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Dulles Rail Review Delayed

Funding Vote Set Despite Lack Of Risk Report

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By [Bill Turque](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
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The [Fairfax County](#) Board of Supervisors, nearing a critical vote June 18 on funding the beginning of Metro's expansion to [Dulles International Airport](#), will not be able to see a key assessment of the \$2.7 billion project's financial risks until as late as mid-August, a federal official said yesterday.

It could mean yet another delay for the rail link, sought for decades by officials as a prescription for chronic traffic congestion in Northern Virginia -- and debated for just as long by stakeholders unable to agree on its cost or design.

The board was to approve the county's \$400 million share of the extension, money that is to come from taxes imposed on property owners along the 11.6-mile rail line, the first phase of which would run from a point east of the West Falls Church Metro station to Wiehle Avenue in Reston.

But the [Federal Transit Administration](#) (FTA), which is expected to contribute \$900 million, said yesterday that two "risk workshops" to evaluate the financial and engineering soundness of the project -- including the potential for cost overruns -- likely won't be completed until as late as mid-August.

An agency spokesman said the risk review has been delayed because officials of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation were six weeks late in providing critical documents. The deadline is one of a series missed by the agency, which was months late in reaching a construction agreement with [Dulles Transit Partners](#), a private consortium that includes Bechtel Inc., and with the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority.

That six-week delay was first reported yesterday by the Washington Examiner.

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Several board members said yesterday that they would be reluctant to vote on county funding without the federal agency's evaluation.

"How can we in good conscience as a board vote when we don't know whether Uncle Sam is playing ball?" said Supervisor T. [Dana Kauffman](#) (D-Lee), a leading critic of the plans to build the extension through [Tysons Corner](#) mostly above ground instead of in a tunnel. A coalition of Northern Virginia businesses and residents, <http://TysonsTunnel.org>, says it has an engineering study showing that the project can be built with a more aesthetically pleasing and pedestrian-friendly tunnel for a fixed price of \$2.2 billion -- \$500 million less than the current projected cost.

Fairfax County [Board of Supervisors Chairman Gerald E. Connolly](#) (D) said yesterday that he would look at the possibility of postponing the vote. But he added: "Rail to Dulles is the single most important transportation project we've got. . . . We don't want to contribute to any further delays."

[County Executive Anthony H. Griffin](#) said yesterday that board approval June 18 was "very important to the overall schedule" of the venture. He said that even without the total risk assessment, "we will have a sense of how the review is going." In any event, he added, county funding would be subject to the transit administration's final approval of the project.

"The [\$900 million] grant won't be approved by FTA unless the risk assessment is good," Griffin said.

The federal agency had been prepared to review the rail project in mid-March, but spokesman Wes Irvin said delays at the state level made that impossible.

"We're doing due diligence on a project that has a history of uncertainties and unknowns," Irvin said. "We have a duty to make sure it is reviewed thoroughly."

The agency has retained two consulting firms to conduct independent analyses of the public-private rail venture, which is projected to cost \$5.1 billion, when the final segment to Dulles is completed in 2013.

The new potential delays come amid continuing political pressure on the board from tunnel advocates. The West Group, a developer with major holdings in Tysons and a heavy contributor to county political campaigns, has been especially aggressive in trying to persuade the board to renounce the above-ground option and insist on a competitive bid for the first phase.

The company lent TysonsTunnel \$3.5 million to help bankroll the tunnel campaign, which lately has included television and newspaper advertising urging backers to pack the room Monday when the board holds a public meeting on the project.

In a letter last Friday to Kauffman, West Group President Gerald T. Halpin excoriated the contracting process. "From my vantage point as a member of this community for more than 50 years, I can personally say without reservation that the current project process and approach is the worst thing I have seen in Northern Virginia, ever."

In an April 30 "briefing document" to tunnel advocates, West Group Executive Vice President Donna P. Shafer said that the McLean Citizens Association needed to redouble its pressure on Supervisor Joan DuBois (R-Dranesville).

"Joan DuBois needs to know that her constituents here do not want to be saddled with an open-ended contract for a second-rate aerial solution that could result in hundreds of millions more in costs," Shafer wrote.

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
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