

## **Defrauded but not fooled.**

David L. Foster, Executive Director, RAIL Solution

We don't have to let them get away with it. Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) has pulled a fast one on us. In the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for Interstate 81, VDOT has structured the analysis to favor their desired outcome, a massive I-81 expansion.

Construction of additional lanes and vast interchanges would displace homes and businesses, destroy forests and farmland, and disrupt historic battlefields. Travel disruption over 15 years would discourage tourism. The \$10 billion project could be financed only through tolls on cars and trucks. Tolls on I-81, while other north/south Interstates remain free, would adversely and differentially impact business, growth, jobs and economic activity in Western Virginia.

Here's what they did:

- Selected to do the study a firm that had been part of STAR Solutions, the Halliburton consortium that proposed a border-to-border rebuilding of I-81 to 8 –12 lanes.
- Set up rail to fail. Three prior Virginia-funded studies (all cited in the DEIS) show clearly that freight diversion from highway to rail is unlikely in corridors of less than 500 miles. Nevertheless, VDOT refused to look beyond the 325 miles of I-81 in Virginia, to an effective Knoxville – Harrisburg rail route.
- Picked instead a rail plan upgrading 13 short sections of track in Virginia, many not even in the I-81 corridor, averaging only a mile or two each. Used this inadequate alternative as the benchmark for consideration with all the highway options.
- Found minimal truck diversion and concluded that rail would not be a factor in determining the scope of highway expansion.
- Announced the findings in the DEIS Executive Summary supporting a border-to-border widening of I-81, and referring to the study's technical appendices to support their conclusions. Repeatedly told people the Executive Summary is all they need to read.
- Filled the technical appendices with data, charts, and tables that give the appearance of research, but in fact are riddled with errors and shortcomings.
- Used false information to misrepresent in a prejudicially negative way the characteristics of the Norfolk Southern rail line paralleling I-81 in Virginia.

→ Failed to consider rapidly rising fuel prices or the chronic shortage of truck drivers when forecasting trucking demand in the future, resulting in an inflated need for new capacity on I-81.

Here's what VDOT should have done with your money:

→ Made a realistic determination of the future capacity required in the I-81 Corridor.

→ Made an honest side-by-side comparison of the environmental and economic costs of providing that new capacity on the highway and on the parallel rail line.

→ Backed the lowest-cost, lowest-impact package of improvements providing that capacity.

After all, isn't that what an environmental impact study is for? But the DEIS does none of these things.

There is broad-based public support for a meaningful role for rail in the future I-81 Corridor. Fifty local governments and planning organizations have passed resolutions in support of rail. People recognize that relying on ever more lanes of pavement to solve each problem of congestion and growth is not smart. Or even possible.

Virginians don't have to repeat the ruinous policies of the West Coast and Northeastern U.S. at great cost to our economy and environment. We can pioneer, for our state and nation, a balanced transportation system that includes a core network of high-capacity rail lines, instead of vast new highways, as our primary means of moving freight. Railroads can do the job with one-third the pollution and five times the energy efficiency.

Although STAR Solutions' dedicated truck lanes are gone from the DEIS' recommendations, I-81 would still be subject to a massive rebuilding from border to border in Virginia. Some of it would be six lanes wide, but almost two-thirds would be eight lanes or more.

A more sensible solution would be a plan of measured improvements, targeted at capacity chokepoints and safety problem areas. These could begin now, not wait for a 15-year construction plan to be finalized. They could be paid for incrementally like all other Virginia highway projects, not through tolls. They could be put out for competitive bids to encourage participation by local contractors and to save taxpayers money, not guaranteed exclusively to STAR.

At the same time rail upgrades, funded with federal loans, could increase capacity for handling through intermodal freight in the Corridor, extending the life of highway improvements and limiting their scope and urgency.

What should you do now?

Tell VDOT that the people's views matter. Dominated by highway people who have spent their entire careers building roads, VDOT wants to go on building roads. The highway engineering and construction lobby is a powerful ally. Many state and federal politicians are pushing hard, too. Help counter these entrenched interests. Speak out. Go to a public hearing when they are announced, send comments to VDOT in writing, or post them on VDOT's website: [www.I-81.org](http://www.I-81.org)

But most importantly, you must do this now, during the public comment period. If we let VDOT exclude a viable rail option now, a major highway expansion may soon be approved and underway. We may never ever get another chance.

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