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Sometimes we work together in the Virginia legislature and produce sound public policy and sometimes we don't. Working on Mental Health reform in the 2008 session was a privilege. Transportation remains complete frustration.

Several General Assembly members have long histories in the mental health field. Mine includes over 30 hours of college courses focusing on how the human brain functions, which gave me a scientific understanding of ongoing research in addiction, congenital brain disorders, and even Alzheimer's. I also spent 7 years heading a non-profit that worked directly with the mental trauma of child abuse and neglect.

Long before the inconceivable tragedy of Virginia Tech, even members who had only dealt briefly with mental health needs also knew that Virginia lagged far behind. Mental health services were not a priority. Access to help and accountability vary tremendously statewide. Reluctance and shame still stifle public discussion.

Before the Session, several commissions and legislative committees spent countless hours looking at what Virginia Tech revealed about our mental health system. During the Session, as just one member, I was part of numerous long meetings trying to truly understand the ramifications of reform proposals. It was bi-partisan ... it was constructive ... it was inclusive of those affected and of those who must carry out the reform.

We passed laws to change the standard for commitment to better respond to potential danger. We spelled out oversight responsibility for out-patient tracking. I particularly focused on opening information sharing. Despite a tight budget, we added funding for 40 mental health service providers. We also appropriated money for the Wounded Warrior initiative to provide mental health services to veterans, guardsmen, and reservists.

I believe we made significant progress in mental health reform. Equally important, many of us are committed to continue to review and strengthen what the 2008 Session produced. This is the way to do the hard work of legislating.

In contrast, addressing transportation is at the other end of the spectrum. Year after year after year, perceived partisan advantage has overpowered informed discussion. The result is virtually zero progress. Some progress in tying land use decisions and transportation, yes, and we've also seen real VDOT reform.

But, instead of sustained funding to meet our needs: the abusive driver fees came and went; the Virginia Supreme Court *unanimously* declared the 2007 regional tax structure to be unconstitutional; and the only funding idea to pass the House in 2008 was to separately tax only those goods sold to Virginia residents out of all the goods shipped daily into Dulles and the Hampton Roads ports. Think for a moment about looking at a shipment of flowers and deciding which bouquets Giant is going to sell in Virginia versus Maryland. Serious solutions must have serious, open, inclusive thinking.

Doing nothing (1) assures congestion will continue to get worse, (2) increases the amount of Northern Virginia construction money that will be taken to maintain roads in the rest of the state, and (3) reduces public accountability. Let me expand on the third point. On the heels of Springfield Civic Association residents having to endure Mixing Bowl decisions, I now have over 30% of the Beltway HOT lanes cutting through my district. I will repeat what I wrote for your SCA newsletter in December 2005:

*“If nothing is done to increase state transportation revenues, the only projects will be those initiated by the private sector or the federal government (although we will soon run out of funds to pay the required state match.) I believe continuing down this path puts too much focus on mega projects and takes more and more control away from state and local decisions.”*

There are no easy answers. The hard work of determining sound transportation policy still awaits.