

# Tired of Waiting on States, Counties Fund Roads on Their Own

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Local governments in the Washington region have given up on getting additional state money for major transportation projects and are instead going into debt to embark on an unprecedented half-billion-dollar road-building boom to try to ease some of the area's worst jams.

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In most cases, the money will go to build or expand roads that are the responsibility of the state governments in Richmond and Annapolis, which have failed to fund projects promised for years.

"We're tired of waiting around," said Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large), a member of the Montgomery County Council. "Our people are crying for relief, and we want to provide it."

Montgomery officials agreed in April to put up \$160 million to accelerate state road projects. Prince William County is placing a \$300 million bond before voters today that would improve Route 1, Route 28 and several other roads. Loudoun County has \$51 million on the ballot — the county's first transportation bond — that would expand such roads as Routes 7 and 50.

Fairfax County is in the middle of a

\$160 million construction plan that voters approved two years ago.

"This is the great state shift — or the great state shaft," said Gerald E. Connolly (D), chairman of the Fairfax Board of Supervisors. "You are seeing that in Loudoun, Prince William and Fairfax — all of us are taking on more debt because of the state's

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## Local Funding of Roads Deemed a 'Harbinger'

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failure to invest in any fashion."

Funding and building roads locally have advantages. County governments can be quicker, less bureaucratic and more responsive to changing needs. Local funding also ensures that tax money will be spent where it originates rather than being spread across a state.

But local construction plans are isolated and work against a growing regional desire to coordinate development. The results might be new highways and wider roads but even worse bottlenecks.

Virginia Transportation Secretary Pierce R. Homer said the growing role of local governments in road-building makes it more difficult for state officials to keep an eye on the big picture. "The state has a responsibility to ensure that major transportation corridors are developed in a coordinated fashion," he

said. "Without adequate state resources, that state role is diminished or in some cases nonexistent."

Prince William, for instance, is spending \$42 million to widen Linton Hall Road, the main connector between several new housing developments, such as Sudley Manor, and major commuter routes. On Friday, workers graded part of the road as construction trucks rumbled in and out of the new housing sites.

But no matter how many lanes the county adds, Linton Hall commuters will still run into one of the biggest bottlenecks in the region, at Route 29 and Interstate 66. A state project to redo the interchange has been a top Northern Virginia priority, but a lack of funding has delayed it for years. The state now has the \$182 million interchange penciled in for construction — beginning in 2013.

"They're just moving the traffic from one place to another. You still can't get on 29," said Jim Lemmon, 44, of Prince William, buying coffee Friday morning at a *We Not Stop* on Linton Hall Road. "The state's not going to do anything about it. They make promises they can't keep, and we're the ones who have to live with it."

Increasing local investment in transportation projects is part of a long-term trend away from traditional state sources. Political leaders in Virginia and Maryland, as well as in several other states across the country, plan to fund highways with tolls or through the private sector. Major projects such as expanding the Capital Beltway, for example, will be financed largely through a combination of the two.

A recent study required by the federal government of how the Washington region plans to pay for road and transit improvements

through 2030 illustrates a clear change. Three years ago, the study showed state governments, including the District, paying for 43 percent of transportation funding, with local governments contributing 11 percent. But a revision of the plan released last month showed the state share plummeting to 32 percent and the local share increasing to 17 percent. The same analysis showed toll revenues rising from 1 percent to 7 percent. The federal contribution held steady at 27 percent.

"This is a harbinger," said Ronald F. Kirby, transportation planning director for the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, which conducted the study. "It's a recognition that the states can't keep up. So Plan B is tolls and local bonds. We better get used to that because that's the way it's heading."

In Virginia, the state government

is supposed to pay for and maintain almost every road in the commonwealth. Under Virginia's six-year construction plan, the state is spending \$735 million less than last year as more money is shifted to road maintenance. Legislators debated dozens of plans to increase transportation funding for most of 2006, including during a special session of the General Assembly in September, but they couldn't agree on any.

In Maryland, highways and major roads are built and maintained by officials in Annapolis, with local governments paying for local streets. Its six-year plan for new transportation projects is also shrinking — \$500 million less is included than six years ago.

Maryland Transportation Secretary Robert L. Flanagan said the state came up with a plan two years ago to add \$238 million a year for projects. But he said there is a lot of

"catch-up" to be done on roads and rail.

"We can talk philosophically about what is the state's responsibility versus what is a local responsibility," he said. "As long as we're working together, it's a better approach."

In the Washington region, fast-growing Prince William is becoming the king of road-building, doing it on a bigger scale than any jurisdiction. When the state continued to delay money for the Prince William Parkway, for example, the county built the four-lane highway itself. To keep up with the work, the county created a transportation department this year.

Craig S. Gerhart, the county's executive, said political leaders are not happy to spend the money, but they came to realize that Richmond was not going to come through.

"People can argue about a lot of things, but at the end of the day it takes money to build roads, and they don't have any money," he said. "We can't be successful as a community with a failed transportation network."