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## **EXPANDING PUBLIC TRANSIT**

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VIENNA METRO BUS. Image credit: Trevor Wrayton, VDOT

## INTRODUCTION

Whether it is buses, light rail, or the Metro, transit is an essential public service in every region of Virginia. This has been starkly apparent during the COVID-19 crisis, when transit has been critical for transporting healthcare, grocery, and other essential workers to and from jobs. Public transportation systems provide access to jobs and housing, attract economic development, alleviate road congestion, and reduce carbon emissions and other air pollutants that harm public health. Despite real progress on transit funding in 2020, Virginia still spends far too small a share of its transportation dollars on transit.

## BACKGROUND

Transit's role in Virginia goes beyond providing essential mobility. Public transportation incentivizes economic development, is a critical lifeline for rural communities and differently-abled people, and is vital for reducing vehicle air pollution – which harms our health and has a

disproportionate impact on children, senior citizens, people of color, historically marginalized communities, and low-income areas. Transportation is now the greatest source of carbon pollution in the state. With less than 10 years to reduce emissions before it is too late to mitigate climate impacts, we need transit and transit-oriented development to dramatically reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and the resulting greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>1</sup> We must also begin to electrify transit vehicles to cut both emissions and diesel pollution, centering these efforts in communities of color and low-income communities that have traditionally faced heavier transit-related air pollution.

In the 2020 session, the Virginia Clean Economy Act (VCEA) codified a plan to decarbonize Virginia's electric grid. The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT), however, currently lack codified mechanisms for addressing the climate crisis or sufficiently accounting for climate impacts in the agency's strategic planning process. These agencies must commit to reduction in VMT and transit expansion, including converting car lanes to dedicated bus lanes.

Current transit funding levels do not match the transportation needs or population changes of the Commonwealth, nor the wishes of its residents for better access to areas with high concentrations of jobs. Most Virginians live in areas where transit can be a particularly efficient and convenient travel option – 65 percent of the Commonwealth's population lives in the urban crescent encompassing Northern Virginia, Fredericksburg, Richmond, and Hampton Roads. Another 8-10 percent of the population resides in other cities, towns, and close-in suburbs.<sup>2</sup>

Before the 2020 session, transit and rail received just 12 percent of Virginia's total transportation budget.<sup>3</sup> In the 2020 session, HB1414/SB890 increased and restructured transportation funding so that transit is now allocated 23 percent of the Transportation Trust Fund.<sup>4</sup> However, when accounting for the Highway Maintenance and Operations Fund, Route 58, and VDOT Northern Virginia District allocations, transit likely receives much less than 23 percent of total funds.<sup>5</sup> With Hampton Roads and Greater Richmond's transit agencies currently two of the three worst funded transit systems in the country per capita, our current transit spending clearly does not empower the Commonwealth to build out the high-quality, environmentally just, and economically competitive public transportation systems we need in order to provide more Virginians a faster, cleaner, and more affordable commute.<sup>6</sup>

Increased funding for transit can help address racial inequities that persist from residential segregation caused by highway construction, exclusionary zoning practices, and lower transportation spending in rural, low-income, and communities of color. Transit is vitally important to low-income Virginians who otherwise might not have access to personal cars and differently-abled residents who may not have the physical capacity to operate one. Their ability to work, shop, and provide for their families depends upon reliable transit backed by consistent state and federal investment.

Additional funding for transit is essential for providing for more frequent (every 15 minutes or less), affordable, and reliable service that generates high ridership and attracts business. Other important features are dedicated lanes to speed service and on-time performance, high-quality weather shelters and benches, informative signage, real-time arrival information, and streets designed to be safe for walking to and from stops.

## CONCLUSION

Transit is essential for improving access to jobs, education, healthcare, and services for all Virginians and reducing vehicle trips, greenhouse gas emissions, and other air pollutants. Strengthening environmental justice, economic competitiveness, and climate change resiliency depends on action in 2021 and beyond to significantly increase the state's investment in transit.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase the Percentage of Overall Transportation Dollars Towards Transit
  - Increase transit and rail capital and operating funding to at least 30% of the entire state transportation budget by 2025 and at least 50% by 2030.
  - Require the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority to allocate at least 50% of regional transportation revenues to transit and rail by 2025, and the Hampton Roads Transportation Accountability Commission and the Central Virginia Transportation Authority to allocate at least 30% of revenues to transit and rail by 2025, and all other regions with regional transportation funding to allocate at least 20% of those funds to transit and rail by 2025.
- Protect & Expand Opportunities for Zero Fare Transit
  - Protect the Transit Ridership Incentive Program from cuts to continue providing low-income Virginians with access to affordable fares.
  - Utilize state funding to encourage zero-fare transit across Virginia throughout the duration of the pandemic while it is necessary to protect riders and operators, and at the onset of economic recovery to increase ridership levels.
- Require DRPT to annually audit local agencies and jurisdictions to ensure that expanded bus service, more comfortable and covered weather shelters, and safe walking access to stops are equitably distributed across localities and regions and directly benefiting underserved communities.
- Require VDOT to support the expansion of transit for the reduction of vehicle miles traveled and greenhouse gas emissions through funding the conversion of arterial lanes to dedicated bus lanes, such as in high capacity transit corridors.
- Require transit agency development plans and strategic plans to account for and reduce greenhouse gas emissions through procurement of zero emissions vehicles, route planning, fare reduction, and increased ridership.
- Require at least one rider representative on the governing board of all transit agencies receiving state funding.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> IPCC, 2018: *Summary for Policymakers*. In: *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty* [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, H.-O. Pörtner, D. Roberts, J. Skea, P.R. Shukla,

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<sup>2</sup> Demographics Research Group, *Virginia Population Estimates*, U. of Va. Weldon-Cooper Center for Public Service, <https://demographics.coopercenter.org/virginia-population-estimates> (last visited June 29, 2020).<sup>3</sup> Missouri Conservation Sales Tax. <<https://olis.leg.state.or.us/liz/201511/Downloads/CommitteeMeetingDocument/89604>>.

<sup>3</sup> CTB worksession June 18, 2019, agenda item 3. Comparing total Commonwealth Transportation Fund to rail, transit, and WMATA allocations from 2020-2025 and including an estimate of NVT Authority transit spending. A separate comparison for FY2020 VDOT vs DRPT spending shows DRPT at about 10.6% of the total for that year. See Laura Farmer, *FY 2020-2025 Commonwealth Transportation Fund (CTF) Six-Year Financial Plan: FY 2020 CTF and VDOT Budgets*, Va. Dep't of Transp. (June 18, 2019), [http://www.ctb.virginia.gov/resources/2019/june/pres/3\\_syf\\_budgets.pdf](http://www.ctb.virginia.gov/resources/2019/june/pres/3_syf_budgets.pdf); Steve Pittard, *FY 2020-2025 SYIP/Budget Update*, Va. Dep't of Rail and Pub. Transp. (June 18, 2019), [http://www.ctb.virginia.gov/resources/2019/june/pres/4\\_drpt\\_syip\\_budget.pdf](http://www.ctb.virginia.gov/resources/2019/june/pres/4_drpt_syip_budget.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> H.B. 1414, <https://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?ses=201&typ=bil&val=HB1414>; S.B. 890, <https://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?ses=201&typ=bil&val=SB890>.

<sup>5</sup> Nick Donohue, *Legislative Update*, Off. of the Secretary of Transp. (Mar. 17, 2020), [http://www.ctb.virginia.gov/resources/2020/march/pres/4\\_legislative\\_update.pdf](http://www.ctb.virginia.gov/resources/2020/march/pres/4_legislative_update.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> *NTD Transit Agency Profiles*, Fed. Transit Admin., <https://www.transit.dot.gov/htd/transit-agency-profiles> (last visited June 29, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> *Planning: Transit Development Plans*, DRPT. <http://www.drpt.virginia.gov/transit/planning/transit-development-plans/> (last visited July 15, 2020)

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