Innovation program looks to make Virginia the model for transportation changes

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Sunday, April 24, 2016 12:00 am

Connected vehicles, automated cars, real-time digital message signs, traffic signals that talk to each other.

Although some of these innovative transportation technologies are years or decades from becoming everyday reality, the future of driving may be closer than we think.

Planners, often caught up in the day-to-day requirements of keeping pace with today's transportation issues, can't always look far enough ahead or think out of the box to come up with innovative ideas.

But Hap Connors, the Fredericksburg area's representative on the Commonwealth Transportation Board, thinks it's important to get ahead of the curve.

"The world is changing so fast," said Connors. "How do we make this old model work?"

The old model is the traditional governmental approach, which Connors considers too restrictive in bringing innovative companies and people to the transportation planning table. He thinks a new approach could allow Virginia to become a leader in transportation innovation while also spawning new businesses and jobs.

That's why Connors helped spur renewed interest in a Virginia Department of Transportation program focused on innovation and technology. To do that, he helped start a CTB sub-committee where new ideas and projects can be initiated.

VDOT's Innovation and Technology Transportation Program already has more than a dozen proposed projects in the pipeline, along with a $74 million budget over the next six years to get some of them done.

The projects in the program include digital roadway signs that offer travel times for various routes or modes of transportation, enhancement of VDOT's 511 traffic update system and traffic-signal synchronization and technology that adjusts signals based on traffic conditions.

The program's focus and proposed projects could change over time, said Connors, a former Spotsylvania County supervisor. He sees the subcommittee as a brainstorming group that could generate new ideas.

VDOT "has a lot of smart people" and the new subcommittee "gives these guys permission for thinking outside the box," he said.

At the committee's March 16 meeting, VDOT Chief Engineer Garrett Moore said he wanted the state to be a leader in connected and automated vehicle technology, something Connors also stresses as a key to the state's future transportation model.

At the same meeting, VDOT Deputy Commissioner Quintin Elliott suggested the possibility of starting a pilot program that could encourage the development or testing of new technologies in the state.

Connors thinks that approach also is key to Virginia being a leader in transportation innovation.

"We should offer Virginia as a test bed for Google, or whomever, to test their products," he said. "We need to open our doors" to open-source data and technology companies.

The state could create "accelerators" in which it shares data with companies that could, in turn, create new technologies the state could utilize, he said.

This approach would lead to the creation of new businesses and jobs in the state, Connors suggested.

One somewhat radical idea Connors wants to pursue is having a broadband system installed on VDOT-owned right-of-way.

Such a system not only would be used for connected and automated vehicle technologies of the future, but could also bring high-speed Internet service to rural areas that have poor service or none at all, Connors said.

"I'm really interested in having the Fredericksburg District become a pilot for broadband," he said.

The subcommittee is still in the early stages and there is a lot that has to happen for the ideas to become reality, but Connors hopes it will lead to big things.

"The old system needs to be disrupted," he said. "We have the people to do this. Someone needs to own it."