

New Directions For Some Big Issues

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CHARLOTTESVILLE Virginia is being rapidly transformed. From jammed highways to choking air pollution, from the loss of farmland and natural areas to rising taxpayer expenditures to serve far-flung development, our sprawl and asphalt-centered transportation policies are taking a toll on our budgets, our communities, our health, and our environment. On top of these problems, transportation and sprawl are leading sources of greenhouse gases that threaten even more serious and long-lasting damage. We must change course.

Virginia's population is projected to rise from just over 7 million to almost 10 million people between 2000 and 2030. This will mean adding the equivalent of another Northern Virginia. It is estimated that more than 1 million housing units will be added during this time.

Most new development in recent decades has been built beyond existing communities. The rate of land conversion has been more than double population growth. If current patterns continue, we will develop more land in the next 40 years than in the previous 400 years.

Increasing sprawl and a transportation program that spends the bulk of taxpayer funds on roads mean most trips must be taken by car and most freight moved by truck. People in Virginia drove more than 80 billion miles in 2005, the equivalent of driving farther than to the sun and back every day.

ALTHOUGH growth has brought significant benefits, it also has caused tremendous -- and often unintended -- adverse effects. A primary consequence of auto-dependent, sprawling development is the enormous amount of energy required to fuel our economy and lifestyle. Transportation uses more energy than any other sector in Virginia. More than 5 billion gallons of motor fuels were consumed in the state in 2005, and fuel consumption has been rising almost twice as fast as population, leaving us vulnerable to rising, volatile fuel prices.

The most urgent consequence of current growth patterns is the threat of climate change due to global warming. There is now broad scientific consensus that global warming is real and that we have a narrow window of time to curb emissions and avoid potentially catastrophic impacts. Virginia is vulnerable. Impacts are likely to include increased drought, more intense storms, greater flooding, harm to the Chesapeake Bay, wetlands loss, accelerated beach erosion, and the loss of entire species.

Virginia produces more carbon dioxide than many countries, and these emissions rose 34 percent between 1990 and 2004. Transportation is the leading -- and fastest rising -- source of CO₂ in the state, generating almost 43 percent of the carbon dioxide emitted from fuel combustion in 2004. Sprawl plays a critical role as well, both by increasing driving and by destroying forests and farmland that help store carbon.

WE CANNOT afford business as usual.

Citizens and decision-makers increasingly recognize that development and transportation decisions are influenced by a host of governmental incentives and regulations that promote sprawl and offer few alternatives to driving. Reorienting governmental policies offers some of the most important opportunities for addressing the challenges of growth.

Promising efforts are under way throughout Virginia to capture the benefits of economic growth without harming our quality of life, and the governor and General Assembly have adopted some important steps in recent years to promote smarter growth and to reform transportation policies. In addition, Gov. Kaine unveiled a new energy plan that contained the state's first target to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

The positive steps taken so far are only a beginning, and they could easily be overwhelmed by destructive new highway and development projects. Nonetheless, they indicate the enormous potential for promoting better ways to grow. Moreover, since many of the challenges of growth are closely interrelated, the same solutions often can help address multiple goals.

Innovative, practical steps are needed at the state and local levels to fundamentally change our development, transportation, and energy policies and patterns. These steps include the following:

- Revitalize communities and promote more compact neighborhoods and town centers that include affordable housing and transportation alternatives to solo driving;
- Provide incentives for greener building to make new and existing structures healthier, cleaner, and more energy-efficient;
- Protect and enhance rural and natural areas, and promote agricultural vitality;
- Provide greater transportation choices, including increasing funding for transit, rail, pedestrian and bicycling paths, and improved local street networks;
- Provide incentives for more efficient, cleaner vehicles and cleaner fuels; and
- Make reducing greenhouse gas pollution a priority in all energy and transportation plans and projects.

We must develop smarter ways to grow if we are to remain an economic leader and enjoy vibrant communities, energy security, a healthy environment, and a strong quality of life for all citizens.

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