



December 6, 2022

Mr. DJ Stadtler  
Executive Director  
Virginia Passenger Rail Authority  
919 East Main Street, Suite 2400  
Richmond, VA 23219

**Re: Long Bridge Bicycle/Pedestrian Span Width**

Dear Mr. Stadtler,

I am writing on behalf of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association (WABA) and its more than 7,000 members across the Washington metropolitan area in response to the latest changes to the proposed width of the Long Bridge Bicycle/Pedestrian span.

For fifty years, WABA has worked to transform the capital region by improving the conditions for people who bicycle. Our work to advocate for dedicated bicycle infrastructure, pass laws that promote safe roadway behavior, and provide education programming for all road-users has resulted in a drastically different cultural and political approach to biking for transportation. Biking can and should be an equitable, safe, low-cost, time-saving, and sustainable way to navigate our cities for all residents.

Bridges are absolutely vital to our region's active transportation network, and we have been enthusiastic supporters of the once-in-a-generation bicycle/pedestrian span as part of the larger Long Bridge rail expansion since its inception. Creating a safer and more accessible river crossing for residents and visitors knits our communities and economies more closely together and provides a meaningful, carbon-free transportation alternative to our crowded and polluting roadways – much like the larger rail project.

To realize its full potential though, the bicycle/pedestrian bridge must be designed and built wider than currently proposed. While we appreciate the recent announcement of a wider 16' span (from an original 14' width), this remains inadequate. Simply put, 16' is not wide enough for the expected volume of bicycle and pedestrian usage and will be grossly insufficient for the growing volumes that will occur over the long life span of the bridge due to population growth and mode shift. The current design does not meet best practice standards that recommend separate spaces for pedestrians and those on wheels to prevent conflict between users moving at different speeds, and any modifications to widen the bridge in

the future to address the conflict would be virtually impossible. We therefore call on VPRA to design the bicycle/pedestrian span that is 20 to 24' wide in the center to provide safe opportunities to pass and pause, thereby reducing conflicts between users and ensuring a more pleasant experience for all.

### **Design Constraints & Remedies**

WABA acknowledges two areas of tight horizontal clearances identified by VPRA that will make expansion of the bicycle/pedestrian span beyond a width of 16' difficult: near the Virginia landing, due to the additional width required for the ramp down to the Mount Vernon Trail, and near the District of Columbia landing, due to the turns required to reach the landing zone in the vicinity of the WMATA bridge pier. However, we believe that these pinch points need not constrain the entire design. Unlike a railroad bridge, a bicycle/pedestrian bridge does not need to be the same width all the way across the river, and in fact, the middle of the bridge (away from the constrained areas near the shorelines) is where additional space is most needed.

At the Virginia shore, a portion of trail users will be taking the main bridge to Long Bridge Park and a portion of users will be taking the ramp down the Mount Vernon Trail. This essential splitting of traffic means each individual span to Virginia does not need to be as wide as the main span of the bridge. At the DC side, having a constrained width of only 16' could function essentially as traffic calming – signaling the users as they approach the DC side that they need to slow down and go single-file to successfully navigate the landing into East Potomac Park.

Additional width is most needed in the middle portion of the bridge. It would open up additional space for safe passing, as well as provide space for tourists and other bridge users to pause and take in the views or to simply catch their breath while crossing a span stretching 2300' – nearly half a mile. Much like the Esplanade at Long Bridge Park that is often filled with stopped onlookers enjoying views of passing trains and planes, we expect numerous users to stop and take in the view of trains, transit vehicles, boats and waterfowl as they travel across this new bridge span. Other users will inevitably need to stop to adjust a tire, tie a shoe, or attend to a child in a stroller; it is critical that they have the space to stop without creating conflicts.

WABA is aware of several of VPRA's overarching concerns with widening the bicycle/pedestrian span, which we do not find convincing: increased costs, delay in the engineering schedule, and the aesthetic effects of bulkier piers and ramps. We strongly believe that the cost increase of a larger bicycle/pedestrian span is truly marginal; the heavy equipment will already be on-site and the cost increase of a 50% wider

bridge is nonlinear and can't be expected to cost 50% more. It also ignores that VPRA recently received \$20 million in unexpected, previously unplanned-for federal money to fund the span.

Any delays would seem self-inflicted since a public design process for the bicycle/pedestrian span was explicitly called for in the draft Environmental Impact Statement and could have been started much earlier. We also remain years away from construction with time for adjusting the schedule. Finally, we will note that the National Capital Planning Commission (one of the design agencies cited) agreed with us and others on a call for a wider bicycle/pedestrian span.

### **VPRA Transparency & Engagement Going Forward**

While we appreciate VPRA engaging with us and other active transportation allies on this issue – and for the design modifications to-date – we remain deeply concerned that this conversation is happening largely outside the public eye. This runs contrary to the public design process called for in the draft Environmental Impact Statement (a clause removed in the final EIS) and to general best practices around transparency and accountability for large, publicly funded projects. VPRA will be the lead on multiple critical infrastructure projects in Northern Virginia over the coming years, some of which will be controversial. This project, arriving so early in its existence, is an important opportunity to prove that it is a trustworthy partner that will keep its promises, be transparent, and take public feedback to heart to make a better project for everyone.

So far, VPRA does not seem to be doing so. Failing to go forward with the called-for design process, claiming at the one engagement meeting open to the public that a width beyond 14' was nonnegotiable, and only allowing public testimony to the VPRA Board via in-person attendance in Richmond all point to an organization doing its best to forge ahead with a minimum of public transparency or engagement. This does not bode well for the critically important rail improvements that VPRA must shepherd through the public realm over the next decade.

The Washington Area Bicyclist Association has been a strong supporter in moving forward transit projects throughout the region, even in the face of short-sighted public opposition. We supported the CC2DCA project to connect DCA with Crystal City rail infrastructure, the Long Bridge Project during the environmental phase, the rail-first overhaul of Union Station, and the expansion of Amtrak service and through-running MARC service to Virginia as key planks in the People Before Cars Coalition (a broad partnership between JBG Smith, the National Landing BID, Sustainable Mobility for Arlington County, and Arlington Families for Safe Streets). We are eager to continue supporting rail expansion throughout Northern Virginia but need a transparent, trustworthy, and willing partner in VPRA.

## Conclusion

In the draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Long Bridge project, which is the last document the public had an opportunity to comment on, it was stated on page 22-12 that “The materials and *dimensions* of the bridge would be confirmed in a final design phase following completion of the EIS” (emphasis added). This line appears to have been removed from the final EIS and VPRA seems to have skipped this public engagement entirely. If this process had moved forward earlier, the loud public desires for changes to the bridge design could have been incorporated earlier when changes in design are less costly and less likely to endanger the schedule.

We implore you to bring forward an updated design for the bicycle/pedestrian span that is 20 to 24’ wide in the center, to provide safe opportunities to pass, space to pause and observe, and to reduce conflicts between users. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity and there are numerous examples throughout the US (and on the nearby Anacostia River) of wider dedicated bicycle/pedestrian bridges to draw from.

Thank you for your time, we hope to be a strong partner to VPRA going forward to transform transportation in Virginia.

Respectfully,

Kevin O’Brien

Trails Coalition Coordinator | Washington Area Bicyclist Association