

Senator Houck Reports from Richmond
(Week of April 3, 2006)

On March 27th, the Special Session of the General Assembly, as requested by Governor Tim Kaine, convened in Richmond. The purpose is to reconcile the differences between the comprehensive transportation plans and budgets as proposed by the House of Delegates and the State Senate.

While there are many dynamics that shape my decision making, I have utilized the reactions from you, my constituents, via the survey I sent during the 2006 session of the General Assembly.

When asked "Is transportation improvement a key issue for you?" **75% of the respondents answered yes.** Obviously, my work, while seemingly unproductive at times, is important to the citizens of this senate district. As a Budget Conferee, I will work earnestly to resolve this important issue.

One question that received the most negative responses was: Should budgetary funds be diverted from public and higher education, the environment, and health care to fund transportation? **91% of respondents answered this question with a NO.**

This question captures the greatest difference between the House of Delegates and the Senate's competing versions of the budget: What funding methods should be used for transportation improvements? The entire Senate, Democrats and Republicans alike, do not feel it is responsible to take funds from other core programs, such as education, public safety and health care to fund our transportation needs. Transportation must have its own funding sources to ensure its viability and should not compete with school children, law enforcement officials or frail senior citizens in nursing homes. The House of Delegates' approach does exactly that, which all forty Senators have rejected.

By creating a reliable and dedicated source of transportation dollars, the Senate will be able to more adequately fund programs such as the Highway Construction Fund, the Rail Enhancement Fund, and the Commonwealth Mass Transit Fund. Without question, mass transit development and rail funds are important programs to the 17th District and our economic viability. When asked, should the Commonwealth improve and expand the mass transit system to deal with congestion problems, **92% responded yes.**

Money alone is not the only answer to Virginia's transportation dilemma. The geographic areas that I represent are experiencing rapid resident development, which puts additional strain on our poorly funded transportation system. I sponsored a number of bills, which passed the General Assembly, that deal with land use planning and transportation. Ultimately, I believe these measures will lead to enhanced coordination of these separate government functions. My actions were guided by the comments I received from the survey whereby **96% responded** that local land use and state transportation planning should be better connected.

I hope current disagreements between the House and Senate can be appropriately resolved. As always, please do not hesitate to contact my office with questions or comments.