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An HRBT expansion is likely on the way. Here are the project's winners and losers.

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An unexpected 17-0 vote to expand the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel was the most weighty vote I've covered in my year at The Pilot.

It may be the weightiest transportation vote in a generation.

For months, cities had lobbied for their preference of four options to relieve traffic on Interstate 64 and the HRBT. Thursday, local leaders came together and unexpectedly voted for their preferred project a month early. More importantly, the unanimous vote was a strong show of regionalism, in a place with a storied history of parochialism.

My guess is everyone realized they weren't going to get 100 percent of what they wanted. By choosing the cheaper project, it left money to do major interstate projects in Chesapeake, Virginia Beach and Suffolk.

There was compromise. Leaders from smaller communities said the HRBT might not have a direct impact on their community, but they realize the regional improvement will benefit all in some indirect way.

Now that we know the probable project, here's how it shook out.

Winners

Virginia Beach and tourists: The Beach wanted the HRBT done first. It's the main route for those coming from the north. Officials say they don't want bad backups to sour tourists' perception of the beach and prevent them from coming back.

The Peninsula: A third crossing wouldn't directly benefit Newport News and Hampton. Expansion at the HRBT should make it less stressful and more reliable getting to South Hampton Roads and back.

Willoughby Spit residents (kinda): The project would take nine residential properties and small slivers of several others. Plus, more people will get sound walls in their backyards. But this is a drastically smaller footprint than a previous proposal to expand the HRBT.

Navy: The military had significant concerns about an interstate expansion running through Norfolk Naval Station. That's off the table for now and pushed into a long-term vision plan.

Losers

The Port of Virginia: It lobbied for a connector from I-564 near the port out toward the middle of the harbor and then down the side of Craney Island to connect to Va. 164 and beyond. This would have significantly benefited truckers. It's now in a long-range plan beyond 2040. However, officials point out that the connector likely would not have been built because of funding issues until past 2040 anyway. Transportation Secretary Aubrey Layne said he will continue to work toward developing the project as soon as possible.

Hampton Boulevard: Port trucks will likely continue to rumble down Hampton toward the Midtown Tunnel as one of the preferred ways to get out of town.

Norfolk: OK, so Norfolk didn't really lose here. It gets the I-564/664 Connector, formerly known as Patriots Crossing, in a long-term vision plan and money to study it. The city, VDOT and the Navy also get time to work out any concerns about the connector.

Granted, this project is not set in stone. The Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization recommendation is just that – a recommendation. But it is likely the biggest factor the Commonwealth Transportation Board will consider when it votes on the project Dec. 7, and a unanimous decision among 17 localities speaks volumes.

High-occupancy toll lanes are coming to Hampton Roads in 2017, and I left out a very important detail in the story: Solo hybrid vehicle drivers won't get a free ride like they do now on I-64 and I-264 HOV lanes during rush hour.

This would mirror the (unpopular) policy on some of Northern Virginia's HOT lanes. This is how The Washington Post's Dr. Gridlock described it in March: "VDOT officials and transportation experts recognize that the hybrid exemption is a threat to a basic concept behind the HOV/HOT lanes. A faster, more reliable trip is the incentive for carpooling. The more solo drivers in hybrids occupy the lanes, the less likely the carpoolers are to maintain their travel times."

This will surely be met with the same consternation in Hampton Roads.

One person emailed me and said they recently bought a 2015 Honda Accord Hybrid with the special fuel plates "with the sole purpose" of driving to and from the naval station.

Now that's useless for the I-64 HOT lanes, and he's not happy.

U.S. 460 project will be scored under Smart Scale thanks to CTB

The CTB voted Wednesday to submit the U.S. 460 expansion project from Suffolk to west of Zuni.

No local governments or regional organizations were eager to submit the project, so the CTB chose it as one of the two projects it can submit to the Smart Scale transportation funding and prioritization process.

The project includes a new four-lane divided highway from U.S. 58 in Suffolk, a bypass around Windsor and an expansion of the existing highway through Zuni.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recently issued a permit for the project and now officials need to decide whether to pursue it. It may not even score that well against other projects around the state.

Layne said the submission is not an endorsement of the project, but he thinks residents in the area deserve a conclusion on the project: build it, or abandon it.

Finishing up

- Attended the Virginia Governor's Transportation Conference in Arlington this week. The first thing they showed was a stunning video of the Antares rocket launch from Wallops Island on the Eastern Shore. A beaming Layne yells into the camera after the launch: "Virginia's back in space. We are BACK."
- Layne and I were talking about the light-rail referendum at the conference, and he asked, if the vote ends up being 49-48 against light rail, like the recent Virginian-Pilot/WVEC/Christopher Newport University poll said, is that a clear enough mandate to the council? Certainly wouldn't be an overwhelming decision either way.
- The Virginia Beach Tea Party is hosting a light-rail panel discussion that will include both sides of the issue.
- Randal O'Toole of the libertarian think tank Cato Institute is representing the anti argument.
- The event is Nov. 2 from 7-8:30 at the Meyera E. Oberndorf Central Library, 4100 Virginia Beach Blvd.
- A pro-light-rail rally is set for Nov. 5 at the Sandler Center plaza in Town Center from noon to 3 p.m. Anti-light-rail groups led by City Treasurer John Atkinson plan to "crash the party." (Their words, not mine).
- Saw a pro-light-rail digital billboard along I-64 this week. The spending has begun, but VB Connex is not filing campaign finance reports because of an "educational" loophole in the campaign finance laws. It's a complicated issue, and we've struggled to find an independent opinion on whether they should be filing or not. Turns out there's not too many nonprofit/campaign finance wonks out there.
- Watch this video from Mission Transport VB (a.k.a. VB Connex/Light Rail Now) where young people read "mean comments" left on their page. Think of it as a local version of Jimmy Kimmel's "Mean Tweets" segment. Find it at <http://tinyurl.com/jnkt23r>.
- Only 16 days until the election. It's almost over, folks.