

Washington Post, July 25, 2002

GUEST COLUMN

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Connecting the Eisenhower-Duke Connector to Larger Issue of Development

George Foote is a member of the Ad Hoc Eisenhower Avenue to Duke Street Connector Task Force. He also served as the first chairman of the Alexandria Budget and Fiscal Affairs Committee. As the city debates where—or whether—to build an Eisenhower connector, Foote urges city residents and leaders to think about the larger issues.

This October, the Alexandria City Council will decide whether to build a connector road from Eisenhower Avenue to Duke Street. Before the vote, a citizen task force and city staff will spend hours reviewing traffic models and sorting through a complex decision matrix, then recommend whether or where to build the road. Meanwhile, civic associations are squaring off and developers are weighing in.

We may be wasting our time focusing on the connector alone. The traffic impact of the connector is serious, but it is a mere day at the beach compared with the tidal wave of development that is bearing down on Alexandria.

Here is one look at the coming flood. By the time this year's first-graders graduate from T.C. Williams High School, Alexandria could add half as much new commercial building space as there is in all of Tysons Corner today. That is more than 10 million square feet of new space.

Another look: We could have the equivalent of half of downtown Philadelphia in east Eisenhower Valley alone. Development in the west valley could add millions more square feet. Potomac Yard is approved for 2 million square feet in Alexandria and more than 3 million just across the line in Arlington.

Alexandria already is one of the densest cities in the United States, and we serve large regional traffic flows. Even with a small fraction of the projected growth—and despite all the planned investment in transit

systems—Alexandria's 16 square miles of area will become much denser and congested. The growth will impose new loads on our entire infrastructure. We will have to choose whether to knock down homes and businesses to build new roads or have our cars and buses wait in traffic at more failed intersections. Our neighborhood streets will become busy commuter shortcuts, and our emergency services and air quality will be degraded.

This hard urban vision, so foreign to Alexandria's traditional red brick buildings in Old Town and quiet neighborhoods around the city, may offer some fiscal and lifestyle advantages. Moreover, Alexandria has gifted and dedicated officials and professional staff who can manage change as well as anyone.

But Alexandrians better take a long, cold look at the wave of proposed development. We should at least decide whether to accept the changes it would wash into Alexandria.

The history of the Eisenhower connector helps track the approaching hurricane. For decades, Eisenhower Valley was a 3½-mile-long flood plain between the Belway and Duke Street. The empty valley, however, beckoned city planners and developers. Alexandria receives half its revenue from property taxes and needs commercial development to help fund vital services. Developers saw a prime location for a new commercial and residential district.

The City Council first sought a Beltway interchange for the valley in 1973, and later voted to connect the future interchange to Duke Street in the West End. In the 1980s, the city staff built a ramp to begin the infamous Bluestone Road connector from the valley to Quaker Lane. Alexandria bloomed with "No Bluestone" signs. A special council election turned on the issue, and the ramp is now a grassy hill beside the Metro yard.

By the 1990s, the storm was taking shape. The Beltway interchange opened in 1997. The federal courthouse, the Patent and Trademark Office and other developments grew in Eisenhower Valley. Developers, business people and the valley's new residents organized to promote the valley.

On the north side of the city, the long fight over Potomac Yard ended and construction began.

Back in the valley, the City Council appointed a West End task force to review the route of the connector road from the beltway interchange to Duke Street. When the task force nimbly shifted the recommended route back toward the Bluestone ramp, about two miles east of the Beltway interchange, heavy-weather warnings went out. Strong interests mobilized to block the proposed \$25 million road.

Thousands of residents in neighborhoods north of Duke Street oppose more cut-through traffic and object to expansion of the growing link between two interstate highways along Quaker Lane and Seminary Road. Schools and parents seek reduction, not increases, in traffic risks for children at affected schools.

Valley interests argue that the connector would improve access to the valley's new homes and offices and claim it would relieve traffic on Duke and Van Dorn streets. Meanwhile, the development wave rolls on. In April, the General Assembly earmarked \$25 million from the proposed new sales tax for Eisenhower Valley improvements.

Regardless of whether we build a connector, if this wave continues, Alexandria's city streets will become urban highways to serve commuters and the expanding commercial zones while neighborhoods throughout the city change and disappear. It is time to reconnect the connector debate to the larger question of what kind of city we want to live in and leave to our children.