

Richmond City Council

City of Richmond, Virginia

JON BALILES

CITY COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE

FIRST DISTRICT

April 19, 2016

Dear Commonwealth Transportation Board Member;

I am writing to register my opinion on Item #9 of April's meeting agenda concerning Richmond's Bus Rapid Transit Project and to record my concern with the decision the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) is potentially faced with today. I urge you to take a deeper look into this situation and delay making a decision on this agenda item. Instead, you should request more information into the costly conundrum the Commonwealth, the City of Richmond, Henrico County, and the Great Richmond Transit Company (GRTC) collectively now face.

As a City Council representative of the City of Richmond speaking only for myself and not for my colleagues or the Council as a whole, I write to you as someone who supported the approval of the BRT project – based on statements made leading up to and at the time of approval – and as one of two Council members that has introduced multiple amendments in recent years to increase funding for GRTC and to improve transit in the City of Richmond. I also know the challenges public transit in Richmond faces as someone who knows the system and rode the bus every day to work for three years to City Hall.

I am writing based in part by what VDOT has published on Page 5 of the Public Involvement brochure: "The programming process represents the public's final opportunity to comment on a project before funding determinations are made. This public participation is paramount in today's tight financial environment where VDOT and DRPT must make decisions with limited resources. By participating at the programming stage, citizens can help determine where those resources are focused."

The BRT project envisioned for the City of Richmond would be made mostly in part with a \$24.9 million TIGER grant through the hard work of the Commonwealth and complimented with local partners. However, the \$35.8 million construction price tag that was put out to bid earlier this year by the state was met with three responses – all of which are substantially over budget. According to the City's transportation staffer who was formerly with the Department of Rail and Public Transportation, the lowest bid is more than \$11.5 million over budget (a 32% overage), the next bid was \$23 million higher (a 54% overage), and the third bid was \$59 million over budget (a 168% overage).

While all of these amounts are alarming, they do not include any contingency costs for unforeseen issues with public utilities underneath a major thoroughfare that has been used for more than 150 years. It is reasonable to believe that this road could host many other unknown and expensive surprises that would further increase costs. This became apparent when I inquired with people familiar with the process and project about the reasons for the higher bids. They speculated that complications from the age and fragility of the infrastructure could have played a major role in the higher bids.

While the localities that helped fund the project are grateful for the Commonwealth's pledge to absorb any cost overruns incurred during construction for this project, this situation could see construction costs skyrocket before any overruns or contingencies are even known. The Commonwealth gave strong assurances that this project would be bid on or under budget. We now know that this is not the case, and

such lack of foresight raises serious concerns as to what other aspects of this project are still unknown as it is being rushed towards construction.

Along with some of my colleagues, we have registered our concerns with the bid amounts received for the BRT project and have been told that VDOT officials would be available to answer currently unanswered questions about the bidding process and receive a “cost breakdown of the project elements to the project partners”. We have been told that this will occur in the City of Richmond on May 2 but so far have not been able to ascertain any information about the reason for the exorbitant bids.

Since the bids are so significantly over budget and could rise higher, I would ask the CTB to consider the following:

- A BRT plan that utilizes a right travel lane on Broad Street in the City of Richmond dedicated to BRT.
- A BRT plan that could be implemented without the infrastructure costs and still allow buses to run in their own lane and use curb service and use stoplight technology to improve route timing.
- The current BRT proposal right lane travel and curb service lane is used on Broad Street from 14th -2nd Street.
- The standard for BRT requires 1.9 miles of any BRT route to be designated (but not separated) bus lanes – something that can easily be accomplished downtown and in the western stretch of the proposed BRT route.
- A plan that would allow a future continuation of bus service into Henrico County that would use curb (and not center lane) service.

We can still provide faster and more reliable service using the BRT concept without having to go back to square one. While a review of the route and bidding process would clearly not allow for an October 2017 ribbon cutting as envisioned by some, it would indeed allow for a plan to be revised and implemented on budget or under budget that would not threaten the conditions of the TIGER grant and not require reshuffling funding from other projects. We are all too aware of how limited and precious are the Commonwealth’s transportation dollars.

It is the CTB’s responsibility to look at projects and find ways to complete them with the best use of taxpayer dollars. This is such a case that deserves review and revisions that remove the politics in favor of the practical. We do not have to go back very far to recall the abrupt and correct halting of the Route 460 mega-project, but only after \$300 million was spent that could have been so instrumental in vital projects elsewhere across the Commonwealth. I fear that a similarly political decision made today without regard for the cost or consequences will only repeat that poor example. It is better to do this project right than to do it quickly, especially now when we know that certain major past assumptions have already been proven wrong.

Sincerely,

Jon Baliles