

Armstrong to be patron of Kaine's highway bill

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By GINNY WRAY - Staff Writer
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Del. Ward Armstrong is ready to go to bat for Gov. Tim Kaine's transportation bill.

Armstrong, a Collinsville Democrat and House minority leader, will be the chief patron for the legislation that Kaine unveiled Thursday. The bill includes regional and statewide components designed to raise funds for transportation maintenance projects, which would free funds for new construction.

"As patron, I'm the point man," Armstrong said Thursday after Kaine's news conference. "I'll present it to the House Finance Committee. If it passes there, I will be the manager on the floor."

He also will be the lightning rod for opposition to the bill. Republican House leaders have consistently opposed a statewide tax hike, and Kaine has warned that he will not settle for any measure that doesn't include statewide maintenance revenue.

"That goes with the territory," Armstrong said of the controversy that could come with the bill. "I'm now in a leadership role. I think it's the right thing to do. I'm willing to step out and carry this deal," despite the possibility of a partisan fight.

"I'm at a point in my legislative career where it's important for me to step up and do this. I'm pleased the governor asked me to do it," Armstrong added.

He observed that no Republican legislators attended Kaine's announcement, and no Republicans have agreed to cosponsor the bill. But he noted that in 2004 then-Gov. Mark Warner's tax package was in the same situation, and it eventually was passed with the support of 17 Republicans.

"I understand their reluctance to increase taxes," Armstrong said of House Republicans. "But the increase being proposed is very modest, and I don't know how we build roads with no money. Today the Commonwealth Transportation Board revised the six-year plan, and it's my understanding there's no new money for U.S. 58 until 2014. It was pushed back. What about I-73? If we want these highways, we have to pay for them."

He added that he thinks Kaine's bill is equitable, with Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads paying 1 cent more of sales tax, with the money staying in those regions.

"Hopefully by allowing Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads ... to do a regional fix, it saves us from being robbed of money. Yet at the same time we're not paying the 1 cent (additional) sales tax. They shoulder more of a burden," he added.