

## Transportation

# Virginia is rethinking its road and rail networks in planning for the long term

The state's transportation secretary, Shannon Valentine, discussed what the federal government can do to help states rebuild after the coronavirus pandemic.

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By [Ian Duncan](#)

The sliver of 2020 before the coronavirus pandemic hit found Virginia Transportation Secretary Shannon Valentine feeling optimistic about the future. The General Assembly passed legislation backed by Gov. Ralph Northam (D) to restructure the state's transportation funding and opened new options for promoting rail and transit.

Then the virus threatened to throw her department into disarray, biting into gas tax revenue as people stayed home. But the General Assembly stepped in, providing financial flexibility that Valentine said allowed her to avoid layoffs or delays to construction projects.

With the pandemic underscoring the importance of reliable transportation options, Valentine, who has been in the job since 2018, is again looking to the future. She spoke to The Washington Post about how Virginia is tackling some of the biggest questions in transportation and what President Biden's infrastructure push might mean for the state. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Q:** What would you identify as big statewide challenges? What is a problem that you're fundamentally trying to solve?

**A:** I believe that the fundamental foundational problem is sustainable, predictable, long-term funding. We need a federal partner, because that is what allows us to plan and develop programs that address aging infrastructure, capacity issues, environmental issues and equity issues to compete for what could possibly be discretionary grants.

If states knew we had that long-term, stable funding, we could develop programs to address issues — we could plan rather than react. And it allows us to compete for an infrastructure package that could have discretionary funding or look to the private sector, where we can compete on public-private partnerships to make sure we're making the smartest decisions possible. But that stability, I believe, is fundamental.

**Q:** In terms of projects, you have a clear policy about prioritizing moving as many people and goods as efficiently as possible and not being committed to one mode. Why is that important, and how is that different from how state transportation and agencies might traditionally have thought about their responsibility?

**A:** Beginning in 2018, we began doing corridor planning studies. The first one was along I-81, which had been not just an unreliable corridor, it was incredibly unsafe and had major accidents. We took a year to study it. We identified \$4 billion worth of need. We prioritized \$2 billion worth of needs.

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From there, we worked on I-95, we worked on I-66. I don't need to tell you just how congested 95 is, particularly between Fredericksburg and Washington, some of the most congested in the country. One of the obvious ideas was adding a lane in each direction for 52 miles between Fredericksburg and 495, and the cost of doing that was \$12.5 billion. In 10 years when that project would have been completed, we looked at the modeling and saw the road was just as congested on the day we finished as the day we started. So with that information, that is how we actually identified rail as a viable option.

We could develop capacity for both freight and passengers at a third of the cost. And that is what led us to reach out to CSX about the possibility of sharing the corridor, bringing in partners with Amtrak and VRE and really working with rail to address the congestion and capacity issues as we improve the highway system as well. But it was going through that process that actually led us to rail and started these conversations that we were able to announce on March 30 this year. It's a \$3.7 billion initiative with a unique partnership with the freight railroad, passenger rail and commuter rail, and all coming together to improve freight operations along this corridor.

**Q:** You also use an approach called Smart Scale. Can you explain how that works?

**A:** Smart Scale is a data-driven process put in place in 2015. And it's based on factors: safety, congestion, accessibility, environmental factors, economic development and land use in our larger regions. And based on data, with those factors in place, we actually score projects. We come up with a staff recommendations of these projects. But really, that initial staff recommendation comes from data and that is how we choose projects in Virginia. It's completely transparent. It holds us accountable for our decisions and they're fully funded. To get into this process, we have to have a fully funded project. It's multimodal. It's across all districts, and it's, in my mind, a very accountable process.

**Q:** You've mentioned goals around environment and equity. Those feel like some of the most urgent questions in transportation at the moment. How do they fit into this process?

**A:** When we look at the environment, it is an integral part of transportation and transportation planning. I will say, though, in recent years we have tried to move from beyond what is compliant to a real commitment. We have created a subcommittee of the Commonwealth Transportation Board on environmental stewardship. The purpose is to look at the impacts of transportation on climate change, as well as the impacts of climate change on transportation.

We're developing a pilot to create a baseline for measuring greenhouse gas emissions with our infrastructure projects and then we hope to be able to integrate that into our Smart Scale process, to be more deliberate and more metric-focused. We're making sure we take into account sea-level rise, as well as inland flooding. Trails have become even more important during the pandemic. We have got 1,600 miles of trails and there's been a real emphasis lately to expand on trails.

And I will also say our express lanes. In Northern Virginia, we intend to have 90 miles of connected express lanes by the end of 2022. And those express lanes not only provide a reliable trip for people in their cars, they provide a free trip for transit and HOV-3. So even our express lane network becomes almost a bus rapid transit system for bus systems and our carpooling. We're trying to look at a holistic system so we are creating a seamless, more integrated transportation network.

**Q:** On equity, one thing that seems tricky is coming up with hard measurements that might fit into a system like you

use. Are you trying to integrate thinking about how projects might have disparate impacts on certain groups as part of the Smart Scale planning, or are you finding that it doesn't fit neatly into that kind of approach?

**A:** It all starts with planning, right? Fundamentally identifying those needs. The planning process is run out of our Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment. They are becoming more data-driven on identifying transit needs, health care, lack of connections to jobs, education, and making sure communities have access to transit and public transportation.

I really believe that covid has shone a bright light on just how fundamental public transportation is to connecting people to essential work and food and medicine. It is truly vital. As we have been developing these innovative projects like Transforming Rail in Virginia in our negotiations, we ensured that with our commuter rail service, VRE, we were introducing evening and nighttime service, that we had weekend service, because so many service jobs are not 9-to-5.

Some of our transit systems in Virginia had initiated fare-free options. What we've learned is that fares are and can be a barrier, so we're developing pilots around Virginia to work with fare-free so we can expand that and see how we could address that particular barrier. The Transit Ridership Incentive Program that came out of the omnibus bill that passed in 2020 is looking at all the barriers, as well as the design of our routes and how we can better create that accessibility for all people, and in particular those who are underserved. We're working very hard to do that.

**Q:** You talked about the importance of that long-term core federal funding. If you had five years of extra funding, how would you see that being put to the best use and how might it change people's experience of getting around Virginia?

**A:** If we were able to expand infrastructure and there were other opportunities for infrastructure investments, one would be rail. Rail does not have long-term sustainable funding for projects or a program of projects. Allowing rail projects to compete in the same way that transit projects can with the Federal Transit Administration and highway projects can with the Federal Highway Administration could really go a long way with improving the national rail network.

The second thing with rail is to develop policies that support collaboration among freight, passenger and commuter rail. Today, it's siloed and we are set up as competitors rather than as collaborators. And in most cases, the host railroad — the freight railroad — owns the rail. And we have Amtrak running rail. We have commuter rail. And if we could develop policies that actually support all of us working together, I believe it would be a tremendous benefit.

And then finally, leadership on some core issues, such as what is the future of transportation funding going to look like? We in Virginia are building a bridge that includes a gas tax, highway use fee, mileage-based user fee. And leadership when it comes to the electrification of our infrastructure. States can take this on. But to really implement this, just looking at the standards nationally, I think, would be a great benefit.

### **What readers are saying**

The comments reflect a strong debate on the effectiveness and future of rail transportation in Virginia. Many commenters express frustration with current rail inefficiencies and advocate for high-speed, electrified railways as a modern solution to congestion and safety issues on... [Show more](#)

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