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March 24, 2008

The Honorable L. Preston Bryant, Jr.  
Secretary of Natural Resources  
Chair, Governor's Commission on Climate Change  
P.O. Box 1475  
Richmond, VA 23218

Dear Secretary Bryant:

Unfortunately, I will not be able to attend the upcoming meetings of the Governor's Commission on Climate Change on March 27, 2008 and May 13, 2008 due to prior commitments. However, I do want to take this opportunity to expand upon some important comments made by Senator Frank Wagner at our last meeting.

As you recall, Senator Wagner observed that if we are to reach the Commonwealth's goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent by the year 2025, and in light of the fact that over 30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions emanate from transportation sources, that Virginians would need to find alternative means of moving around. He suggested that public transportation would need to play an increased role in the transportation patterns of Virginians in the future. I feel it is important to continue the conversation about the need to grow public transportation in the Commonwealth in order to achieve our goal.

The US Department of Energy agrees with the Commonwealth's assessment by noting that approximately one-third of all greenhouse gas emissions in the United States are produced by the transportation sector. Studies indicate that reducing the number of vehicle miles traveled through public transportation not only reduces congestion and oil dependence, but also reduces the carbon footprint of each individual who otherwise would travel by conventional means. The presentation by the staff of the Department of Natural Resources drew a very compelling connection between transit use and land use patterns. Creating efficient land use patterns with higher density development is an important element toward the integration of public transportation as an effective tool in meeting the transportation needs of Virginians in the future.

Notwithstanding these observations, the recognition of the need to change land use patterns and the recognition of the need to increase utilization of public transportation is not enough to ensure that Virginians change their travel patterns going forward. Public transportation operations in Virginia, particularly Southeastern Virginia, are inadequately funded. Services are not sufficiently frequent, direct or available to be an attractive and convenient alternative in order to attract anyone other than those who have no other

choice of mode. Virginia is quite constrained when it comes to expanding its public transportation systems – in large part due to the fact that transit operating funds in the Commonwealth are funded primarily through the localities. The Commonwealth of Virginia and the federal government provide substantial and growing capital assistance to this vital public utility, but the majority of the support for operations, and definitely the support for improving and increasing operations funding, comes from municipal general fund sources.

The most successful transit operations in America come from areas with dedicated regional operating funds, where the proceeds go straight to the transit operators. A good example of this was the two percent gasoline tax assessed by the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission in the 1970's that provided regional funds for the operation and maintenance of the Virginia portion of the Washington Metro system. This tax was originally imposed by the General Assembly, and 30 years later continues to provide a dedicated stream of funding for what has become the second largest rail transit system and the fifth largest bus network in the United States.

Until Virginia's transit operators are granted a dedicated source of operations funding sufficient to replace municipal general funds, the growth of transit and its viability as a transportation alternative will be extremely constrained. Regionally, dedicated funding for transit operations is the template for the growing success of public transit operations nationwide. This template has helped transit achieve historic national ridership attainment in the last five years.

Evidence suggests a real and critical need to increase alternative choices for public transportation as we continue to move into this era of three to four dollars per gallon of gasoline. I have enclosed several pieces of interesting and informative literature for distribution to the Commission, which strongly support the case for growing transit services in Virginia. We must remember that public transportation is still a utility that requires public investment in order to sustain and expand services as demand continues to rise for convenient, clean, and cost effective mobility.

I look forward to continuing this very relevant conversation as we continue working towards achieving – and hopefully exceeding – our emissions reduction goal.

Sincerely,



Michael S. Townes  
President/CEO, Hampton Roads Transit

Enclosures

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