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Roads, Cars, and Responsibility

by Scott McPherson

In the 1995 hit film *French Kiss*, actress Meg Ryan said she preferred to get around “as nature intended: in my car.” Though rarely stated so explicitly, this attitude sums up the typical American’s approach to travel.

As anyone living in the Washington metropolitan area can attest, the result of this view is a commuting nightmare. Northern Virginia alone has more than 1.4 million cars, which an AAA mid-Atlantic spokesman recently described as “a transportation crisis” that robs people “of hours every day they could spend with their families but now have to spend behind the wheel.”

The impact goes beyond gridlock. Fairfax County is ranked 12th-worst in the nation for air pollution. Alexandria, and Arlington, Prince William, and Stafford counties likewise received failing grades. The Baltimore-Washington area is ranked 7th-worst in the country.

Though everyone agrees that something should be done, there is little consensus. Environmentalists even joined Republicans in opposing a 2002 transportation referendum in Virginia, indicating the failed vision of current political leaders.

This impasse can be broken, but it will require the region’s voters and lawmakers to ask themselves some tough questions about personal travel. The first is: do people have a right to roads? More important, is transportation even a government problem, and might government involvement actually be contributing to the mess? To suggest that driving is not a right comes as a shock to most people. A free person has the “right to travel,” but this does not include a corollary obligation on the part of anyone to provide the means to do so. Americans have the right to free speech, but not a right to a government-funded newspaper service.

Since travel does not morally require government intervention, the second issue is easier to understand. Like food, computers, housing, and the many other goods and services that Americans enjoy in abundance, roads should be built and maintained by the private sector — for profit.

Legislators in Richmond and Annapolis should consider selling existing roads in the metropolitan area to private owners, and leave future road projects to be negotiated between

roadbuilders and area landowners. This would have immediate and unexpected positive consequences.

First, gridlock would very likely become a thing of past. At present, the use of roads is effectively “socialized,” with everyone paying virtually the same amount for the roads despite how often or when he drives. Like any other publicly owned commodity, overuse becomes the norm.

Profit-minded road owners, however, would want traffic to move smoothly to avoid losing paying customers. During peak travel times, the price for driving could go up to reflect increased demand, essentially pricing large numbers of potential drivers out of the market, freeing up road space, and cutting down on traffic jams. Fewer cars would also mean less automobile pollution — and better air quality.

The rising price of travel would undoubtedly increase the popularity of mass transit systems, as well. People will still need to travel, but Metro rail and bus services would appear much more attractive. Carpooling, too, would gain popularity to offset rising driving costs, and bicycle paths could be further developed. Walking might even make a comeback! In addition, urban sprawl might be slowed as demand for more localized housing escalated to avoid expensive commutes.

Northern Virginia and the surrounding area would not be the first to experiment with pricing mechanisms to control traffic. Both London and Singapore have implemented pricing systems that charge additional fees to enter specific high-congestion districts at peak times. Increasing the number of toll roads and high-occupancy lanes is another popular idea.

Unfortunately, such “solutions” are really window dressing. Over the next few years, the number of cars in Fairfax County alone is expected to rise by 15 percent. A profit-driven approach would offer meaningful, lasting alternatives.

With government in charge, nothing is likely to change — at least not for the better. The issue is politicized, so competing “interests” constantly jockey for control to impose their view on everyone else. Passionate factions form, making progress nearly impossible. Meanwhile, the traffic snarls continue and commuter tempers rise.

Instead, local commuters should begin taking individual responsibility for their use of travel resources. Road users shouldn’t be forced to subsidize rail travel, and passenger-rail advocates shouldn’t have to pay for roads to be built.

Highways in the Washington-area could run smoothly and efficiently, Metro could (finally) turn a profit, and air quality in the region could radically improve, and all without any tax hikes or political battles. Private roads are the route forward. All that’s needed is the political will; the free market will show us the way.

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