

Sept 4, 2008
Newport News

Mayor Joseph Frank
Chairman, MPO Committee

Mayor Frank,

This letter is my submittal to the discussion at the MPO Committee meeting on Tuesday, September 2, 2008. If you remember, in the interest of time, you asked me to send a note in lieu of speaking as the meeting was running late. I appreciate your consideration.

My comment is about the discussion on weighted voting. I recognize that some sort of weighted voting in relation to population is fair. My concern is the potential that I see to relinquish the MPO decision-making capability to special interests.

According to the MPO website, the MPO now has 16 voting members, representing 13 communities, and 3 special interests - the Williamsburg Area Transit, the Transportation District of Hampton Roads, and the Virginia Department of Transportation. I refer to these three as special interests, since they all, in some way, receive subsidies from the government. This results in 81% of the voting power resting in the hands of the representatives of the communities, who in turn, represent their constituencies. Weighted voting with this mix would likely result in a larger percentage of voting power in the hands of the communities, which is as it should be.

But, the draft by-laws of August 29 add more special interests as voting members, the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation and the Virginia Port Authority plus the Federal Highway Administration. Discussion around the table on Tuesday indicated that others such as the airports and freight interests were also being considered to be included as voting members of the MPO.

The special interests were often referred to as "stakeholders" at the meeting. I take exception to this designation. The stakeholders are the citizens of your communities, not the special interests. These special interests should exist to only to serve the public good. They should not be political advocates, potentially against the public will or interests.

A Citizens Transportation Advisory Committee is also being considered with one vote on the MPO. At my count, that is around a 5 to 1 advantage of special interests over citizens.

Because of the added "stakeholders", a weighted voting system was discussed in an effort to maintain a voting ratio in favor of the communities represented at around 70%. The discussion centered on the potential of several large communities hijacking the voting power by forming a coalition. An honest effort ensued to minimize that probability. But, everyone in the room seemed to not see the big elephant being injected into the voting mix - the addition of several special interests with voting rights.

Each weighting scheme that was discussed ignored the potential of a few large communities such as Virginia Beach, Norfolk and Chesapeake in a coalition along with several of the special interests. This block is not far-fetched. I easily see a potential coalition of several of the special interests having similar goals as the larger Southside communities.

My suggestion is to develop a standing committee consisting of the special interest groups and allocate the chair of that committee one voting seat on the MPO - as is now proposed for Citizens Transportation Advisory Committee.

With that suggestion in place, whatever the final decision is on weighted voting, the voting power would still reside mainly with you and your colleagues, the representatives of the communities - as it should be. Special interest groups should never be given enough power to override the taxpayers or their duly elected representatives.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

John R. Gergely, PE
449 Winterhaven Dr.
Newport News 23606
(757) 930-3815
gergely@visi.net

cc for information:
NN City Council members
Interested Virginia Peninsula General Assembly members
Ivan Rucker, FHWA