

MEETING SUMMARY
JOINT NVTC-PRTC LEGISLATIVE BRIEFING
DECEMBER 6, 2021
Embassy Suites Hotel – Springfield, Virginia
9:00 A.M.

NVTC Members Present

Canek Aguirre
Walter Alcorn
Katie Cristol
Matt de Ferranti
Libby Garvey
Jeff McKay
David Meyer
Jennifer Mitchell (Alternate, Commonwealth of Virginia)
Paul Smedberg
David Snyder
Rip Sullivan
Michael Turner
James Walkinshaw

NVTC Members Absent

John Bell
Elizabeth Bennett-Parker
Adam Ebbin
Eileen Filler-Corn
John Foust
Paul Krizek
Matt Letourneau
Dalia Palchik
David Reid

NVTC Staff Present

Kate Mattice, Executive Director
Monique Blyther
Andrew D’huyvetter
Matt Friedman
Allan Fye
Rhonda Gilchrest
Adam Hager
Patricia Happ
Scott Kalkwarf
Becky Merriner
Tenley O’Hara
Ben Owen
Aimee Perron Seibert
Sophie Spiliotopoulos
Brittany Sumpter
Colethia Quarles
Melissa Walker
Ronnetta Zack-Williams

PRTC Members Present

Victor Angry
Andrea Bailey
George Barker
Kenny Boddye
Margaret Franklin
Todd Horsley (Alternate, Commonwealth of Virginia)
Jennifer Mitchell
Jeanette Rishell
Pamela Sebesky
Ralph J. Smith (Alternate, Prince William County)
Ann Wheeler (Alternate, Prince William County)

PRTC Members Absent

Tinesha Allen
Lee Carter
Deborah Frazier
Elizabeth Guzman
Matthew Kelly
Cindy Shelton Lamb
Jeanine Lawson
Gary Skinner
Yesli Vega

PRTC Staff Present

Bob Schneider, Executive Director
Ivanna Baez
Althea Evans
Alyssa Ludwiczak
Becky Merriner
Holly Morello
Perrin Palistrant
Christine Rodrigo
Joe Stainsby
Barbara Murdock (Keolis)
Carolyn Narh (Keolis)

Opening Remarks

Katie Cristol, Chair of the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission (NVTC) and member of the Arlington County Board, and Margaret Franklin, Chair of the Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission (PRTC) and member of the Prince William County Board of Supervisors, welcomed attendees to the annual NVTC-PRTC Joint Legislative Briefing.

NVTC Chair Cristol stated that it is good to be back to meeting in person this year. This event is NVTC and PRTC's annual opportunity for the Commissions and local transit leaders to share with the region's elected officials an overview of legislative priorities that are vital to maintaining support for transit in Northern Virginia.

NVTC Chair Cristol observed that it has been an exciting year for NVTC as the Commission worked hard with the local systems to pivot and respond to the changing transportation environment. She is particularly proud of NVTC's work to help the region leverage the federal funding provided from Congress to maintain strong public transit service during the COVID-19 pandemic. She also noted that NVTC released a study that seeks to fully understand the impact and opportunities of providing zero- and reduced-fare transit opportunities, launched a multi-year effort to help the entire region implement zero-emission buses and announced two new rounds of Commuter Choice projects that will provide important transit services along I-66 and I-395/95 express lanes.

NVTC Chair Cristol recognized NVTC Commissioners in attendance. She then turned the podium over to PRTC Chair Franklin.

PRTC Chair Franklin stated that there is a wonderful slate of speakers today to provide their perspectives on public transit at the federal, state and regional levels. She noted that this has been another challenging year for the region's transit agencies, but federal support has helped keep these agencies moving and with high vaccination rates in Virginia, it is hoped that in the future more people will be riding transit. She stated that Dr. Bob Schneider will be giving an overview of the major efforts at OmniRide as part of the panel discussion, but she is excited to say that OmniRide has been responding to the changing needs of its riders and seeing a strong rebound in many of its transit routes.

PRTC Chair Franklin recognized PRTC Commissioners and PRTC/OmniRide staff in attendance. She also recognized other elected officials, as well as their staff, from many elected offices, including members of Congress, Virginia House of Delegates and Senate.

NVTC Executive Director Kate Mattice, moderator for the event, presented an overview of the event's agenda, which is in three parts starting with the federal level, where attendees will hear from Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy of the U.S. Department of Transportation Carlos Monje, followed by reflections on Virginia Governor Northam's administration with Deputy Secretary of Transportation Nick Donohue. The event will conclude with a panel discussion by leaders from three of the region's transit systems – with Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) Board Chair Paul Smedberg, Virginia Railway Express (VRE) Chief Executive Officer Rich Dalton and PRTC/OmniRide's Executive Director Bob Schneider.

Special Guest Speaker: Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy Carlos Monje

NVTC Executive Director Kate Mattice introduced the first speaker, Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy of the U.S. Department of Transportation Carlos Monje, who was participating virtually. She noted that Under Secretary Monje is the number three official at the U.S. Department of Transportation and a true champion for public transit and multimodalism in the administration. She observed that the strong public transit network in the Washington, DC region is critical to the strength of the economy and quality of life. While many of the local bus systems are not formula funding recipients of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), they are all connected to the Metro system, VRE and PRTC's OmniRide – and are keenly interested in major investments in new passenger rail, bus rapid transit routes and in ways to make the bus transit fleets even cleaner. She stated that the region is excited about the passage of the federal infrastructure bill and looks forward to hearing more about it from Under Secretary Monje.

Under Secretary Moje thanked NVTC and PRTC for giving him the opportunity to speak at this event. He gave a breakdown of how the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) will boost transit and other transportation infrastructure. This bi-partisan legislation will give the administration the ability to reverse the trend of falling behind (U.S. ranked 13th in worldwide infrastructure) and modernize the infrastructure after decades of systemic under investment. It will provide new jobs; make major investments in roads, bridges, rail, transit and airports; improve safety; and address the climate crisis. He provided some specifics on funding opportunities in some of these areas.

Under Secretary Monje also reviewed some of the benefits of President Biden's landmark Build Back Better Act, which was passed by the House last month. It includes \$10 billion to improve transit access for low-income families and for high-speed rail corridor assistance to support planning and development of public high-speed rail projects.

Following his remarks, there was a time for event attendees to ask Under Secretary Monje questions.

Special Guest Speaker: Virginia Deputy Secretary of Transportation Nick Donohue

NVTC Executive Director Mattice welcomed Deputy Secretary Nick Donohue, who is participating virtually from Richmond. She noted that the Northern Virginia region has truly benefited from Mr. Donohue's work with Secretary Valentine and the Northam Administration on both rail and public transportation, leading the implementation of both the dedicated funding for Metro and for VRE, the passage of the Omnibus Transportation legislation in 2020 that provides stability and growth to Virginia's transportation infrastructure, the transformation of passenger rail in Virginia with major investments in rail right of way and additional track that will be game changing for VRE, and the establishment of the Commuter Choice program which will continue to benefit travelers along I-66 and I-395/95 for decades.

Deputy Secretary Donohue stated that it has been a pleasure working with NVTC, PRTC and the local transit agencies such as VRE, WMATA and OmniRide over the last eight years. It has shown how successful a state and regional partnership can help advance transit goals. He spoke of the significant transportation investment and policy decisions made over the last eight years during the administrations of Governors Ralph Northam and Terry McAuliffe. He stated that this last four years was very eventful with the first ever dedicated funding for WMATA in 2018. He rode Metro recently and can see the changes and it was an impressive ride. Clearly there is still more work to be done, but Virginia led the way in clarifying how WMATA compared to other transit systems and providing dedicated funding for the system. In 2019 the Commonwealth shifted focus to the I-81 Corridor and although that legislation was not successful it ultimately resulted in an interstate bill, which raised \$280 million annually for Virginia's interstate. This led to the Commonwealth recognizing the need for reform and refocus of the state's planning process.

Deputy Secretary Donohue stated that the General Assembly directed a study on the I-95 Corridor which found that once \$12 billion in improvements were completed (adding another lane taking 10 years to complete), it would not improve travel speeds compared to 2019 travel speeds. This got the administration really looking at accelerating rail planning through the I-95 Corridor, including the Long Bridge Project and an historic partnership with CSXT. He also spoke about studying the sustainability of transit revenues in Virginia, which ultimately resulted in the Omnibus Transportation Bill in 2020. That bill also created the Virginia Passenger Rail Authority and authorized bonds to help acquire the rail right-of way. Mr. Donohue then noted that three days after the Omnibus Bill passed, the state went into lock down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He gave some highlights on how the Commonwealth responded to the pandemic.

Mr. Donohue then spoke about the significant impact to Virginia from the federal infrastructure bill. Virginia is expected to receive \$300 million more each year in construction bonds that the Commonwealth Transportation Board will use for state of good repair projects. Transit agencies in Virginia will receive an additional \$100 million each year. The federal discretionary grant program totals \$36 billion to expand intercity passenger rail. Virginia is well positioned to compete for some of these funds. He is also optimistic of the state revenue forecasts, which will be released in the near future.

Following his remarks, there was a time for event attendees to ask Deputy Secretary Donohue questions. Fairfax County Board Chair Jeff McKay concluded with a heartfelt thank you to Mr. Donohue for all his hard work over the last eight years and his service to this region and the entire Commonwealth.

Transit Panel of Regional Transit Operators: Paul Smedberg (WMATA), Rich Dalton (VRE) and Bob Schneider (PRTC/OmniRide)

NVTC Executive Director Mattice introduced the regional transit panel members including WMATA Board Chair Paul Smedberg, Virginia Railway Express (VRE) Chief Executive Officer Rich Dalton and PRTC/OmniRide Executive Director Bob Schneider.

WMATA Board Chair Smedberg gave an overview of Metro service during the COVID-19 pandemic. He thanked the Congressional delegation for working to provide federal aid to all transit system to get them through the pandemic. He also acknowledged Loudoun County Board Supervisor Matt Letourneau, who partners with him as the two Virginia representatives on the WMATA Board. Mr. Smedberg addressed the recent Blue Line derailment and the National Transit Safety Board's investigation. All 7000-series railcars were taken out of service and current service levels will continue at least through the end of 2021.

Mr. Smedberg also observed that travel patterns have changed due to the pandemic and WMATA is considering how to respond to these changes. Looking towards the future, he stated that it is important to remember how transit is central to the economic success to the region and that it is essential as many people are dependent on transit. WMATA is also focusing on zero-emission buses.

Mr. Smedberg acknowledged DRPT Director Jennifer Mitchell for her outstanding contribution to WMATA and the region. She has been a great partner to the entire region. He also acknowledged DPRT staff Tim Roseboom and Todd Horsley, and NVTC staff Andrew D'huyvetter.

VRE CEO Rich Dalton stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has not been kind to transit, regionally and nationwide. To date, VRE daily ridership is down 85% from pre-pandemic levels. In June 2020 VRE returned to normal service levels because riders needed more frequent service. With several federal relief packages, VRE is on sound financial ground. VRE continues to monitor return to work plans throughout the region. VRE is looking for un-tapped markets to reach new riders. He reviewed some of VRE's capital projects that are currently underway. He also thanked DRPT Director Mitchell for her partnership with VRE.

PRTC/OmniRide Executive Director Bob Schneider announced that the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) honored OmniRide with the prestigious BASE Gold Standard Award. The award is the top recognition TSA can give to a transit agency for demonstrating outstanding performance in enhancing their security programs. OmniRide is the first and only bus-only transit system in the National Capital Region to earn this recognition. The Virginia Transit Association (VTA) also honored OmniRide with the Exceptional Safety Award at this year's annual VTA Conference. Dr. Schneider also recognized PRTC/OmniRide staff and operators who went through seven service changes over the past year. OmniRide never reduced its local service and within 90 days of the pandemic hitting, local service recovered by about 65%. PRTC/OmniRide is once again looking at double decker buses because it solves several issues including the labor shortage and emissions reduction. OmniRide is also looking at reclaimed natural gas and other low-emission options.

Ms. Mattice asked about what the federal infrastructure legislations means to each of the transit systems. Mr. Dalton stated that for VRE it expects to receive 30% more in federal formula funding, and the expanded discretionary grant programs could bring more funds for specific projects. Mr. Smedberg stated that federal assistance will help WMATA continue with state of good repair projects and the opportunity to apply for grants for different projects. Dr. Schneider stated that for capital projects the federal infrastructure bill is not a "game changer" for OmniRide since VRE

receives more of those formula funds. But OmniRide is more competitive in the discretionary grant programs. With more federal dollars available for big projects, there may be some benefit as policy makers decide how to use their funds in different ways.

Ms. Mattice asked about the state funding program and its impact on each system. Dr. Schneider stated that OmniRide is eligible for Commuter Choice funding opportunities, as well as receiving direct operating funds for local service. Everything up to now has been about “through-put” but with the pandemic, the region is seeing the need for different travel patterns. Once the I-66 Outside the Beltway project is finished, state funding will open up new travel from Prince William to Reston or to Dulles Airport. Mr. Smedberg stated that the state funding has been very important to WMATA. It has helped with state of good repair projects, station rehabilitations, and modernization of other elements. Mr. Dalton stated that state funding, especially the Commuter Rail Operating and Capital Fund (C-ROC), has benefited VRE. C-ROC funds will be leveraged into a debt issuance to fund projects for the Transforming Rail in Virginia project.

Ms. Mattice recognized the economic value of transit and asked what messages the transit systems have to the business community for the future. Mr. Dalton stated that leveraging off of VRE’s previous successes, VRE asks the business community to continue to advocate for transit to the General Assembly and the new administration, and to advocate for the ability to enhance current mobility solutions to increase economic benefit and environmentally sound ways to move people around the region. Mr. Smedberg stated that despite the challenges right now, if one looks at where all the commercial and residential development is happening, it is happening within a ¼ mile of a transit station or transit center. The business community values transit and sees the importance of transit, especially Metro. Dr. Schneider stated that transit brings workers to where we buy our coffee, and it brings the workers to this hotel to set up for this event. Providing great transit service is important. He also encouraged everyone to get out and ride transit.

Ms. Mattice asked what else is important for attendees to know about each system. Mr. Dalton stated that for VRE, the reality is that there will be some changes over the next few years coming out of the pandemic including ridership and travel patterns and those will need to be redefined. He asked for patience as the transit systems leverage off their collective experiences. Mr. Smedberg called for stabilization for the next few years and to begin to look at new travel patterns and behaviors and how people will be using transit in possibly new ways, and how all the transit systems will need to adapt and adjust. It will produce challenges but also tremendous opportunity. Dr. Schneider stated that PRTC/OmniRide will look at the behavior of its riders. He called for a new focus on “purpose driven travel” designed to serve all riders who use transit for all trips, not for just those going to and from work. When OmniRide understands the purpose of travel, it can respond with service. A key difference for bus service compared to rail service, is that it allows them to be responsive to changing needs. OmniRide can provide service to where it is needed.

Ms. Mattice thanked Mr. Smedberg, Mr. Dalton and Dr. Schneider, as well as those other local transit systems not represented on stage, for their hard work and perseverance over the last year taking good care of their employees and continuing to provide transit service to the region.

Closing Remarks

Due to the time, Ms. Mattice encouraged attendees to stay and ask questions directly to the panelists. She also encouraged attendees to take a briefing folder, which includes legislative agendas for NVTC, PRTC and VRE, as well as other information. She also thanked NVTC and PRTC staff for their work in making this event a success.

Approved this 6th day of January 2022.

Canek Aguirre
Chair

Matt de Ferranti
Secretary-Treasurer