

ANOTHER MAIN STREET?

First of Two Articles

An Ambitious Gridlock Remedy

As Beltway Groans Under Traffic Burden, Bypass Plan Dusted Off

By Stephen C. Fehr
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Long before the Capital Beltway was completed around Washington in 1964, transportation thinkers were planting the idea that this region would someday need to consider another, outer bypass because the increase in Washington's population eventually would overwhelm the Beltway.

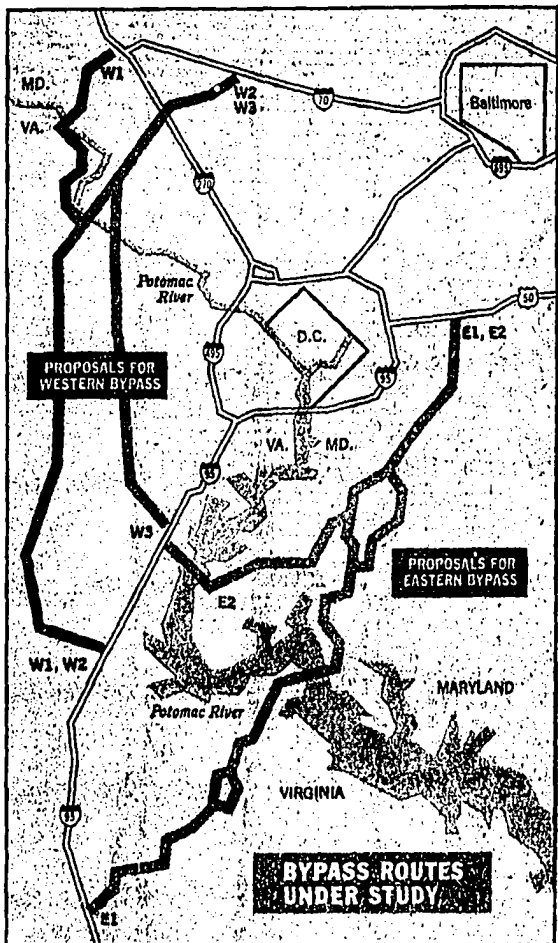
Someday is here.

The Beltway can't carry interstate travelers and trucks carrying goods between the Northeast and the South—its original purpose—as well as the swelling volume of local traffic brought on by the burst of growth in the suburbs. Month by month, Washington's 64-mile Main Street becomes slower, more dangerous and overloaded, prompting many fed-up drivers and policy makers to revive the 40-year-old plan to build a new bypass.

"It's already virtually a parking lot now," complained John E. Dings, of Fairfax County, who frequently gets stuck in Beltway traffic in his job as a district manager for Davey Tree and Lawn Care of Chantilly. "We have to build the outer Beltway. We don't have any choice."

Maryland's solution is an eastern bypass, a highway extending up to 93 miles and costing from \$1.4 billion to \$1.7 billion to build in today's dollars. Virginia highway officials agree with Maryland's idea but want their own western bypass, in the same price range and up to 82 miles. The roads, to-

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BY DAVE COOK — THE WASHINGTON POST

Bypass Plan Would Redefine Area Suburbs

BYPASS, From A1

gether dubbed the Washington Bypass, wouldn't hook together in a circle like the Beltway but would tie into existing highways.

Whether to build all or part of the bypass is shaping up as this region's most important and complex transportation and development issue since the decision to build Metrorail. Unlike previous bypass proposals, which languished on drawing boards, this one is being taken far more seriously and urgently because of the region's traffic congestion crisis and the pressure to select a route before land and construction costs escalate.

Many circumstances could cause the Washington Bypass plan to unravel, not the least of which is financing it and getting officials in two states, 23 counties and more than 80 federal, state and local government agencies to reach a consensus that today appears elusive. But Metrorail overcame some of the same obstacles; in fact, the bypass proposal brings up some of the same questions that the region's elected officials eventually resolved in the 1960s:

Who would pay?

Where would the interchanges be and whose back yards would be ravaged by construction?

Who's pushing the idea and are the region's political leaders solidly behind it?

Would it actually reduce Beltway traffic?

Is the bypass just a development tool in disguise?

Starting Thursday, Virginia and Maryland highway officials will begin answering some of those questions at 18 public hearings and meetings, part of a planning timetable that began two years ago.

After that, probably late this year or early 1991, Virginia Gov. L. Douglas Wilder and Maryland Gov. William Donald Schaefer are committed to deciding whether their states should build any part—or all—of the bypass before the turn of the century. If they approve, the issue moves to Congress and the Bush administration for consideration of financing and regulatory approval.

An Economic Catalyst

It is no exaggeration to say that new highways arcing up to 175 miles to the west and east of Washington would change the definition of the region much as the Beltway did, possibly bringing with it more than 200,000 people and 174,000 new jobs, according to consultants studying the proposal. Much of that growth will occur anyway, but a bypass would serve as a catalyst for economic activity, officials said.

"There's a real risk that a bypass would turn into another Main Street, moving the traffic jams, development and accidents to another road. Is this a step towards making us a vast region like Los Angeles?" said Saunders C. Hillier of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation Inc., which ended a two-day bypass conference yesterday with a call to delay the highway until both states chart a course for growth.

Countered Edward S. DeBolt, a McLean pollster and transportation advocate: "The only thing that will stop this are the minority faint hearts who'd like to go back

HOW THE BYPASSES WOULD AFFECT BELTWAY TRAFFIC

WESTERN BYPASS

AMERICAN LEGION BRIDGE (designed for an average of 110,000 vehicles a day)

Average daily number of vehicles crossing the Potomac here:	171,000 ¹
Average daily number of vehicles that would cross in 2010 without the western bypass:	231,000
Average daily number of vehicles that would cross in 2010 with the western bypass:	216,000-224,000
Net reduction in vehicles each day:	7,000-15,000
Truck traffic:	
Average daily number crossing here:	3,650 ¹
Average number crossing in 2010 without the western bypass:	8,000
Average daily number crossing in 2010 with the western bypass:	3,260-3,760
Net reduction in trucks each day:	4,250-4,760

EASTERN BYPASS

WOODROW WILSON BRIDGE (designed for an average of 75,000 vehicles a day)

Average daily number of vehicles crossing the Potomac here:	150,000 ¹
Average daily number of vehicles that would cross in 2010 without the eastern bypass:	190,000 ²
Average daily number of vehicles that would cross in 2010 with the eastern bypass:	172,000-173,000 ²
Net reduction in vehicles each day:	17,000-18,000
Truck traffic:	
Average daily number crossing here:	9,000 ¹
Average number crossing in 2010 without the eastern bypass:	16,000 ²
Average daily number crossing in 2010 with the eastern bypass:	8,900-9,300 ²
Net reduction in trucks each day:	6,700-7,100

SOURCES: Virginia Department of Transportation; Bellomo-McGee Inc., Vienna

¹ Based on 1988 traffic data.

² Assumes no expansion of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge.

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to 1940. People who resist change see this as an opportunity to protect the status quo, no matter what it means to this region's economy, jobs and growth."

Of the two routes, the western bypass is the shakiest. Its critics assert that it wouldn't provide much relief for the Beltway and is primarily being promoted by Northern Virginia builders such as John T. "Til" Hazel and by Dulles International Airport interests who want to increase airport access.

The eastern bypass has its own obstacles. Many residents and elected officials along the route question whether it is a true bypass. And many in Virginia contend that Maryland's real motive is to aid the Port of Baltimore and Baltimore-Washington International Airport at the expense of Virginia's ports and airports.

A Md.-Va. Joint Project

Wilder and Schaefer will choose from among three western and three eastern routes. The western route generally goes from Interstate 95 in Prince William or Stafford County, north past Dulles, across the Potomac in Loudoun County, through either Frederick or Montgomery counties in Maryland and ends at Interstate 70.

The theory behind the western leg is to improve access between the Midwest and the South, drawing through traffic from the American Legion Bridge, which carries the Beltway over the Potomac between Montgomery and Fairfax counties, and the Point of Rocks Bridge, which carries Route 15 over the Potomac about 30 miles northwest of the American Legion Bridge. From 56,000 to 77,000 vehicles would use the western river crossing each day in the year 2010. (The highest average for a segment of the Beltway is 227,000 vehicles a day.)

The eastern bypass is mostly a network of existing roads that generally run from I-95 in either Caroline or Prince William counties in Virginia, north across a new Potomac River bridge into Maryland, through Charles and Prince George's counties to the intersection of Routes 50 and 301 near Bowie.

That route would provide another option for drivers traveling the congested Northeast corridor. The idea is

to coax through traffic off the Beltway, away from the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, Shirley Highway and I-95 in Maryland. From 59,000 to 61,000 vehicles would travel it every day.

Maryland needs Virginia's support to build the eastern bypass, but some Virginia officials have signaled they won't go along unless they have Maryland's backing for a western route.

"If we tried to work it separately, it would fail," said Maryland Highway Administrator Hal Kassoff.

Wilder and Schaefer declined to comment, saying it would be premature.

Virginia Transportation Secretary John G. Milliken said Wilder generally supports the eastern bypass but has reservations about the western leg because of the special nature of Loudoun County.

Before leaving office, Wilder's predecessor, Gerald L. Baliles, said he and Schaefer generally agreed on the need for both legs of the bypass, and officials from both states were discussing forming a compact that would plan and build such projects, but time ran out on Baliles's administration.

Virginia's transportation department is recommending that both bypasses be built, but Maryland's Kassoff said, "While our minds are still open, the merits and value of the western bypass remain to be proven."

Not a Transportation Cure-All

Both states acknowledge that neither bypass would solve Beltway traffic jams, and that the Beltway and the Wilson Bridge probably will require widening. Moreover, most vehicles using the bypasses would be making local trips, making the word "bypass" a misnomer.

Of the two routes, however, the eastern bypass would do a better job getting through traffic off the Beltway. Traffic through the Washington region is expected to increase from 70,000 vehicles a day today to more than 150,000 vehicles in 2010, half of them trucks.

If the bypasses were built, the number of cars and trucks skirting the Beltway by 2010 would be as high as 28,000 a day in the east, compared with 12,000 a day in

the west. Significantly, the eastern bypass would carry four times the number of through trucks as the western route, rerouting large trucks that contribute to major Beltway accidents and delays.

"The eastern bypass could show tangible results the day it opened," said Virginia Sen. Charles L. Waddell (D-Loudoun), who supports building both bypasses although many of his constituents oppose the western route.

The numbers become trickier when considering the overall impact of the bypasses on Beltway traffic. The states say the eastern route would remove up to 18,000 vehicles a day from the Wilson Bridge in 2010, compared with 15,000 a day from the American Legion Bridge for the western route.

However, overall traffic on the Wilson Bridge is expected to rise from 150,000 vehicles today to 190,000 in 2010, and on the American Legion Bridge from 171,000 vehicles to 231,000. According to one projection, truck traffic crossing the bridges would be higher in 2010 than today even if both bypasses were built.

The Development Question

Accompanying the skepticism about traffic is anxiety that the road could lead to more development in such areas as western Montgomery County, where residents have fiercely guarded their predominantly rural life-style.

"I'm prepared to lay across the road if they ever approve the western bypass," said Montgomery County Executive Sidney Kramer.

Across the river, Loudoun officials envision concentrating development in the east while preserving open space in the west.

"If a road of that magnitude came through Loudoun County, you can kiss that vision goodbye," said Loudoun Board of Supervisors Chairman Betty W. Tatum.

Howard County Executive Elizabeth Bobo said the western bypass also contradicts planning there, and suspicion about the western bypass is strong in Fauquier and Prince William counties in Virginia and Frederick County in Maryland.

The eastern bypass also has its share of critics, most notably in Anne Arundel County. "Anne Arundel has experienced a tremendous amount of growth already," said County Executive James Lighthizer.

Developers and other officials said the key to assuaging critics is to limit the number of interchanges, which are magnets for development. Tentative plans for the eastern route show up to 28 interchanges, the west as many as 20.

Salvatore J. Bellomo, who heads the states' \$2 million bypass study, said that the longer the distance between interchanges, the more the bypasses serve a transportation purpose instead of development.

John R. Tydings, executive vice president of the Greater Washington Board of Trade, a prime backer of a bypass, said flatly: "You won't find a lot of sympathy in this place for multiple [interchanges]. You'd defeat the purpose of getting around this market simply and safely."

Maryland Transportation Secretary Richard H. Trainor and Virginia transportation commissioner Ray D. Pethel said neither state is interested in promoting development unless the local jurisdictions want it.

Nevertheless, officials in both states acknowledge that the bypass will lead to some growth. The challenge, they say, is in clustering growth to avoid sprawl. But bypass critics said these land-use decisions should be made before the governors pick a route.

"This is the most important regional development issue that will occur in the next 20 years," said Gary G. Nelson, transportation chairman of the private Northern Virginia Conservation Council. "Before there's a decision on the highway, the first decision should be: How do we want this region to develop?"

NEXT: Who's for and who's against?