

REFLECTIONS ON THE NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION:
TRANSPORTATION FOR THE PAST HALF-CENTURY

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Foreword

The process of planning and building regional transportation facilities in the National Capital Region is especially complicated because of the unique political character of the region. The metropolitan area contains significant parts of two states, a federal district, and is the seat of the nation's government. There are no other metro areas with the governmental complexity of greater Washington. This paper will provide one person's perspective regarding how the region's transportation infrastructure has been planned and built from the late 1950s to 2014, what worked or did not work and why, and what it may mean for the region's future.

The writer has been involved in the planning process at the regional scale in Washington for almost 50 years, having been a planner with the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (16 years), a policy analyst/advocate with The Greater Washington Board of Trade (11 years), and senior researcher/policy analyst with the School of Public Policy's Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason University (12 years).

A Letter to the Past

(From Wikipedia:

Frederick Gutheim (1908 – 1993) was an urban planner and historian, architect, and author. He is noted for writing The Potomac, a history of the Potomac River published in 1949. In addition to writing many books, Gutheim served as the staff director of the Joint Congressional Committee on Washington Metropolitan Problems and was the President of the Washington Center for Metropolitan Studies.)

Dear Frederick,

In looking back over the past half-century at development of the National Capital Region, the work of the Congressional Committee that developed recommendations for transportation and development in the region stands out as a monumental effort and vision to provide an effective regional transportation system. You were there as the staff director of that effort and continued to be involved in regional planning for some time. I am writing you to provide my reflections on what has happened to the vision and work of the committee since 1959.

There have been significant accomplishments in planning and development of the region's transportation system. The planning process initiated in the early 1960s has progressed and evolved over the decades and has produced well-conceived and rational regional plans. The process has been able to adapt to changing demographics, demands and policies. The planning process has also improved over time to involve most all stakeholders and levels of government in attaining consensus on current and future needs in the region, and in coordinating transportation plans with land use and development.

Unfortunately success has not been so great on the implementation side of the ledger. The visionary rapid transit system the Committee initiated has been completed, but it took two decades longer than anticipated. Many of the freeway systems on those early plans were removed by local government officials over the years, and more than should have been given the development of the regional economy, especially the circumferential facilities. A key has been lack of a regional implementation structure that would have provided dedicated funding for needed regional facilities. The legislation that the Committee drafted in 1959 to create a regional transportation authority embodied a realistic way of implementing plans, especially in a region so complex as the Nation's Capital. Instead, the implementing of plans has been fragmented and at times dysfunctional. The mixed success on implementing the region's plans has resulted from a lack of regional decision-making structure, which in turn has meant lack of a regional dedicated funding for regional facilities.

Given the significant – but unsuccessful - efforts over the last half-century to build a better decision-making structure to implement our plans, it seems increasingly doubtful that the region will be able to do much more than muddle along and provide about half of what is really needed.

Attached to this letter is a brief paper I have prepared summarizing my reflections, beginning with an excerpt from your book that underlines how long we have been dealing with this issue. I will appreciate any suggestions you may have on how the region can rise above this half-century mediocrity and do a better job of building what we plan.

With utmost respect and regards to you and your vision and work for the region,

John McClain

And Two and a Quarter Centuries Later...

A series of books was published in the late 1940s known as the “Rivers of America”, which gave the histories of the major river valleys in America. One of these books was *The Potomac*, which was authored by the late Frederick Gutheim. In this book, Gutheim tells the story of the Potomac River from the 1600s through the 1940s. A particular part of the story of the late 1790s concerned the matter of developing a major trade route from the Potomac west to the Ohio valley. As the Ohio Valley had become settled and its rich land farmed, there was interest all along the East Coast for the best trade route to the Ohio and the Mississippi lands beyond. The leaders of Maryland and Virginia began some serious discussions of developing a route using the Potomac and then overland into the Ohio Valley. And then...

“...Yet as the commissioners sat at Alexandria and Mount Vernon to consider ways and means of cementing the bonds of unity with the west...the states of Maryland and Virginia were drawing gradually apart... Each time a road or canal was to be undertaken, the localities directly affected were to be found snarling at each other. The natural advantages of the Potomac route to the west, which should have been realized if the states had continued to act in concert, were dissipated in conflicts and delays over the choice of routes...

What this disunity ultimately cost the Potomac may be seen by looking at the New York metropolitan region. Had the logical Potomac route to the west been pushed through without quarreling and delays, the great port city of the Atlantic might well have been in Chesapeake Bay ...Norfolk, Baltimore, Georgetown, Alexandria...The Virginia Assembly was not joking when late in the eighteenth century it passed a resolution urging the merchants of Alexandria to bestir themselves lest the port of New York surpass them.”

Two hundred and twenty-five years later the region continues to be embroiled in local differences and disputes about similar transportation issues, and local/state interests continue to over-ride regional interests.

The Last Half-Century: Planning of the Region's Transportation System

The suburbanization of the Washington area began in earnest in the 1940s. It was in 1946 that the Washington Board of Trade changed its bylaws to allow membership by companies located outside the city, recognizing that the geography of the economic region was extending well beyond the city boundaries. The 1950s and early 1960s were an era of much planning for the region's infrastructure and there are several books that describe fairly ambitious highway and transit planning from the decade. The Interstate Highway system initiated in 1956 by President Eisenhower shaped much of the planning thought in the 50s, and a fairly elaborate system of highways and transit was laid out in various forms in anticipation of serving the region's travel needs.

In 1955 the Congress appropriated funds for a special study to be undertaken regarding transportation problems in the National Capital Region. The first part of the study dealt with transportation solutions to the increasing congestion prevalent at that time, and this was followed with a long-range plan for the development of the metropolitan area and how the transportation systems would support the development of the region. This study was known as the "Mass Transportation Survey."

In 1958 the U.S. Congress established a joint Congressional committee and charged it "to study and investigate all and any matters pertaining to the District of Columbia concerning problems which are created by the tremendous growth of the District of Columbia and the metropolitan area surrounding it." It was known as the Bible Committee after its chairman, Senator Alan Bible of Nevada. During 1958 and 1959, the Committee conducted studies and held hearings on many aspects of the National Capital region's growth and development. Consultants and staff prepared analyses and reports on population and employment growth, transportation, water supply, sewer systems, recreational facilities, financial and organizational models, planning organization,

building code uniformity, metropolitan governance, zoning and land use planning, and others.

The work of the Bible Committee precipitated new interest in the regional community to develop an overall plan for the region, including a transportation plan. In 1961, NCPC produced a general concept plan – *A Policies Plan for the Year 2000: The Nation's Capital*. Five years later a more detailed plan – *The Regional Development Guide 1966-2000* – was developed. Also in 1966, based on the detailed plan, the first contemporary long-range transportation plan was adopted for the region by the newly created National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board (part of COG).

From an historical perspective, this was probably a milestone of regional cooperation for transportation planning. These plans envisioned a region with a strong central city with seven to nine radial corridors emanating from the center. The corridors would have both rail and freeways, and they would be connected by a system of three beltways (one of which, I-495, was being constructed at the time the plans were developed.) The outer two of these beltways were only to have interchanges where they intersected the radial corridors, and at the intersections there were to be nodes of development. There was also planned an extensive system of freeways within the center city.

In the 1970s COG/TPB initiated a continuing process of updating the region's transportation plans. This process required close cooperation and collaboration with the state transportation agencies in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia and the local transportation departments of the region's local governments. One driving factor for developing regional transportation plans was (and continues to be) that Federal law requires such plans to be adopted by the region's governments in order for specific projects to receive Federal transportation funds, and the funds from the Federal government represented a significant portion of the total funds needed for most any major highway or transit

project. The departments of transportation in Maryland, Virginia and DC as well as the local governments understood this funding aspect very well, and most all projects proposed by any of the major parties would be approved by everyone else (“you approve my project for funding and I’ll approve yours”).

Federal legislation laid out specific requirements for the planning process which had to be done in order to get funding for projects, and these requirements changed and evolved over time as national priorities changed. E.g., the regional process had to add air quality considerations as well as financial resource considerations in the milestone surface transportation legislation of 1991 (ISTEA). There were also other changes in priorities that gave more funds to transit. These changes at the national level played out with changes in priority at the region’s level as well in deletion of highway elements and more emphasis on transit elements.

The leaders at TPB were very successful in adapting to changes in national transportation policy and in managing and connecting all the different level governmental interests in developing and adopting plans for the National Capital region. The plans were updated and adopted every few years, and changes were always made as local/state governments changed their own plans and those needed to be incorporated in what was done at the regional level.

Since the late 1970s the transportation planning process at COG/TPB has been a model for the metropolitan transportation planning process nationally. In spite of the challenges of multi-state and multi-level governments, the COG/TPB process was able to develop rational and effective long-range plans. It built and maintained excellent data systems, models, and land use forecasting in a cooperative process with local governments so that the travel demands could be measured and enabled proposals for specific facilities and/or systems to meet the existing and forecasted demands. The process also made every attempt to incorporate input from the regional community: its citizens, businesses, and all stakeholders. In spite of parochial interests that would occasionally arise and challenge the planning efforts, the COG/TPB transportation planning process succeeded. This was the result of excellent staff work and staff leadership as

well as leadership from several enlightened elected officials who served on the COG and TPB Board of Directors over the years. It's unfortunate this leadership at the regional level from local elected officials for transportation planning did not carry over as well into the implementation part of the transportation process.

One conclusion from the past perspective is that we have not been deficient in developing good plans. The region has done pretty good regional planning. The failure has been in acting on, funding, and implementing what has been planned.

But then, planning something is usually easier than doing something.

While specific facilities in the region's plans changed over time, something that changed even more was the timing of building the planned facilities. A prime example is the Metro system, which in the plans of the early 1960s sought completion of the system by 1980. Perhaps that was unrealistic – but history has shown it took much longer: instead of twenty years it took over forty years to mostly complete what was in the 1960s plan. And the timing was always off – a major new highway facility took 25 years at least from being on the plan to building (the Intercounty Connector completed in 2012 was also on the 1960s plan). Taking facilities off the plans – which was done very often at the initiation of local governments – diminished the ability to reserve rights-of-way if it were later decided to put the facility back on the adopted plan. In the early 1980s one of the leaders on the Transportation Planning Board was asked in a meeting with staff why facilities should be removed from a 25-year plan, and the response was a candid “we are elected for 4-year terms and that's the length of time for which we are accountable.”

Implementation of the Region's Plans: Funding and Building

The chronological list of major milestones in the region's development and in transportation facilities/systems built in the region over the past half century includes the following:

- 1950s
 - The 1950 metropolitan area population was 1.75 million of which approximately half was in the District of Columbia. By 1960 the region grew by an additional 610,000 people
 - National Capital Park and Planning Commission 1950 plan for circumferential highways
 - Congressional initiation and funding of the Mass Transportation Survey - 1955
 - COG established in 1957
 - The Congressional Joint Committee on Washington Metropolitan Problems (The Bible Committee), 1958-59
- 1960s
 - Year 2000 Plan
 - Population growth boomed with an additional 860,000 people by the end of the decade
 - 1962 Highway Act & Formation of the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board (COG)
 - Capital Beltway completed
 - Tysons Corner Regional Shopping Center opened
 - Reston and Columbia new towns begun
 - 1967 Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority created by Interstate Compact. It set up the construction and operating authority with funding from Federal government and from state and local government general budgets; i.e., no dedicated funding source.
- 1970s
 - Metro rail service began
 - High Occupancy Vehicle Lanes opened on I-395, one of the first such projects in the US
 - COG Regional Planning efforts (Cooperative Forecasting/Transportation Planning Coordination)
- 1980s
 - Economy and transportation demand soared even as Metro expanded into suburbs. Travel became less central-focused even as Metro was trying to do the opposite. In 1950 eighty-four percent

- of jobs in the region were in the central city. By 1990 seventy-one percent of regional jobs were in the suburbs.
- 1987 – Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority created at the initiation of the Federal government
 - Behind the scenes – Board of Trade and others pushing for a regional authority for surface transportation, modeled on MWAAs.
 - 1990s
 - Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), a milestone piece of legislation that significantly changed the metropolitan transportation planning process. A part of it created a commission for the National Capital Region to examine the feasibility of a new regional transportation authority – its deliberations ended in primarily focusing on an authority for a new Wilson Bridge. An authority was not created, but much of the work of the commission undergirded cooperative efforts to get a new bridge funded and built.
 - ISTEA also limited regional plans to “Constrained Long Range Plans” (CLRP), meaning regional plans could only contain new facilities for which funds could be identified
 - 1997 private sector funded regional transportation plan developed – included facilities needed long-term whether or not funding could be identified
 - Fairfax County Parkway completed as a major arterial rather than a limited-access freeway as it had been in the plans of the 1960s and early 1970s.
 - 2000s
 - Build-out of original Metro system plan completed
 - “Northern Virginia Transportation Authority” created by 2002 legislation in Virginia – no funding or ability to raise funds until new law in 2013
 - New Woodrow Wilson Bridge
 - High Occupancy Vehicle lane expansions
 - New Metropolitan area definitions as the region’s geography continued to expand
 - High Occupancy Toll Lanes constructed on major portion of the Beltway in Virginia through public-private partnership arrangement, and under construction on I-95 South to Stafford
 - Construction of Silver Line, the first extension of Metro beyond the original plan of the late 1960s
 - Inter-County Connector opened – was on the original 1960s plans
 - As of 2012 the metropolitan area had grown to a population of 5.9 million, almost 250 percent growth since 1950.

Summary of Reflections: Conclusions and Outlook

Over the past half-century there have been several accomplishments in development of the region's transportation system. These would include development of a regional transportation planning process that has evolved over time to reflect both national infrastructure funding priorities as well as the changing demographic and economic forces of the region. The process has done well in linking land use development patterns with the infrastructure investments through the overall COG/TPB regional planning process. The process has not been perfect and linkages of planning to implementation (funding and building) of transportation needs are still not as strong as is needed to build and fund a transportation system needed by a healthy and growing metropolitan economy.

The planning and construction of the Metro system is the most significant single project completed since the 1960s. Initial actions by Congress in the late 1950s by the Bible Committee were followed by the formation of the federal National Capital Transit Agency, which then led to the WMATA compact.

Formation of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority in 1987 led to significant improvements to both Reagan Washington National and Dulles airports. Modernization and expansion of the airports have been extremely important to the region's economic development. The provision of excellent air service has been especially key to growing the region's services sector economy.

Planning and building of the region's highway system has had mixed success. The plans of the 1960s with three circumferential highways and other freeways within the region were obviously not completed as called for by those plans. A case could be made that if the planned circumferential highways had been built and connected with the radial corridors containing both freeways and transit – and accompanied by appropriate land use plans as also called for – that the region's development patterns and transportation systems would have made for a region better positioned in the 2000s for economic growth and better quality of life. A case could also be made that much of the reality that did happen – circumferential facilities taken off the plans – was because the region did not need so many roads. However, taking those facilities off the plans meant that rights-of-way could not be protected for potential future needs. While some circumferential roads like the Fairfax County Parkway and the InterCounty Connector did get built, their transportation usefulness to the region could have been much greater.

One of the key failures regarding the region's transportation system has been the lack of dedicated regional funding for regional facilities. The principal source of funding for Metro was the federal government and the major source of funding regional highway facilities has also been the federal government. The

region has been very fortunate that Federal funds were available for some of the key regional facilities. Transportation has always been important to the federal government in order to serve the function as the nation's seat of government, and was a key reason in the level of federal funding provided for Metro construction. However, the region's economy has diversified enormously over the past five decades, and Federal employment now only represents about 12 percent of total employment.

Attempts have been made to find some source of regional funding for Metro and those attempts have so far failed. But in looking ahead to rehabilitation needs of Metro (as well as regional highways), and future extensions, efforts should continue to seek a regional funding source. It is likely that federal funding levels and options will continue to decline, and the National Capital region will need to become more self-sufficient. That's a somewhat daunting prospect given the failure of the region's governmental leadership to develop better regional collaboration and commitment to regional and long-term needs.

In addition to the funding issues, there continues to be overall governmental fragmentation for implementing plans that constrains commitment to infrastructure needs and decision-making. In 1959 the Bible Committee drafted legislation to create a regional transportation authority. And over the years the subject was addressed several times in different venues – informal meetings with governors and the item in the 1991 ISTEA legislation setting up a regional commission to study anew the formation of a regional authority. The Potomac Conference was initiated in the 1990s by the Board of Trade to bring the region's private sector and public sector leaders together to address regional problems and potential solutions. It met a couple of times a year and made some accomplishments, but could not galvanize sufficient consensus for creating a regional authority. Legislative action in Virginia created in 2002 a Northern Virginia Transportation Authority (NVTA), but without significant powers and importantly no funding capability until a new law was passed in 2013 that finally dedicated funding to NVTA. While this was welcome news for Northern Virginia, it remains to be seen if funding will be sufficient and more importantly it does not fulfill the need for a region-wide authority.

One wonders if after a half-century of no real progress on this issue if the region will ever be able to agree to form such an entity that would make the whole process better organized and more efficient. A key problem has been that those in charge have mostly been local elected officials whose focus is (naturally) their local constituents and the next local election cycle. With this construct it is very difficult to have truly regional leaders. There have been a few, but not nearly enough.

In looking at past successes in the region, it has been leadership at the Federal level that has been key in most achievements. That was clearly the case

with Metro and with getting the region's planning process established. Local government leadership has been less contributory to regional successes and sometimes has been a negative factor. And as the region's private sector has grown and strengthened, its leadership has become significant and needs to assert itself more.

An excerpt from the final report of the Bible Committee in 1959 described the regional situation and need this way:

In the end, the Federal interest in the National Capital region must rest on the indivisibility of the area as a social and economic unit. It is one agglomeration of population, one labor market, one retail trade zone, one region for purposes of urban transportation – the aspects of metropolitan unity are endless. They can be ignored only if we are willing to disregard what makes metropolitan areas great centers of business, cultural, social, and educational opportunity: the fact that they are unified. What happens in one part of it will affect the rest. What is happening in any part of it reflects the whole...Whatever Congress attempts in the National Capital Region, what it chooses to do in the environs will be quite different than what it is now doing, or may do in the future in the District of Columbia itself. And what it does in the suburban areas and for the National Capital Region as a whole will reflect the unique Federal concern with this area.

And the regional concept embodied therein is even more true than a half-century ago.

In looking ahead as the Federal presence becomes less important in the region's economy and its growth, will there be leadership within the region that will forge and develop better ways of implementing the plans and building the transportation systems needed? Perhaps in time there will be more leaders in the region whose perspective is truly regional. Current efforts by some to develop regional leadership and regional solutions are trying to do just that and their efforts should be supported.

So in looking back over the past half-century at the region's transportation process development and evolution, there are serious doubts about the region's ability to address and resolve its needs in the most effective way. It seems it will more or less muddle along – developing reasonably good plans but no really good way to get them done.

And while there are doubts, there must also be hope – hope that the leadership will arise and that the different elements in the region will come together in a common vision for the best interests of living and working in the National Capital Region. And the region will achieve what President Kennedy said in the preamble to the 1961 Plan for the Year 2000:

“More than any other city – more than any other region – the Nation’s Capital should represent the finest in living environment which America can plan and build.”

Maybe by 2050?