INTRODUCTION

Robust transit systems increase economic competitiveness, meet the need for diverse travel options, alleviate congestion on roads, and reduce carbon pollution and other air pollutants. Unfortunately, Virginia currently spends far too small a share of its transportation funds on transit. The Commonwealth should increase spending for expanded rail and bus transit, and through these investments support transit-oriented development in our cities, towns, and urbanizing parts of our suburbs.

BACKGROUND

A review of Virginia’s draft Six-Year Financial Plan indicates that transit and intercity rail only receive about 18% of the Commonwealth’s total transportation budget. Yet today, the vast majority of Virginians live in areas where transit can be a particularly efficient and convenient travel option. For instance, 66% of the population lives in the urban crescent encompassing Northern Virginia, Fredericksburg, Richmond, and Hampton Roads. Another 8-10% of the population also reside in our other significant cities, towns, and closest suburbs.

Access to good public transit has become critical for attracting new business. Following a nationwide search, Amazon selected a site in Northern Virginia adjacent to two Metro stations for its second headquarters. Nearly all of the new office development in Fairfax County is adjacent to the Metro. In Richmond and Henrico, the new Pulse Bus Rapid Transit line is contributing to a boom in development including the $74 million Stone Brewing East Coast brewery, thousands of apartments, and new corporate offices. The Tide light rail in Norfolk is generating over $1 billion in economic investment.

FUTURE

TRANSIT SYSTEMS ARE VITALLY IMPORTANT TO LOW-INCOME VIRGINIANS WHO OTHERWISE MIGHT NOT HAVE ACCESS TO, OR THE FINANCIAL RESOURCES FOR, THEIR OWN CARS. IN MANY CASES, THEIR ABILITY TO WORK, SHOP, AND PROVIDE FOR THEIR FAMILIES DEPENDS UPON RELIABLE TRANSIT OPTIONS.

In addition, the transportation sector is now the number one source of greenhouse gas emissions both in Virginia and nationwide and continues to be a major source of other air pollutants that threaten our health and environment (see Transforming Transportation, p. 32). Combining transit with walkable, bikeable, transit-oriented communities reduces the number of auto trips and miles driven, reducing emissions while also expanding Virginians’ travel choices and improving traffic conditions.

Despite transit’s critical importance, Virginia’s transit systems have lost one of their major sources of funding—bonds that have paid for over $100 million per year in capital investment since 2008. While the 2018 General Assembly approved new dedicated funding to restore Metro, no new statewide investments have been approved for other transit capital and operating needs. The General Assembly also now requires transit providers to compete for funding not only for capital expansion projects (as in the case of SMART SCALE), but even day-to-day state of good repair and operations. Virginia must identify an adequate, sustainable funding source to enable transit providers to confidently plan for future operations and growth. Further, while the I-66 public-private toll projects have provided some funding for transit in Northern Virginia, much more needs to be directed to high-frequency service that supports and encourages transit-oriented development.

CONCLUSION

The next generation workforce and companies are looking for communities with excellent transit. Transit is essential for improving access to jobs, health care, and services for all Virginians, and provides important benefits in reducing vehicle trips and the emissions of greenhouse gases and other air pollutants from transportation. In short, Virginia’s economic competitiveness, roads, and environment depend on action in 2023 and beyond to significantly increase the state’s investment in transit.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase the share of transit and rail funding from 25% to 30% of the state transportation budget.

Allocate a substantial share of any new transportation funding, including an internet sales tax and new funding for interstate corridors approved by the General Assembly in 2020, to transit and rail.

Make transit and rail improvements tied to smarter land use and a central component in all major corridor planning studies, including for I-81 and I-95.

Meet the market demand for transit-oriented communities by increasing funding for supportive transit, bicycle, and pedestrian projects.

Allow regional tax revenues in Hampton Roads to be used for transit, rail, and other multi-modal improvements, and not just roads.

Support a dedicated regional revenue source for transit in the Richmond region, which lags most mid-sized regions in the extent of its transit system.

GREATER RICHMOND TRANSIT COMPANY’S IS THE CITY’S FIRST BUS RAPID TRANSIT LINE. OPENING IN JUNE 2018, THE BUS LINE SERVICES A 7.6-MILE ROUTE ALONG BROAD STREET AND MAIN STREET, FROM ROCKETS LANDING IN THE CITY OF RICHMOND TO WILLOW LAWN IN HENRICO COUNTY.

Image credit: Greater Richmond Transit Company.

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES