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The Truth About Metro to Prince William

By **COREY A. STEWART**

Chairman, At-Large
Prince William Board of County Supervisors

Two important things about the people of Prince William County: they want the truth, and they want the whole story. They want the good, they'll accept the bad, and they'll tolerate the ugly, as long as it's all true. Elected officials have a responsibility to speak the truth—the whole truth.

Two politicians, Congressman Gerry Connolly and Delegate Paul Nichols, have told the community that they would bring Metro to Prince William. Unfortunately, Connolly and Nichols have failed to tell the whole truth about Metro, and many residents now mistakenly believe that Metro may soon be extended to our community. But the whole truth is this: even if federal and state officials decided today to bring Metro to Prince William, experts tell us it will take between 20 and 30 years, if ever.

Let me be crystal clear: I want Metro. The Board of County Supervisors wants Metro and has directed the County Department of Transportation study this issue over the years. The benefits are numerous and easy to articulate. Our county is hungry for new options to commute, and we're eager to take advantage of the economic

development and job growth opportunities that have followed Metro in the past. We will continue to work towards Metro as part of our long-term economic development plans.

So, what are the obstacles to bringing Metro to Prince William? The first is money. The approximate construction cost for an extension to Woodbridge would be \$2.0-\$2.1 billion in FY2007 dollars (double that if we bring it to Gainesville, as some have suggested). The County's portion would be at least \$300 million, in construction costs alone. In addition, Prince William would need to negotiate an entry into the Metro Compact. This would entail the county absorbing part of Metro's mountain of \$6 billion of debt. On top of this, the Metro system is aging and is in need of upgrades and repair, as evidenced by the tragic accident last June. Prince William would be expected to pay its portion of those massive costs.

These costs alone, which do not include the millions in annual maintenance and operational costs, would consume the County's entire transportation construction budget. Every four years since 1988, Prince William residents have passed road bond referenda to the tune of \$600 million. No other county in Virginia has done this,

not even wealthier Fairfax County. Fairfax has not invested in its roads for one major reason: it's transpor-

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tation budget is gobbled up by Metro costs. Prince William residents will need to ask the question: should we sacrifice our entire County road building program so that we can bring Metro to one spot in the County in 20 to 30 years?

But why will it take between 20 and 30 years? Consider the long-planned extension of Metro to Dulles. Since the 1960s the federal government and the Commonwealth have been working on connecting the nation's capital with the largest airport serving it. With a less clear benefit to the federal government, Metro to Woodbridge would be subject to even more false starts and cost constraints. Between the planning, environmental impact studies, the engineering, the agreements between multiple jurisdictions and the state and federal government, and the inevitable lawsuits from multiple aggrieved parties, there is no telling how long it would take before a shovel would even be in the ground.

However, the worst case sce-

nario is not that Metro would never come, it would be the consequences of assuming that it will. When the County plans on a long-term transportation improvement, we account for it in our Comprehensive Plan. In the past, this has inevitably led to the construction of new houses years before the transportation improvements were complete. There are many examples of this in Prince William, including the Linton Hall road corridor and the Government Center Sector Plan (at Ridgefield Road and the Parkway). The homes were built, but the roads came much later. Now try to imagine the housing construction that would occur in anticipation of Metro. Thousands of new high-density units would be built all along the Minnieville Road and Route 1 corridors years before Metro arrived. The congestion would be immense and the quality of life degraded.

In short, I am not being a pessimist when I say that Metro to Prince William County is 20 to 30 years away. All great ideas take time to develop, and we will not avoid working on this goal just because it is lofty. But we must be realistic in the way we communicate with the community.

And Prince William Residents do not have 20 to 30 years to wait. The County continues to support Virginia Railway Express. Our time and energy is well spent focusing on expanding VRE to

Gainesville and Haymarket. On Tuesday September 15th, the Board of County Supervisors took the next step toward high-speed rail transit from Richmond to Washington D.C. through Prince William. This line would produce fast commuter service to the District of Columbia and to the existing Metro network. The County is even studying 21st century solutions like Bus Rapid Transit, which builds dedicated lanes for buses to travel during peak commuter hours along major thoroughfares. But most importantly, as long as the federal and state governments continue to fail to build the roads necessary for Prince William commuters, the County must continue to focus on road construction.

So when a federal or state official talks about Metro: tell them you don't want false promises. Tell them you want them to get the job done and fund realistic transit and transportation. We will continue to work hard towards all innovative solutions, but we will also be straight with the citizens that some things will have to wait.

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