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METRO EXTENSION
Agency Nixes Tysons Tunnel
 Setback for Coalition Lobbying for Underground Route

By [Bill Turque](#)
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The federal agency responsible for reviewing the proposed Metro extension to [Dulles International Airport](#) will not reconsider placing the elevated segment through [Tysons Corner](#) underground, officials said yesterday.

The decision by the [Federal Transit Administration](#) (FTA) is the latest setback for a coalition of Northern Virginia businesses and residents that has mounted an aggressive campaign to have the \$2.7 billion first phase of the project redesigned, asserting that a tunnel would help Tysons' evolution into a more mature, pedestrian-friendly urban center.

TysonsTunnel.org, heavily bankrolled by the West Group, a major Tysons landowner, petitioned the FTA on March 26, asking the agency to reopen its environmental review of the project and require competitive bidding.

But the FTA, which is evaluating the rail extension as designed to see if it qualifies for a \$900 million grant, denied the petition. In a May 23 letter made public yesterday, the agency cited legal and engineering reasons. The tunnel, deputy chief counsel Scott A. Biehl said, was an issue to be decided at the state and local level. The same was true for the question of competitive bidding. The current construction contract is the product of the state's negotiation with a single private construction consortium headed by [Bechtel](#).

The agency also found that there was no need to revisit the environmental review because the impact of a tunnel was adequately covered by the current study. While the design commissioned by Tysons advocates features new tunnel boring technology, the federal agency found that it raised no new significant environmental issues.

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A coalition of businesses and residents asserts that a tunnel would make Tysons more pedestrian-friendly. (By Jahi Chikwendu -- The Washington Post)

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The agency's decision was accompanied by the latest in what has become a pallet-sized collection of engineering studies weighing the tunnel and above-ground options. The new report, commissioned by the FTA and conducted by the construction consulting firm Hill International, confirmed the findings of a state-sponsored study, which concluded that a tunnel, while technically feasible, posed technical unknowns that could prolong construction and make it more expensive.

That study, by the firm Carter & Burgess, followed two other reports, one a proposed design from engineers retained by TysonsTunnel.org and the other an analysis by the American Society of Civil Engineers, which said a tunnel was likely to cost more and take longer to build, but would aid Tysons' transformation into a bona fide urban center.

Hill International said that there had been insufficient analysis of the soil conditions at Tysons. The available evidence showed "mixed face" soil, which is weaker than bedrock and could cause sinkholes that would delay construction and add tens of millions of dollars to the cost.

Overall, Hill concluded, the tunnel option would cost \$875 million, compared with \$577 million for the elevated design.

Scott A. Monett, president of TysonsTunnel.org, said the FTA's decision was disappointing but not unexpected.

He did express dismay that agency officials did not contact the Tysons Tunnel engineering team or potential contractors and relied entirely upon the Carter & Burgess report, which itself was produced without consultation with tunnel engineers or contractors.

"Garbage in, garbage out," Monett said.

[Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Chairman Gerald E. Connolly](#) (D), who will preside over a public briefing on the project Monday, said it was "a little disingenuous" of the FTA to merely claim that the design issue was a state and local matter. He said the agency made it clear last fall that [Virginia](#) was free to reopen the project, but that it stood in serious jeopardy of losing the \$900 million grant and going "to the back of the line" in competition with other localities for federal dollars.

The board is scheduled to vote June 18 on the county's share of the funding for the extension, even though a key FTA analysis of the financial and engineering risks won't be available by then.

Connolly said no decision had been made about rescheduling the vote.

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