

Rush hour finds park intersection still a traffic bottleneck

By CLINT SCHEMMER
of the Potomac News

By now, state highway engineers figured last winter, they'd have unsnarled a traffic bottleneck that's been troubling Prince William County supervisors since 1980.

No longer, they thought, would rush hour find cars logjammed and drivers frustrated where Va. 234 and U.S. 29 cross at Manassas National Battlefield Park. Six new turn lanes and different signals would ease commuters through a crossroads that's bogged down as motorists seek an alternative to the gridlock of Interstate 66.

Politics have put off the engineer's hopes but left their plans intact.

Six months after the Virginia Department of Transportation unveiled its plan to widen the intersection, nearly three years after Gainesville Supervisor Tony Guiffre expressed his concerns about Sudley Road's safety, the department and the National Park Service are still quarreling over the project.

As the controversy wears on, the road builders and park rangers appear more firmly entrenched on opposite sides of a deepening gulf. The department, echoing Guiffre's rationale, says safety demands that the accident-prone crossroads be widened. The Park Service says the project, by overhauling a crossroads little changed since 1862, would cripple its efforts to preserve the ground where two Civil War battles raged.

Time has won each side more allies, raising the political ante in what began as a strictly local issue.

The biggest volley came last month, when Gov. Gerald Baliles' chief of staff countered a plea for preservation from William Penn Mott, director of the National Park Service.

A week later, Secretary of Transportation Vivian Watts made the same points in a letter to Dama Rice, president of Friends of the Virginia Civil War Parks, the largest group of park supporters in the state.

The same month, Civil War Times Illustrated published a strongly worded editorial criticizing Guiffre and the transportation department for their proposal at "Manassas, the historic site under siege."

The exchanges have VDOT's engineers walking softly, trying to find some formula that will soothe the Park Service and let them widen the crossroads from a total of eight to 13 lanes.

But the recent correspondence, and interviews with the opponents, reveal neither side is willing to



PWC - MANASSAS NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD PARK

By Steve Mawyer—Potomac News

Road crews are busy pushing through the new lanes of the Va. 28 expansion project.

compromise on the central issue.

Mott staked out the Park Service's position in a June 25 letter to Baliles, telling him the project threatened the park's historic integrity.

Noting that the late Sen. Harry Flood Byrd sponsored the legislation creating the battlefield park, Mott appealed to the governor to continue Byrd's and other Virginians' work to protect the "hallowed ground" where nearly 4,000 Union and Confederate soldiers died.

The intersection project, Mott wrote, would "destroy the last vestiges of a rural crossroads" that was key to both battles and is vital to understanding them today.

The additional pavement "will have serious impacts on this nationally significant resource," Mott wrote. "It will also lead to local pressure to widen from two to four lanes U.S. 29 and Va. 234 ... through the park, further compromising ... the values for which the National Battlefield Park was established."

Andrew Fogarty, Baliles' chief of staff, responded five weeks later, writing, "The governor appreciates the desire of the National Park Service, as well as many others, to preserve the rural nature of this historic area."

"However, the responsibilities of the Commonwealth to its citizens are many. Among them are both public safety on our highways and the preservation of our historic resources. Ideally we should, through a cooperative effort, strive to achieve a balance between these two responsibilities," Fogarty concluded.

Baliles' message is clear to VDOT's local engineers, who are trying new tactics to win over Park

Superintendent Rolland Swain.

They've eliminated a turn lane that bordered parkland and have begun an environmental study of the proposal.

State law doesn't require VDOT to study the project's environmental impact, a situation that led Bryan Mitchell, director of the Virginia Division of Historic Landmarks, to write to VDOT Commissioner Ray Pethel, "This project can legally proceed without any effort at all to explore options that might be less detrimental to the battlefield park ... Do you feel that the Department of Transportation's exemption from any state environmental review remains appropriate state policy?"

The quest for compromise has also led VDOT engineers to contemplate whether brown pavement, guard rails and light poles would improve the widened intersection's visual appeal.

But Swain, backed fully by Mott, said the problem isn't the asphalt's color — it is the project's very nature.

And the National Park Service, its director said, is going to stand fast in opposition to the proposal.

"I think our position on the integrity of Manassas battlefield is more significant, and a more responsible approach to the transportation problem," Mott said in a recent interview. "We're going to continue to argue that point of view."

"My watchword has been that when in doubt, we must err on the side of preservation. Our responsibility is not just today; our responsibility is forever."

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That's because the junction of Centreville Road and Va. 29—211 is already two lanes in each direction; therefore, traffic can't move any faster through the light just because Centreville Road has been expanded, Trimble said.

VDOT is planning to install just one traffic light on the new northbound lanes, at the intersection of Groveton Road and Centreville Road, said VDOT project engineer Jim Harpine. The builders of the Green Trails development are planning to put a signal at their entrance off Centreville Road, he

added.

VDOT estimates that about 23,000 vehicles will travel on the new four-lane Centreville Road. Harpine didn't have figures on the road's current traffic volume.

Asked if the VDOT figure was a conservative estimate, Harpine declined to speculate if the number was too high or too low. The results of recent traffic study in Manassas suggest that the number of vehicles using Centreville Road each day could be substantially higher.

The study, conducted during a 24-hour period in June, was a count of the number of vehicles that went through the intersection of Center

Street and Fairview Avenue.

Police Chief Sam Ellis said his team counted about 15,000 vehicles.

Expanded to four lanes — two of them new, two of them repaved in certain areas — Centreville Road is Northern Virginia's latest response to rapid growth.

While he welcomes the new road, Manassas Planning Director William Shelly believes that in a year or two the road could once again become overcrowded.

"I think it has benefits," Shelly said. "But they will probably be short-term."