

Legislators wary of quick fix on transportation

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Area state legislators range from hopeful to skeptical that there will be a solution by Saturday to the dilemma of the state transportation package, part of which was ruled unconstitutional by the state Supreme Court last week.

The General Assembly is scheduled to adjourn Saturday.

Last Friday, the Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the part of the 2007 transportation funding law that allows regional transportation authorities in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads to impose taxes for road improvements because the trustees that oversee the authorities are not elected, according to The Associated Press (AP).

The two regional plans, together, were projected to generate more than \$500 million annually, about half the \$1.25 billion that would have been generated under the first major investment in roads, rails and transit since 1986, the AP reported.

Del. Ward Armstrong, D-Collinsville, the House minority leader, said Tuesday he thinks it is unlikely a meaningful solution can be reached by Saturday, especially considering that the General Assembly has spent much of the session debating payday lending. He added that he thinks a special assembly session probably will have to be called on the transportation issue.

Armstrong said he thinks the legislature should not be passing the buck to localities in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads to tax themselves to fund transportation improvements. "It's a statewide issue," he said.

Armstrong said one option might be for the General Assembly to levy the taxes for the transportation improvements in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads.

But Del. David Albo, R-Fairfax County, told the AP he opposes having the General Assembly levy the taxes because the proceeds would be state revenue, "and I don't trust Richmond not to steal my money from my region."

Armstrong also said that if other sources of revenue are looked at, he opposes an increase in the gasoline tax because gas already is expensive. He also said he would be opposed to any changes that would take transportation funds from rural areas of the state, including the area he represents.

Armstrong said he fears that with the repeal of the abusive driver fees by the General Assembly, “that doesn’t leave much for our part of Virginia. What started out as inadequate is now woefully inadequate.” He said sustainable revenue is needed.

Del. Danny Marshall, R-Danville, said he hoped an agreement on the transportation package will be reached by Saturday. He said representatives from both parties and from both chambers of the Legislature are negotiating.

As far as funding for transportation improvements for Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads, he said that perhaps taxing authority should be given to elected local governments in those region.

Marshall said he wants the General Assembly to maintain funding for the U.S. 58 and I-73 projects in this region, which he thinks would help bring jobs to the area. Also, he expressed concern that in the past some people from the most populous areas of the state proposed changing the formula by which transportation funds are awarded from lane mile to congestion (vehicle count), which Marshall said could cause Southside and other areas of rural Virginia to lose transportation funds.

Marshall also said he opposes an increase in the state gas tax.

Del. Don Merricks, R-Pittsylvania, said that everybody — the governor, the House and the Senate — is working hard to come up with a solution, but “whether it will be Saturday ... it may be a little optimistic. I’m hopeful by Saturday.”

In addition to providing some means for elected bodies to levy taxes for transportation improvements in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads, Merricks said he wants to make sure the transportation formula is not changed from funding based on lane miles to congestion, “which would adversely affect our area. Nobody is talking about that now. That is something we have to be vigilant (about): whatever comes down the pike, make sure this doesn’t happen.”

If an agreement is not reached by the end of the legislative session Saturday, options are for the session to be extended, for a special session to be called or for the matter to be addressed during the veto session, Merricks said.

He said he hopes money will stay in the transportation package for improvements in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads, but also to continue funding U.S. 58 and for I-73.

Sen. W. Roscoe Reynolds, D-Ridgeway, said he hopes a compromise will be reached on the transportation package. The main issue, he said, is there is a tremendous amount of highway needs, such as for U.S. 58 to be completed from Hillsville to I-77, the I-73 project and secondary route improvements in this area alone.

“The question is what is going to be done to meet the transportation needs? It’s not a matter of what a person (legislator) supports; it’s a matter of what the leadership of House and Senate come up with,” he said.

At least up until now, the Senate and House have not been able to agree on a workable solution, he said. Last year, they came up with a plan that is falling apart now; before that, there was no acceptable solution, he said.

Reynolds said he advocates the completion of U.S. 58 and for I-73 to be built. It is important for people to realize that in Southside and Southwest Virginia there is little or no money for construction now or in the foreseeable future, he said.

He said he anticipates that people in governor’s office are going to make suggestions about a solution to the transportation package, and legislators will see if a consensus can be reached.