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Audit of VA Department of Transportation Research Council

Richmond, Va.

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The audit was one of four performance audits of Virginia's transportation programs called for by the Governor and approved by the 2010 General Assembly. Del. Joe May (R-Loudoun), who serves as Chairman of the House Transportation Committee, championed the effort in the General Assembly.

Results of the audit, released to Secretary of Transportation Sean T. Connaughton, include six major recommendations to improve the value of Virginia's transportation research program.

Speaking about the results of the audit, McDonnell remarks, "The review identified opportunities and recommendations to transform the Research Council into a champion for innovation to benefit all who use Virginia roads, rail, and transit. We now intend for this program to identify, research, test and implement creative solutions that will fuel Virginia's multi-modal transportation program and make it the best state transportation research organization in the country.

"Audits such as this one are part of this Administration's comprehensive efforts to improve transportation in the Commonwealth. A modern, integrated and cost-efficient transportation system is crucial to job creation and economic growth in the years ahead."

The Federal Highway Administration's Turner-Fairbank Highway Research Center and B.T. Harder Inc. of Philadelphia conducted the independent evaluation of the Virginia Transportation Research Council. Virginia annually spends between \$10 million to \$13 million on research.

The review found that, while Virginia's current business model for research is sound, comprehensive implementation and utilization of research results was lagging. The audit recommends that Virginia improve performance by instituting a more formal and rigorous implementation process as well as early involvement of personnel from the field.

Steps for accomplishing this include developing internal reporting and management processes and utilizing field personnel to support research efforts. It also recommends setting up pilot programs to test research results and, upon successful completion of a pilot, bringing into practice these innovations, process changes, new specifications and other changes.

The research program will also give greater focus on innovative strategies to reduce congestion and to maximize the utilization of current transportation infrastructure, such as active traffic management, better designs, and more through planning.

In addition, it is intended to broaden the current research program to be multi-modal instead of focusing primarily on highway construction and infrastructure. In recognition of this, it is proposed to rename the "Virginia Transportation Research Council" to the "Virginia Transportation Innovation Center."

"The new name is intended to reflect the broader mission of the program and the role we need it to play," says Secretary of Transportation Sean Connaughton. "Virginia is facing multifaceted and complex transportation challenges that we need innovative ideas and practices to overcome. The Virginia Transportation Innovation Center will be at the forefront of reinvigorating a culture of innovation within VDOT and Virginia's other transportation agencies."

The Virginia Transportation Research Council was created in 1948 as a partnership between VDOT and the University of Virginia. VTRC now also works closely with the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute and other areas in Virginia Tech.

The report recommends that the new Virginia Transportation Innovation Center maximize the value of its research capabilities through stronger partnerships with universities in Virginia and leveraging current funding opportunities.

The report says that such partnerships "increase capacity while providing VDOT with a reliable source of highly qualified internal technical support."

Consequently, the VTIC will increase outreach with other state universities to develop "niche expertise areas" and cooperative agreements for grant funding for transportation research in such areas as policy, transit, rail and environmental. This will create opportunities for VTIC to expand its support for all agencies of the Transportation Secretariat.

Two other areas for improvement call for enhancements in the VTIC's advisory committee process, which taps the expertise of experts from government, academia and the private sector to develop proposals for new research.

The effort to implement the audits results will begin immediately.