

LOCAL

Examiner Local Editorial: Arlington & Alexandria officials: Let 'em ride streetcars

By: Examiner Editorial 02/09/11

Virginia's top transportation priority should be widening Interstate-95/395 between Washington and Richmond, according to a new study by TRIP, a Washington-based national nonprofit transportation research group. The construction of high-occupancy toll lanes on I-95/395 was rated fourth on TRIP's "Top 10" list of 50 transportation projects deemed critical to Virginia's future economy. As daily commuters into Washington can attest, more capacity is desperately needed on this highly congested highway, a key commuter route for thousands of Northern Virginians. Yet the Virginia Department of Transportation has abandoned plans to construct six miles of HOT lanes on I-395 north of the Beltway primarily because of Arlington and Alexandria officials' vehement opposition. Arlington even spent \$1 million on a frivolous lawsuit in an attempt to block HOT lane construction. The county got its wish, but it is a pyrrhic victory indeed.

VDOT will leverage about \$1 billion in a private/public partnership to add 29 miles of HOT lanes on I-395 from Stafford County to Edsall Road in Fairfax County, including two new reversible HOV/HOT lanes between Stafford and Dumfries. Existing HOV lanes will be widened from two to three lanes - until they hit Edsall Road. The new HOT lanes will connect to 14 miles of HOT lanes already under construction on the Capital Beltway between Springfield and Tysons Corner. But at Edsall Road, motorists heading into D.C. will experience the updated version of commuter hell as traffic starts bottlenecking inside the Beltway.

Gridlock on I-395 will be further aggravated by the scheduled move in September of 6,400 defense workers into the Mark Center, which has no direct access to I-395, a situation Transportation Secretary Sean Connaughton compared to "a loaded gun pointed at our heads." VDOT's only plan so far to mitigate this foreseeable disaster is a one-lane reversible ramp from I-395's HOV lanes to Seminary Road. But the ramp will be available for HOV/transit vehicles only and construction won't even begin until next year.

When I-395 gets unbearable, and it will, motorists will head for the exits and seek alternative routes to avoid the worst of the congestion. Traffic will soon start piling up on primary and secondary roads in Arlington and Alexandria. Businesses will relocate. When that happens, local residents can thank the Arlington Board of Supervisors and Alexandria's City Hall for pursuing streetcars while blocking two of Virginia's most urgent highway improvements.