



## Comment on Visualize 2045

January 12, 2018

To the Transportation Planning Board & Staff:

The Washington Metropolitan Region (Region) suffers from very bad traffic congestion. Yet congestion arises from land use patterns as much as it arises from particular transportation facilities. This was recently demonstrated by modeling the "Balanced Land Use" scenario as part of the Long Range Plan Task Force. **Visualize 2045 largely fails to include regionally significant measures that can help achieve the balanced land use scenario.**

During the 1900s, many people believed that congestion was caused by land use density. It was assumed that spreading out homes and businesses through suburbanization would reduce density and congestion. Although there is generally more congestion in high-density places than in low-density places, it turns out that low- to medium-density, single-use development patterns (often referred to as "sprawl") create the most traffic congestion. In high-density places with diverse land uses, walking, biking, transit and other forms of shared transportation are often an option. In places characterized by sprawl, almost every activity outside the home requires a private vehicle trip.

Cars take up lots of space when parked – and even more space when moving (1 car-length between it and the next vehicle for every 10mph of speed). Additionally, while we tolerate homelessness for people, we do not tolerate "homelessness" for cars. Zoning and other development regulations often require that cars have dedicated parking spaces at home, at work and at shopping and entertainment venues. Thus, there are more than 2 dedicated parking spaces for each vehicle. Space dedicated to parking (much of it vacant much of the time) creates additional distance between trip origins and trip destinations. The space requirements associated with auto parking and travel combined with the necessity for using a car for almost every activity ensure that sprawl will generate worse traffic congestion than higher-density areas that permit walking, cycling, transit and other forms of shared transportation.

Many of the highway projects in the draft updated constrained long-range plan (Visualize 2045), seek to **accommodate sprawl by adding new lanes**. History shows that this approach encourages more sprawl development that will soon overwhelm the improved facilities. More balanced land use (placing houses, jobs and shops closer together in a mixed-use environment) performs better in terms of reducing congestion, energy consumption and pollution. **But key actions required to move toward more balanced land use are omitted from Visualize 2045.**

With the exception of a few tolled HOV lanes, most of the Region's roads and highways are free

to use regardless of the distance travelled and regardless of the level of congestion. This encourages many households and businesses to locate at the periphery of the Region, where land prices are lower. Unfortunately, lower land prices are offset by increasing traffic congestion, energy consumption and pollution. But these negative effects become apparent to households and businesses only indirectly. If these effects were more apparent directly, in terms of transportation and land use costs, many households and businesses would make different and more beneficial land use choices.

The jurisdictions that comprise the Region can help achieve the “balanced land use scenario” by adopting an integrated set of policies including the following:

- Parking (curbside and off-street) should be priced according to demand.
- All roadway travel should be priced according to distance and congestion. Additional surcharges can be added for heavy and/or heavily polluting vehicles. NOTE: Metrorail already charges users according to distance and congestion. **Distance- and congestion-based roadway prices encourage households and businesses to locate closer to daily activities and to the people that they regularly engage.**
- Development Impact Fees should be assessed only in those areas where infrastructure is lacking or where infrastructure would need to be expanded to accommodate new development. **This discourages sprawl development;**
- Property taxes should be transformed into public service access fees. This is accomplished by reducing the property tax rate applied to privately-created building values and increasing the tax rate applied to publicly-created land values.
  - The lower rate on building values makes buildings cheaper to construct, improve and maintain;
  - The higher rate on land values moderates land prices. It also creates an economic incentive to develop high-value land (typically infill sites near existing infrastructure). **Increased infill development reduces the demand for sprawl development.**
- Zoning regulations should be changed to:
  - Replace parking minimums with parking maximums in activity centers; and
  - Permit greater density and mixed-use development in tightly-defined activity centers.

To some people, the “balanced land use” scenario seems like an unattainable ideal. **Balanced land use is attainable.** Sprawl is not natural or inevitable. Sprawl has been (and is being) subsidized by incentives embedded in existing tax, regulatory and roadway pricing policies. Every jurisdiction within the Region can benefit from a comprehensive set of policy reforms that will reduce sprawl. Just Economics is prepared to assist the Region’s jurisdictions (individually or collectively) to implement these and other measures that can simultaneously:

- Enhance opportunities and incentives for walking, cycling, transit and other forms of shared transportation, thereby **reducing SOV trips and congestion;**
- Reduce rents for both housing and business space, enhancing housing affordability and job creation;
- Enhance infill development and thereby reduce demand for expensive infrastructure extensions (**reduced public expenditures**);

- Enhance land value return and recycling to make infrastructure financially self-sustaining to a greater degree than today (**enhanced public revenues**);
- Enhanced equity because roadway and transit users pay for public goods and services in proportion to the benefits that they receive or the costs that they impose upon others;
- Enhanced equity because landowners will pay in proportion to the public benefits that they receive.

The transportation departments of the District, Maryland and Virginia, the transportation staff at the Transportation Planning Board, and the Transportation Planning Board members themselves have played an important role in making the Washington Metropolitan Region one of the most prosperous and desirable metropolitan regions in the country. At one level, congestion is a symptom of success. Congestion arises from people going to work, to school, to shop and to visit friends and entertain themselves. Cities where the factories and stores have closed generally don't suffer from traffic congestion. But, while some congestion is unavoidable, it is like friction. And too much friction can cause the Region's economic machine to under-perform or even decline.

The Washington Metropolitan Region is at a pivotal moment. Climate change and urban sprawl did not happen in an instant. Neither can they be remedied in an instant. But a failure to take meaningful action now will have inevitable and unavoidable consequences in the future. TPB has a track record of stepping beyond its transportation silo and working with MWCOG's and the member jurisdictions' planning, environmental, housing and economic development departments to create a regional vision and to address some of the Region's most pressing challenges. Therefore TPB, MWCOG and the Region's jurisdictions can do this again. They can design and implement a "balanced land use" program as outlined above. The elements of this program have been used successfully in communities in the United States and around the world. If we are successful, our children and grandchildren will praise us for our courage and foresight. If we fail this challenge, they will curse us for timidity and ignorance. Let us act and be praiseworthy.

Thank you for considering my remarks. Please let me know if you have any questions or if I can provide any assistance regarding the design and implementation of a "balanced land use" approach to transportation solutions, affordable housing and sustainable, equitable prosperity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rick Rybeck". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rick Rybeck, Director