

NATIONAL REVIEW

Why I-95 in Virginia Is Jammed

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Drivers were stranded overnight on Interstate 95 in Virginia, and the highway remains blocked due to ice and accidents over the past 30 hours. Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) officials say they hope to have the highway reopened for the morning rush tomorrow, and they just now announced that no more people are stranded in cars on the highway.

According to VDOT officials, the initial cause of the backup was multiple crashes in the Fredericksburg area on Monday morning. They have closed a roughly 50-mile stretch of highway south of Washington, D.C. As cars and trucks became stuck, the snow piled up around them, making it even harder to move. Temperatures didn't spend much time above freezing today, and the snow is still on the ground. Vehicles were there so long that they ran out of gas. Fortunately, there have been no traffic-related injuries or deaths reported.

Here's what VDOT had to say about its preparation, according to the *Washington Post*:

VDOT officials said they were prepared for the storm, but snow fell faster and for longer than they could manage. Tractor-trailers began jackknifing on the highway about 8:30 a.m. Monday, state police said, causing motorists to lose control and other trucks to jackknife to avoid collisions. Disabled vehicles and tractor-trailers blocked exits, and VDOT officially closed the highway about 8 a.m. Tuesday to avoid other motorists from trying to enter and to help others make their way off the highway.

"I do believe that VDOT was prepared prior to this storm," [Fredericksburg district engineer Marcie] Parker said. "We got more snow than what was initially predicted, and the rate was falling harder. Could we have kept up with a snowfall rate of that amount? No."

She said VDOT didn't pretreat the portion of the highway because rain that preceded the sleet and snow would have washed it away. Even so, Kelly Hannon, VDOT's communications manager for the Fredericksburg District, said the agency apologized for the "very stressful, scary situations" and would take an "exhaustive look" at what happened.

An exhaustive look would be a good idea. According to drivers interviewed by the *Post*, VDOT sent out a notification only on Tuesday morning. One driver asked, "If they were able to send an

alert out this morning, why couldn't they do that yesterday?" That's an excellent question that transportation officials should have to answer.

Fredericksburg got about twelve inches of snow, which is about the average annual snowfall for that area, all in one day. This was a big snowfall, no doubt about it. But it's not unheard of. The Fredericksburg *Free Lance-Star* reports that Fredericksburg got 25 inches of snow in January 2016, two feet in February 2010, 20 inches in December 2009, two feet in February 2003, 20-25 inches in January 1996, 17 inches twice in January 1987, and 24-30 inches in 1983. It's not as if Miami or San Diego got a foot of snow.

A *Free Lance-Star* weather report from Monday morning slightly understated the exact amount of snow but essentially predicted the weather event accurately:

Temperatures at midnight were a trifecta of 46 degree readings at Stafford Regional Airport, Shannon Airport, and the University of Mary Washington. By 6:30 this morning, those thermometers had dropped to near freezing, and will remain there much of today thanks to gusty northerly winds yanking cold air into the region. As a result of the temperatures and frozen precipitation, the Fredericksburg vicinity is under a Winter Storm Warning until 4 p.m.

Precipitation will taper off by mid-afternoon from west to east across the Fredericksburg area. Snow and sleet will accumulate in the 6-10 inch range as temperatures hover near 30 degrees. The clouds will clear enough to allow the sun to reappear before it sets at 5:02 p.m. Those clear skies will contribute to frigid conditions tonight, as local thermometers plummet into the teens by Tuesday morning.

Tomorrow will thus begin very cold, with any wet surfaces having refrozen. Travel on Tuesday morning will be treacherous, as streets and bridges are likely to be icy.

The National Weather Service issued a winter-storm warning on Sunday for Fredericksburg starting at 1 a.m. on Monday. It's not as though nobody knew this was coming. That applies just as much to VDOT as it does to people who were on the roads.

Weather aside, there are two unique things about VDOT that may have contributed to this debacle. First, despite being the twelfth largest state by population and the 35th largest state by land area, Virginia has the third largest state highway system in the country. The reason for that is the Byrd Road Act of 1932, which transferred control of many highways from county governments to the state. Highways that would be maintained by the county in other states are often maintained by the state in Virginia. That means VDOT has to spread its resources over a larger number of highways, so it can't focus as much on the interstates as other state DOTs would.

Second, VDOT is quite corrupt. In a blog post from 2018, Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute noted that "corruption is alleged to be 'rampant' and 'endemic,'" and "the corruption has been apparently going on for years." He links to a *Washington Post* story describing hundreds of thousands of dollars of bribes among snowplow contractors, and some drug deals as well. A prosecutor quoted in the story said, "This is a more pervasive problem in the Virginia Department of Transportation than is known."

The official named in that report, Anthony Willie, was sentenced to seven years in prison for an \$11 million bribery scheme that lasted over five years. According to the DOJ's statement on the sentencing, Willie and another official "secretly used their official positions to enrich themselves by soliciting and accepting cash bribes in exchange for various favorable official acts, such as awarding lucrative snow removal work to local trucking companies during winter snow storms in the northern Virginia area." Actually removing snow has not always been the top priority in awarding VDOT snow-removal contracts in recent years.

All of this is on top of the fact that I-95 between Richmond and Washington is one of the most congested highway corridors in the country to begin with. Glenn Youngkin will be inaugurated as governor on January 15. If he's in need of day-one plans, he should look at reforming VDOT.