



Interstate 81: Facts & Cost Don't Justify \$13.6 Billion Project

Targeted Solutions Available at Lower Cost

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and STAR, a group of road builders, are negotiating a massive expansion of I-81 under the state's Public Private Transportation Act.¹

STAR plans up to 12 lanes in Augusta County, 10 lanes in Rockingham and Frederick Counties and 8 lanes elsewhere in the Valley. Most lanes will be dedicated to trucks. No lanes will separate cars.

The \$13.6 billion STAR plan is the most expensive public works project in state history. Reports indicate this mega-project is not justified and better alternatives are already underway.

Less Costly, Targeted Solutions:

We don't need 8 to 12 lanes of asphalt to address the problems on I-81: inadequate shoulders, insufficient merging distances and high grades that slow truck traffic in many sections.

- **Improvements in Progress:** VDOT, in its Six Year Plan, has **committed \$400 million and spent \$275 million** to make corridor-wide improvements to problems identified in a 1998 study. They include better entrance and exit ramps, new truck climbing lanes at key locations and adding one lane each way. Major projects are complete in Bristol and Christiansburg.

High Cost to Drivers and all Virginians

VDOT's own studies call for modest improvements over time, at a cost of \$3.4 billion, one fourth the cost of the \$13.6 billion STAR project.

- **Tolls:** Cars will pay five cents per mile and \$16 for a trip the length of I-81. Trucks will pay 20 cents per mile and \$65 for a full-length trip. Traffic is expected to divert to Route 11, I-95 and other roads to avoid the tolls on I-81.
- **Financing Gap.** STAR initially projected a price tag of \$7 billion. The estimate is now \$13.6 billion. Since VDOT capped the truck toll at 20 cents per mile, that leaves a big gap for Virginia taxpayers to close. Any financing shortfall will be covered by higher tolls or by taking money from other transportation projects in Virginia.
- **Pulling Road Money from Other Needs:** STAR wants \$1.6 billion of Virginia's federal transportation funds² and \$1.9 billion in state or local funds to pay for its project. That enormous sum could be better spent on critical transportation problems elsewhere in the state, for improvements to I-81 and for rail improvements in the I-81 corridor.

¹ All data, unless otherwise indicated, from the STAR Proposal, 2003.

² U.S. Rep. John L. Mica (R-FL) made it clear in a conference committee meeting last year that all money allocated under the federal transportation bill will count toward each state's total share of road and transit funds. Any funding for I-81 truck lanes will greatly reduce Virginia's general transportation funds for other projects. VDOT's chief financial officer stated, in a November 2003 analysis, if these funds were subtracted from Virginia's total federal formula share, the effect on the rest of the transportation improvement program would be devastating to both the mass transit and highway construction programs. "

Highway Safety and Traffic Conditions

VDOT's own report on the STAR project, the Purpose and Need Statement, shows I-81 is safer and enjoys better traffic conditions compared to other Virginia interstates. From the report:

- § **Safety:** On I-81, the average crash score is 160 per 100 million miles of travel compared to the statewide interstate average of 277. Many I-81 crashes are animal related, up to 14 percent in a section studied near Salem.
- § **Congestion:** Just seven percent of northbound and 10 percent of southbound lanes are below urban and rural standards of congestion for an interstate highway. Less than one percent (four of 381) of exit and entrance ramps operate below these standards.
- § **Trucks:** The big story on I-81 is the percentage of heavy trucks – 23 to 35 percent of all traffic – nearly twice the rate on I-95 and higher than the average on interstates across the nation. Yet the STAR project depends upon **even more truck traffic** to pay for the road widening, fails to segregate cars from trucks and requires trucks to cross auto lanes at the majority of entrances and exits.

Rail Alternatives Undermined

Seventy percent of all trucks on I-81 are long-distance through-traffic, not local. If a truckway is built, STAR projects an increase from 3 million trucks today to 9.4 million by 2021 and 14 million by 2031. Rail is a critical tool to help manage the load.

- Diverting long-distance freight from trucks to rail can reduce I-81 truck traffic up to 30 percent, according to several studies since 2000. Recent market conditions have pushed rail freight shipments to record levels due to lower costs and improvements in technology, such as those proposed by Norfolk Southern Corporation in their I-81 diversion plan.
- Forty Virginia counties, cities, towns and planning agencies adopted resolutions in 2003 urging VDOT to undertake a full analysis of rail alternatives to a massive widening of I-81. But VDOT's draft Environmental Impact Statement on the STAR project does not allow analysis of the joint investment with neighboring states needed to shift long-distance truck freight to rail. And traffic projections in the VDOT report do not consider investments in other means of transportation to reduce truck traffic.
- STAR wants "a non-compete clause" to restrict Virginia's ability to make rail upgrades and improvements to roads surrounding I-81 to ensure that truck toll revenues stay high.

Time to Consider Other Solutions

All Virginians will pay for the \$13.6 billion STAR project through taxes, tolls and the diversion of funds from other, more pressing road projects. Shenandoah Valley counties also will pay with the disruption of their communities, the loss of battlefields, farms, rural beauty, air and water quality, and the negative economic impacts on tourism, agriculture and many other industries.

Virginians deserve less costly and less destructive options for I-81.

We deserve better information from VDOT about the real impacts.

We deserve a different future than 8 to 12 lanes of mostly truck traffic.

For more information, go to www.shenandoahvalleynetwork.org.