

Richmond Times-Dispatch

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2021

Editorial: Traditional infrastructure investments will improve human outcomes



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Federal lawmakers in Washington escalated their tug-of-war this past week over two sweeping pieces of “infrastructure” legislation: a [\\$1 trillion package](#) focusing on traditional improvements to roads, bridges, rail, airports, broadband and more; and a [\\$3.5 trillion bill](#) focusing on “human infrastructure,” including provisions for Medicare expansion, free community college, child care and universal pre-K.

Virginians continue to grapple with pandemic-driven forces that magnify struggles with one or more of these public policy issues in their households. No single factor should be overlooked. Whether it’s child care or health care, a lack of access or resources can make or break a family’s stability and affect the overall economy.

But traditional infrastructure investments — upgrades to the structures and facilities that keep society moving — are the first part of the solution. These fixes might be less flashy, but they will improve human outcomes.

Rewind to 2015. In a [column for the Washington Examiner](#), Robert Puentes, a nonresident senior fellow for the Brookings Institution’s Metropolitan Policy Program, made his case for infrastructure as the “backbone of a healthy economy.”

“The economy needs reliable infrastructure to connect supply chains and efficiently move goods and services across borders,” Puentes wrote. “Infrastructure connects households across metropolitan areas to higher-quality opportunities for employment, health care and education.”

In just six years, this perspective has evolved quite a bit. Digest a few snapshots that underscore some changes in key facets of everyday life.

The economy: At the end of 2015, Amazon Prime had about [54 million members](#). Today, that figure [exceeds 200 million](#). And even neighborhood grocery stores, from big chains like Kroger to local names like [Libbie Market](#), have instituted online ordering and delivery/pickup options to keep pace with how consumers wish to acquire goods and services.

Employment: A [2015 Gallup poll](#) found that only 37% of U.S. workers ever had telecommuted, whereas a [2020 study](#) by Owl Labs — a video conference equipment company — found roughly 62% of workers [ages 22 to 65](#) were remote at least occasionally. Locally, Capital One, the Richmond region’s [largest private employer](#) with 13,000 workers, [said in June](#) that its future is as a “hybrid work company.”

Health care: A [survey](#) by American Well — a telemedicine tech company — found that only 5% of doctors had used such platforms in 2015, whereas a [July McKinsey](#) study estimated 13% to 17% of patient visits were being conducted via telehealth. The Richmond region’s No. 2 and No. 3 private employers show how society is adapting: Bon Secours offers a [24/7 virtual visit service](#), while VCU Health operates a [virtual urgent clinic](#) from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily.

Education: A Virginia Public Access Project graphic mapped the [fall 2020 reopening statuses](#) for K-12 school divisions across the state. Each had some form of virtual learning, and even as in-person schooling returned this fall, online communication is likely a more regular part of the school year than in 2015.

“Big demographic and cultural changes, such as the aging and diversification of our society, shrinking households and domestic migration, underscore the need for new transportation and telecommunications to connect people and communities,” [Puentes added](#).

Two examples accompanied that point: a decline in licensed drivers, with younger people opting for ride-sharing and biking; and a drop in married families with school-age kids, from more than 40% of households in 1970 to 20% in 2015. And Virginia’s own infrastructure investments since 2015 appear to reflect that shift. Consider three developments.

Public transit: The creation of recent bus lines in the Richmond region, from the [Pulse in 2018](#) to new service along U.S. Route 1 in 2020, changed how we access jobs, education and health care. Whether you’re an employee at the [SimpliSafe call center at Willow Lawn](#) or a student at [John Tyler Community College](#), a free-fare bus trip is a markedly different option than having to arrange a ride from a friend or family member.

Rail: [More Amtrak passenger service](#) from Norfolk, Newport News, Richmond and Roanoke to points north is beginning to take shape. This growth is supported by a forthcoming second bridge over the Potomac River to provide better balance with freight traffic, while also easing congestion along major interstate highways.

Earlier this year, [the average cost of a new car](#) crossed \$40,000 nationally. Regardless of how much a vehicle costs, roads in disrepair can create more financial distress. A [February 2020 study by TRIP](#), a Washington nonprofit, found Richmond drivers lose roughly \$1,500 per year due to added vehicle operating costs, traffic accidents and congestion delays. And don’t forget the environmental element, as [transportation is a leading cause of greenhouse gas emissions](#). These observations beg the question: Should cars be more or less of a staple six years from now?

Broadband: During the pandemic, going to work, the doctor or an online class has been second-nature for some people. For others without reliable internet, the process has been — and, in some cases, continues to be — a nightmare.

In 2015, the [Virginia Telecommunications Initiative](#), a state-funded program that works with localities and providers to connect unserved areas, did not even exist. Since 2017, Virginia has awarded \$124 million in grants, bringing more than 140,000 homes and businesses online.

[According to Commonwealth Connect](#), the state’s broadband coalition, 233,500 Virginians still are unconnected. And even in places that have gained internet access, families and businesses still need help to afford and/or learn the benefits of this new technology, from selling goods to using library services.

The goals outlined in the congressional infrastructure proposals appear to be well-intentioned. COVID-19 has taken a toll on our community, and in an ideal world, every federal dollar will yield its intended purpose. But massive spending plans require equivalent execution.

If Virginia is any example, traditional infrastructure investments — public transit, rail, broadband and more — stand to improve human outcomes. To drive prosperity, we have to start with the systems and facilities that keep us going.

— *Chris Gentilviso*