

From nearly the moment that the Arlington County portion of Interstate 66 opened in 1982, various planners and officials have fought to widen it based on the simple argument that more lanes are needed to alleviate daily traffic jams.

The latest effort to widen the road, launched last year on Capitol Hill and under consideration by Virginia officials, includes another justification: that a third westbound lane would help people flee Washington in the event of another terrorist attack.

The I-66 widening is one of billions of dollars' worth of stalled or contentious road and transit projects -- some that were conceived of decades ago and others far from dense population centers -- that state officials and highway advocates across the region are reselling in part as evacuation routes.

The efforts to widen highways come despite a regional emergency plan that would urge people not in immediate danger to stay off roads, largely because experts fear widespread gridlock, as occurred Sept. 11, 2001.

They also add to an American tradition of using security issues to gain federal support for projects, which goes at least as far back as the creation of the interstate highway system.

"Anytime you can make a national argument as opposed to a parochial argument, you have an opportunity to get broader support," said U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.). "Clearly, Washington, D.C., is a major target. Therefore, I think there is a legitimate argument."

But Hoyer cautioned that some of the security arguments might be a stretch. Homeland security "is an added rationale, which is applicable in some cases, but I don't think it's applicable to some roads further out," he said. "You can stretch homeland security purposes to the extent that it may be a rationalization rather than a reason."

Among the projects that officials say would add to the region's security is the Maryland intercounty connector, a proposed highway that would cross the suburbs north of the Capital Beltway. An environmental review of the project states that one of the reasons it is necessary is

to "provide much needed system capacity for population evacuation." Maryland officials say some other projects, including improving Indian Head Highway and Branch Avenue as well as building a bypass around Hughesville, also would help in evacuations.

The Northern Virginia Transportation Alliance cites 11 regional projects that it says are critical to homeland security. They are projects the group has coveted for years, including two additional bridge crossings over the Potomac River as well as expansion of some outer suburban parkways. Together, many of those projects would form about two-thirds of an outer beltway around the region that has been sought by highway backers.

"A lot of the many long-planned transportation improvements that haven't been built, among other things, have a regional security benefit," said Bob Chase, president of the alliance. "Obviously, some of these facilities are more important on regional security than others."

Chase and other road supporters believe that in a region filled with federal facilities, there is no way to tell where an attack would be or how extensive, so all of the region's roads should be expanded.

"In general, the health of our entire transportation infrastructure is key to homeland security for both evacuation and delivery of first responders and follow-up resources," said Maryland Transportation Secretary Robert L. Flanagan. "You need capacity. You need redundancy."

The intercounty connector, for instance, is "in an area where there are numerous federal agencies" and would offer an alternative to the Beltway in event of an incident, Flanagan said.

Nevertheless, officials across the region have concluded that the most likely type of threat would be limited in area. So they have adopted a strategy of dealing with the affected area first and instructing others to "shelter in place" until they are given the all-clear to head home.

Transportation experts also say that even if all of the road proposals were approved today, it would take years for them to be built, and they still wouldn't be big enough to get everyone where they want to go.

"Given any kind of scenario in terms of new capacity that we might realistically be able to build, there will still be gridlock if everybody tries to travel at one time," said Ronald F. Kirby, transportation planning director for the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments.

There is a history to linking highway projects and national security. Planning for a national highway system began as early as the 1930s, but the idea didn't gain traction until the 1950s, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower sold the plan for a national interstate system as a way to connect major cities as well as move military equipment and personnel.

The legislation establishing the interstate system, signed by Eisenhower in 1956, termed it the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.

Area transportation officials stress that touting homeland security as a reason to build a road is secondary to its primary need in relieving day-to-day traffic problems.

"Obviously, putting another lane on [I-66] would help people get out of the city" in case of an attack, said Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-Va.), who shortly after Sept. 11 identified a rail extension to Dulles International Airport as one key to regional security. "But that's just one of the needs. It's gridlock every morning and every night, seven days a week."

In the case of I-66, the benefits in an evacuation could be limited, officials said. If the road was widened within the existing right of way, as instructed by the state, only about 6 feet of pavement would be added to the width, including shoulders. Project managers say that would be enough to remove some bottlenecks and probably get more cars through.

"I think the possibilities improve a little bit under the proposed scenarios," said Steve Walter of Parsons Transportation Group, a consultant on the I-66 project. But "we keep talking about big episodic events," he said. "The truth of the matter is these proposals are much more designed toward the day-to-day, where we get much more benefit."

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