
May 14, 2020

Testimony to the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority on the 2020-25 6-Year Plan

Good evening Chair Randall and members of the Authority, I am Stewart Schwartz, the Executive Director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, the leading non-profit organization in the DC region addressing the interconnected issues of land use, transportation, housing and the environment.

Thank you elected officials and staff for your public service, particularly during these extremely challenging times. Your service is deeply appreciated.

You have in hand the joint letter from 16 smart growth, conservation, transit, and bike/ped advocacy non-profits representing thousands of members across Northern Virginia. Douglas Stewart of the Sierra Club has testified to that letter and the projects that we support, and CSG strongly endorses those comments.

I wish to focus on big picture factors which should guide the projects that you select:

The crisis we are now facing stems in large part from the failure to believe in science, ignoring critical warnings about a real threat, and failure to plan ahead to address that threat. The same has unfortunately applied to the threat of climate change, which will bring unprecedented harms including more pandemics, flooding, drought, property damage, refugee movements, and security threats.

Therefore, we urge you to adopt only those transportation projects which support mixed-use, walkable, transit-oriented communities and reduce vehicle miles traveled, vehicle trips, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. As you know, we have long rejected the “congestion reduction” metric pushed by the N. VA Transportation Alliance, which is simplistic and not achievable – it favors road expansion while ignoring the problem of induced demand.

What we have seen in this crisis is that the dramatic drop in driving has contributed to a dramatic drop in ozone and particulate air pollution – the very pollution which has contributed to respiratory illness, with particular harm to communities of color. Particulate pollution has been found by Harvard researchers to contribute to higher incidents of COVID-19 illness and death. No one wishes the economic crisis we have, but among the things we have learned is that we should be doing all we can to slash pollution from driving to protect our health, and looking ahead – to slashing greenhouse gas emissions from transportation.

We have also seen the demand to walk and bike for health, stress reduction, and travel to work for essential workers. Yet people are finding sidewalks are too narrow or missing, biking is unsafe, and too much space is given over to vehicles.

We have also seen the explosion in telecommuting. The percentage of telecommuters after this crisis is likely to remain high, meaning big declines in peak hour commuting, further eliminating justification for massive highway widening.

We have seen who the really essential workers are in our workforce and that transit has been essential for these workers.

For these reasons, we urge you to make a fundamental shift:

-- Our state and regional highway spending should be focused on maintaining what we have already built. We should shift funding to transit operations and capital, local street networks, and redesigning our overly wide roads to expand safe bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure that supports transit-oriented communities.

-- Above all, as local elected officials, you must focus future development in transit-oriented communities and stop approving development that is overwhelmingly auto dependent.

-- Moreover, you should make providing affordable housing near transit and jobs a top priority. Housing, especially affordable housing, near transit and jobs is the number one thing you can do to address traffic, reduce pollution and slash greenhouse gas emission.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stewart Schwartz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Stewart Schwartz
Executive Director