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Governor Opts for Aerial Alignment through Tyson's Corner, Commends ASCE on its Review of Tunnel Option

By Mark Fitzgerald

Following months of deliberation—including the two-month assessment that engaged the independent review panel that ASCE recently convened and headed—Virginia's Governor, Timothy M. Kaine, announced last month his decision to proceed with the proposed aerial alignment of the Metrorail system through the highly developed area of northern Virginia known as Tysons Corner. Given the review panel's finding that the construction of a 4.2 mi (6.7 km) tunnel through that region is feasible and an apparent consensus that a tunnel alternative would provide better integrated development, Kaine's decision was a surprise.

"We carefully reviewed the tunnel option at Tysons, and I share the belief of many of our project partners that a tunnel alignment would be the best option," acknowledged the governor in a statement on September 6. "However, too many unanswered questions remain about cost and timing. These uncertainties cannot be allowed to jeopardize this critical project."

While the report that ASCE's independent review panel issued to Kaine on July 31 found that the tunnel alternative would cost approximately \$250 million more than the aboveground option and would likely extend the project schedule by 12 months, it also

suggested that a tunnel was a reasonable and cost-effective option, especially given the lower maintenance costs of underground tracks. Evidently a major factor in the governor's decision to abandon the tunnel alternative, however, was the \$900 million—almost a quarter of the project's estimated \$4 billion cost—that the federal government is expected to contribute if the project's overall cost falls within the “cost effectiveness” parameters set forth by standards based largely on how much travel time a project is expected to save for riders per dollar spent.

Faced with admonitions from members of congress and other government officials that the extra cost and time of the tunnel alternative would jeopardize federal funding for the entire 23-mile (37 km) project to extend Metrorail service westward from Vienna, Virginia to Washington Dulles International Airport, Kaine approved a plan for an elevated track (with an average height of 10.7 m) that will extend over parts of Chain Bridge Road and Leesburg Pike. “This will prove to be the wrong decision for the wrong reasons,” T. Dana Kauffman, a supervisor of Fairfax County and a Metrorail board member, told *The Washington Post* on September 6. “Ten years from now, I regret my son may pick up a planning text where Fairfax's long-awaited rail extension is highlighted as a failed attempt at service and economic development. It can't only be about the here and now.”

Although the report that the independent review panel provided did not explicitly recommend the tunnel alternative, the majority of conclusions drawn indicated that an underground route, which received broad acceptance across many constituencies and affected communities, offered the region greater benefits. “In advising against the tunnel alternative, the congressional delegation deemed it unlikely that the Federal Transit Administration would depart from its existing cost-effectiveness criterion,” explained Patrick J. Natale, P.E., F.ASCE, the Society's executive director, on September 8 during a meeting with ASCE's board of direction. “This scenario was excluded from the panel's review—with the full concurrence of the state's representative in the review process—due to a declaration by the FTA of its intention to make revisions in the criterion and its application.”

As a way of recognizing ASCE's assistance in assembling and leading the independent review panel—as well as the guidance that the experts on the panel provided—Governor Kaine and Pierce R. Homer, the Commonwealth of Virginia's

Secretary of Transportation, presented ASCE with a certificate of appreciation on July 31. “ASCE has received high praise for the seasoned judgment brought to bear by the panel in its report and recommendations,” added Natale. “Further, although the panel’s identification of the overriding benefits provided by the tunnel alternative did not carry the decision, the Commonwealth has declared its appreciation of many other highly valuable comments and recommendations it has and will continue to use in its management of the project going forward. This effort by the Society is an example of the civil engineer’s role in infrastructure stewardship; and it was an appropriate and proactive role for the Society to take. That, in this case, the voice of the civil engineer did not prevail is just a reminder that the profession constitutes just one voice and that we must continue to honor our seat at the table by offering our advice with integrity, confidence, and clarity.”