to contact me or my staff if you have questions or suggestions about any of the issues that come before the General Assembly.

John Watkins
(804) 698-7510
District10@sov.state.va.us

Please check our new web site at www.senatorjohnwatkins.com