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ENDING THE GLENDENING TRANSPORTATION DOGMA

BY WENDELL COX

Bringing to mind Herbert Hoover's 1933 list of "do's" and "don'ts" for the incoming Roosevelt administration, outgoing Maryland Transportation Secretary John D. Porcari continues to push for an increase in the state's gasoline tax. Like FDR, the Ehrlich administration should ignore the advice. The state's fundamental transportation policy flaws require serious attention, and simply raising the gasoline tax would only make necessary reforms harder to address.

GLENDENING'S TRANSIT DOGMA

If the Bill of Rights were applied to transportation policy, the Glendening administration could have been challenged for failure to separate church and state. Confusing dogma with analysis, Glendening and his lieutenants pursued "damn the torpedoes" transit-only policies. Current Department of Transportation plans, for example, call for spending approximately 50 percent of revenues on transit. That would be fine if transit represented 50 percent of travel in the state. It might even be fine if there were some credible vision that transit ridership might increase to the point that it represents 50 percent of travel. But anyone with such a vision is hallucinating. None of Glendening's lieutenants believe that, nor do their forecasting models predict such a shift no matter how intensely they are tortured.

And for good reason. Today, transit represents less than two percent of travel in Maryland. That means that, for every mile of travel, the state spends at least 50 times as much on transit as highways. So

why are transit riders 50 times more important than people who drive or ride in carpools? Because of the Glendening administration's transit dogma, that's why. For the "automobile is the Great Satan" crowd, there are no limits— a dollar spent on transit is virtuous, one spent on highways is evil.

Less than two percent —and that is after billions of dollars of investment in the Washington area Metro subway system, the MARC commuter rail system, and the

Baltimore subway and light rail system. Indeed, 2000 U.S. Census data indicate that transit's share of work trips has declined in both Baltimore and Washington since before the new rail systems were built. Work trips are important because their concentration during a few hours in the morning and evening are the principal cause of recurring traffic congestion. What can justify spending 50 percent of the money on less than two percent of the travel? Again, Glendening's transit dogma. But does anyone really believe that spending another \$10 billion or so on transit improvements will produce substantially greater results than the last \$10 billion?

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The Maryland Public Policy Institute
P.O. Box 195
Germantown, MD 20875-0195
(240)686-3510
(240)686-3511 - Fax
<http://www.mdpolicy.org>



PUTTING MONEY TO GOOD USE

And it is not as if Maryland is getting value for its transit dollars. Operating costs at both WMATA and the MTA are excessively high. There is no doubt that costs could be reduced significantly if services were competitively contracted like they are in London, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Adelaide and a number of other places. Competitive contracting allows the transit planning agency to decide where the services operate, when they operate, the fare structures and what the buses and trains should be like, while coordinating service. Modern ridership records have been achieved at the London bus and Stockholm subway systems. It is not hard to imagine Maryland contributions to transit operating subsidies dropping by one-half or more in the long run if the state were to require conversion to competitive contracting.

And let us not forget about highways, though the Glendening administration did. While Baltimore and Washington were building their rail transit systems, 99 percent of new travel in the state was by personal vehicle. Roadway expansion did not keep up, not least because of the politicized process that allowed the unprecedented transportation policy malpractice Annapolis has seen over the past eight years. Traffic congestion has gotten much worse, and unless major roadway expansions are undertaken, it will deteriorate even more.

The first thing that Gov. Ehrlich and the General Assembly need to understand is that there is no alternative to roadways. There is no way that new roadway demand can be attracted instead by transit, a fact indisputably demonstrated by the experience of the last 25 years in Washington and Baltimore. Moreover, there is no possibility whatsoever that “smart growth” strategies—land use strategies that control sprawl and make development denser—will reduce traffic congestion.

In fact, just the opposite is the case. Both international and U.S. evidence are clear: higher population densities mean worse traffic congestion, even where a lot more people ride transit. And it is time to consign the “jobs-housing” balance drivel to the ash heap of urban planning history, along with high-rise public housing projects. Planners cannot materially affect travel demand by better coordinating the location of jobs and housing. Why? Because people, not planners, decide where they live and work, and that is how it should be in a nation of free people. In the typical U.S. urban area, people travel nearly 12 miles, on average, to work. That is

not because the nearest job is 12 miles away—not at all. In fact, there are literally hundreds of thousands of jobs in every large urban area that are closer than 12 miles away, all of which are rejected by the average commuter who, for some reason, chooses a job based upon other factors. In fact, the recently released American Housing Survey indicates that proximity to employment is not the principal factor in the choice of home locations.

TIME FOR TOLLS

What all of this means is that highways need to be improved. They need to be expanded in some cases. Some new roads need to be built. Better traffic management is needed. To keep Maryland moving means keeping traffic moving, and getting it moving where it is stopped. That is a gargantuan task, and until the state spends an amount of its transportation resources consistent with highway demand, it would be a mistake to give the politicians more money in the way of a gas tax increase or any other kind of increase.

It is time to depoliticize transportation in Maryland. The roadway improvements that are needed should be funded by the people who use them. That means tolls. A regional high-occupancy toll lane system—fashioned after the successful Route 91 high occupancy toll lane in Orange County, Calif.—would go a long way to providing the additional capacity that could get traffic moving on the area’s freeways. Those lanes would be free for multiple-occupant vehicles, while single-occupant vehicles would pay a toll. And there should be no tollbooths. Debit card technology is such that charges can be assessed without even slowing traffic, as is already occurring on the Ontario 407 Beltway in Toronto. The private sector is capable of developing those systems and should be unleashed as new capacity is commercialized. There already is a private firm proposal for adding toll lanes to the Capital Beltway. The Department of Transportation’s role should be limited to granting and supervising franchises, as it figures out how to reorient its distorted funding priorities.

The Department of Transportation has worked hard to earn the distrust of Marylanders. It is time to set out on a different road.

—Wendell Cox is an adjunct scholar of the Maryland Public Policy Institute (www.mdpolicy.org). He is principal of Wendell Cox Consultancy in St. Louis, a transportation and demographics firm.