

Floor Speech Calling for
2010 Special Session on Transportation
Delegate Vivian Watts
March 12, 2010

Mr. Speaker, Members of the House, I want to add my voice to those calling for a Special Session on Transportation this year. Let's consider the business of transportation in the context of common excuses for not acting.

Excuse #1 – Government growth is out of control.

This is certainly not VDOT's problem. Quite the opposite: VDOT's authorized staffing is 7500 plus 53 positions for DRPT (Department of Rail and Public Transit). This is 30% less than the combined staffing in 2000. And the staffing in 2000 was over 12% less than 10 years earlier.

Excuse #2 – Government bureaucrats are inefficient, the private sector does it better.

VDOT long ago turned that corner. Over 80% of VDOT's budget is paid out to the private sector to do the actual work. This has been true for a number of years and it is the constructive side of why the number of VDOT employees has shrunk.

Excuse #3 – Cut government regulation and redtape.

I want government oversight – from the performance of snowplow operators to billion dollar construction contracts. Public money is paying the bill. When VDOT signs a contract, our taxpayers have a vested interest in on-time and on-budget delivery. If we don't demand it, businesses are perfectly justified in spreading their resources thin to expand profit opportunities elsewhere. In this last decade, we had 8 audits of VDOT. Most were legislatively directed. Continuing to drive out waste, fraud and abuse is an ongoing obligation, but it is not a solution.

Excuse #4 – Private investment is the answer.

Over 20 years ago, with the Greenway and with the first transportation tax district for Route 28, the groundwork was laid for the PPTA. Indeed, Virginia has become a leader in Public Private partnerships. But please look at the projects the Governor identified in his campaign plan. Those projects are as far as you can push political, economic, engineering reality. That's it. They are but a very small part of the statewide needs laid out by Delegate Rust yesterday. As Delegate May creatively analyzed the situation the day before, to address maintenance and construction needs in every corner of the Commonwealth, we need to toll the usage of our entire road network and the gas tax is the best available instrument.

Excuse #5 – Raising taxes kills jobs.

There are two responses. The first and most obvious is that, with over 80% of VDOT's budget going to private sector contracts, we will create jobs in one of the hardest hit sectors of our economy: the construction industry. The second response is just that: the second highest level of congestion in the nation stifling Virginia's economic engine must be addressed.

If we were the board of directors of a corporation that was second to last in a critical element of its industrial infrastructure, we would act. It is extremely short-sighted to refuse to make critical investments to support the economy of the Commonwealth.

Excuse #6 – I'm afraid I'll get fired.

The following quote comes from the 1986 blue-ribbon Commission whose work preceded the Special Session "...as the level of funding for highways in real dollars has decreased, revenue for highway construction has dropped off dramatically – so much so that [in 5 years] the non-construction items will consume all revenues from existing state sources."

That comment parallels our current reality. The key difference is that the 1986 Special Session was held 5 years before Virginia reached the point we are now at. This year's construction funding to localities is virtually zero. Unfortunately, the state elected officials have not had the will to act – in part, because for the last 9 years, budget language has over-ridden a hard lesson learned in 1986: if maintenance money is taken out of ongoing construction funding, only growth areas will have the political will for change.

When it comes to transportation, the voters have hired us to provide an essential service they can't produce on their own: a functioning road and transit network.

We've all uttered and heard marketing slogans "We will fix the potholes"... "Tunnels won't flood" ... "The time it takes you to get to work won't increase 5 minutes every year" ... "40 year old Metro cars and rural bridges are still safe to use" ... and, oh yes, "We will open all rest areas." The list of priority promises verges on a ponzi scheme as grossly inadequate resources are shuffled from one hot button issue to another.

If we don't deliver a sustained, well-functioning product to all stakeholders in this Commonwealth, in the spirit of a free market economy the voters have every right to look elsewhere to "hire" someone else.