

Armstrong: Change likely on road bill

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By FROM BULLETIN STAFF REPORTS –  
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Gov. Tim Kaine “clearly is going to amend” the transportation bill passed in the recent General Assembly session, but how is not certain yet, Del. Ward Armstrong said Saturday.

“He is going to address the Northern Virginia piece and Hampton Roads piece and the statewide piece. There will be major revisions to all” of them, Armstrong said following his speech to the Piedmont Democratic Women’s Club.

Armstrong, D-Collinsville and the House Minority Leader, and state Sen. W. Roscoe Reynolds, D-Ridgeway, addressed the club’s meeting at Forest Park Country Club.

He said both he and Kaine dislike the fact that the bill takes money from the state’s general fund to cover a \$2.5 billion bond package. They have no objection to the bonds but believe a separate revenue source should be used to pay them off, Armstrong said.

Reynolds called the transportation bill “too little too late.” He said the bill amounts to just “a little money for highway maintenance” and noted some highway construction projects are expected to cost more than \$2.5 billion.

“This package forces localities to do what the General Assembly is not willing to do ... raise taxes on citizens, and it does nothing for rural Virginia in any way,” he said.

Armstrong also told the club that the transportation bill, unveiled on the final weekend of the assembly session, “started when Attorney General (Bob) McDonnell and Congressman Tom Davis got together with GOP leaders. ... I’m sure they felt their position in this state as Republicans was weakening. They probably felt they better do something on transportation” or they would be hurt by their failure to do so.

In crafting the bill, “they met in secret, with no input from the public, no involvement of the governor, no involvement by the Democrats. I’m not whining but we’re part of the process, too. We’re elected just as they are,” Armstrong said. “Is it any wonder it’s ended up in the mess that it’s in. In my humble opinion the only way to fix it is to fix both. There needs to be discussions with the governor and the Democrats. So far they’ve been unwilling to do that,” he added, referring to House Republicans and Senators who were on the conference committee for transportation.

Kaine is traveling around the state, talking to local officials about the bill and seeking ideas for resolving the issue, Armstrong said. He will be in Stuart on Wednesday as part of that tour.

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Local officials have told the governor the plan is largely unworkable because it requires Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads localities to impose taxes for their regional transportation authorities, Armstrong said.

Representatives of those localities have indicated they would not approve provisions to trigger taxes and fees for transportation, Armstrong said. "If they don't do that, there is no regional plan," he said.

He also responded to concerns that if this transportation bill is not enacted, rural Virginia will get even less in the future.

Armstrong acknowledged that transportation needs should have been addressed in 2004 when a state tax hike was approved, "I still maintain we're better off waiting to fix it than enacting something we can't work with."

He has suggested to Kaine that if his amendments to the bill are not approved, he should veto the bill. "He has very grave concerns about the bill as it is," Armstrong added.

Funding for the proposed Interstate 73 and the completion of the U.S. 58 widening near Hillsville are in the state budget — not in the transportation bill, despite what some lawmakers have claimed, according to Reynolds.

He said those highways are in the budget because of support from Kaine.

Also at Saturday's breakfast, the Mary Sue Terry Scholarship was awarded to Nakeisha Davis, daughter of Shirley Davis and Chauncey Redd.