

TRANSPORTATION COMMENTARY - Lewis Grimm

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I would like to offer the following commentary / philosophical discussion on the topic of transportation for consideration by the members of the Vision Subcommittee.

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The planning, design, and development of any major urban area is a time consuming and challenging process. Given the documented experience of this effort over the history of the United States, it can easily take the better part of 100 years before an initial "grand plan" has been translated into full-scale physical reality. One need look no further than the neighboring jurisdiction of Washington, DC to illustrate how long it has taken for the original L'Enfant plan to be constructed. Even there, the basic form and structure of the plan has been regularly modified to reflect physical, technological and economic realities. The National Mall area is no longer bisected by several canals, and some portions of the District which did not even exist 200 years ago are now active parklands along the Potomac River.

The currently evolving update of that portion of the Fairfax County Comprehensive Plan which describes Reston should also reflect both the history and heritage of the existing community as it was developed over the past 50 years and seek to define what the area could basically look like 50 years in the future following the completion of the Metrorail Silver Line extension through Fairfax and Loudoun Counties. An important consideration that should be kept in mind during the Master Plan Update is the fact that transportation is itself a land use element. A major transportation facility such as the Dulles Toll Road / Dulles Airport Access Road / Metrorail corridor serves to both divide and unite a region in a manner similar to a land use such as a major river and its adjacent floodplains. A major goal of the Reston Area Master Plan Update should thus be to define the general type and location of the connections which will link together those portions of the Reston community on the north and south sides of the Dulles Corridor.

The discussion at the last meeting of the Vision Subcommittee on August 4th correctly noted the need for significantly expanded transportation system connectivity between the existing and future development areas on the north and south sides of the Dulles Corridor. This discussion also noted the current lack of connections which did not involve an interchange between the Dulles Toll Road the crossing roadways. While such interchanges are necessary and important elements in the regional transportation system, they also need to be complimented by pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular linkages which do not directly connect to the Toll Road. The identification of the general location and scale of these secondary crossings should be an important element of the transportation recommendations associated with the Master Plan Update.

Perhaps one of the most significant challenges facing the members of the Task Force is to create an image of a future major urban center when only a limited definition of a sense of an "urban place" exists in the community today. If one compares the development patterns surrounding the planned sites of the Reston area Metrorail Stations, the transportation network structure is relatively sparse. The current

street system, with the notable exception of that associated with the Reston Town Center, is essentially what one would find in any other part of Fairfax County or any other similar area in the United States defined as a "suburban activity center." When the structure of the Reston area today is compared to that of other desired TOD outcome areas such as the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor in Arlington County or the Bethesda-Chevy Chase corridor in Montgomery County, Maryland, one cannot help but be struck by the dramatic differences in the complexity of the street system in the latter group of communities. As representative "streetcar suburbs" developed in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th centuries, these portions of Arlington and Montgomery Counties possessed a well defined street system well before the Metrorail system was ever conceived, let alone constructed.

An analogy may be useful here. The Vine Street Expressway (I-676) links the Schuylkill Expressway (I-76) with the Delaware Expressway (I-95) through Center City Philadelphia. This portion of the city still maintains the basic street system pattern defined in the late 1600s. When the Vine Street Expressway was designed and constructed, the number of interchanges provided with the city street system were limited while the number of crossings of the street system over the generally depressed freeway section were fully retained. Thus, even with a major urban freeway imposed on the historic street system layout, multiple crossings of the new freeway are still provided at a spacing of one city block. Hence, the new highway was constructed in a manner which accommodated the then two centuries old development pattern. By contrast, the Dulles Airport Access Road was constructed in the late 1950s and early 1960s in what was then a sparsely developed portion of western Fairfax County characterized by dairy farms before the initial development of the Lake Anne Village Center took place. In this example, the defining characteristic of the road system predated the development plan.

With respect to the future street system within Reston, there should thus be a major expansion in the number of crossings of the Dulles Corridor, even beyond those already identified by the members of the several separate subarea committees. As but one example of another "new" Dulles Corridor crossing, a linkage should be provided between Sunset Hills Road on the north and Sunrise Valley Drive on the south between the existing interchange crossings at Wiehle Avenue and Hunter Mill Road. The southern end of this new linkage might connect to Sunrise Valley Drive at its intersection with South Lakes Drive. It is also suggested that the Hunter Mill Road interchange with the Dulles Toll Road and those sections of Hunter Mill Road between at least Sunset Hills Road and Sunrise Valley Drive be reconstructed to a form more appropriate for this important access point to the regional highway system.

The transportation recommendations associated with the Reston Area master plan update should emphasize the need and the desire to provide as comprehensive of a multimodal transportation network for the most densely developed "core" of the area as possible. It should be remembered that the county comprehensive plan is just that; a well structured and organized presentation in text and graphic terms of what the future form and structure of the larger community should be. The details of each element of the overall system do not have to be precisely defined at this time with respect to their horizontal or vertical alignment, their width or cross section, or the specific transportation modes which would be allowed to use each crossing location. Each street segment should rather be noted as representing a "complete street" with an appropriate mix of bicycle, pedestrian, transit, private automobiles, and trucks allowed to use the facility depending upon its primary service function.

It is suggested that the transportation recommendations associated with the Reston area master plan update be a broad scale description of what this portion of Fairfax County might look like 50 years in the future. Just as the plans conceived 50 years in the past defined the general form of the Reston which exists today, so should the new updated plan describe what it should look like 50 years from now.