



## **Va. primary may not sway national debate**

By SCOTT WONG (/REPORTERS/?ID=43) | 6/12/13 4:45 PM EDT

Tuesday's Virginia primary results may not have much national impact in the debate over how to pay for transportation projects, observers said Wednesday — even though two veteran state lawmakers were ousted after backing Gov. Bob McDonnell's massive tax-hike package.

In fact, one anti-tax activist suggested that Virginia's outcome may encourage supporters of similar proposals in other states or on Capitol Hill. That's because only two Virginia delegates lost their seats out of 34 Republican state House members who had voted for McDonnell's plan.

“Would this embolden members in other states because they only see two Republican members losing in a state with a very active tea party?” asked Erich Zimmermann, a senior policy analyst at Taxpayers for Common Sense who specializes in transportation issues. “It suggests that [a tax hike] could potentially be done without huge political ramifications.”

Tea party challengers had targeted four GOP state lawmakers for supporting the McDonnell plan. Two of them — Joe May and Beverly Sherwood — went down in defeat Tuesday. Still, May and Sherwood account for only 6 percent of the plan's GOP supporters in the House, said longtime political analyst Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics.

“Is that really going to have much impact on other state legislatures or on Congress?” Sabato asked. “Frankly, almost all GOP-controlled legislative houses — federal or state — are already very, very reluctant to hike taxes. I doubt two state legislative defeats in Virginia will make much of an impression.”

It's also possible the Virginia election will be a distant memory by the time Congress starts drafting its next transportation bill, which is due by October 2014. Transportation leaders are just starting to discuss the financing, and so far are speaking only in generalities (<https://www.politicopro.com/story/tax/?id=22805>).

Tuesday's election came just a month after McDonnell, a Republican and potential 2016 presidential candidate, signed into law his bipartisan transportation (<http://www.politico.com/story/2013/02/transpo-plan-passage-a-big-win-for-mcdonnell-88002.html>) plan (<http://www.politico.com/story/2013/02/transpo-plan-passage-a-big-win-for-mcdonnell-88002.html>), widely panned by the right as a massive tax increase bogged down

by pork projects. The law cut the state gasoline tax while calling for new levies on wholesale gasoline sales as well as sales tax hikes to generate more than \$1 billion a year to pay for state and local roads, bridges and transit projects such as rail.

Virginia Transportation Secretary Sean Connaughton said passing the bill “took a lot of political courage and leadership” and that lawmakers “dealt with a real problem with action, not rhetoric.”

The secretary praised the two defeated lawmakers for taking a noble stand on a major problem — a stance that probably cost them their jobs.

“The people who lost did the right thing for Virginia by addressing the transportation problem for the next generation,” Connaughton told POLITICO. “And we owe them a debt of gratitude.”

But Dan Holler, spokesman for the conservative Heritage Action for America, said the defeat of two establishment Republicans in a primary is a good example of local accountability in action, “something that is often missing in Washington.”

“At the end of the day, some lawmakers were able to justify their votes and others weren’t,” Holler said.

Virginia’s election, he said, also highlighted why the federal government should get out of the business of collecting and spending transportation dollars and hand the reins entirely to states.

“This is the proper venue for these types of policy discussions and legislative efforts,” Holler said. “It continues to reinforce the notion that this can and should be done at the local level rather than through complex formulas crafted by folks in Washington.”

The results of the Virginia funding initiative are already coming to fruition: Next week, the Commonwealth Transportation Board will sign off on a six-year transportation plan that boosts the state’s spending on roads, bridges and transit to \$17 billion. Two years ago, the statewide plan called for just over \$10 billion.

But it’s unlikely the Old Dominion will see another massive tax hike anytime soon. Then-Democratic Gov. Mark Warner won a \$1.5 billion-a-year tax hike for transportation and education back in 2004. But you have to go back to 1986 to find the last time Virginia passed another tax increase. That was also a tax to fund transportation.

“That’s three hikes in over a quarter-century,” Sabato said. “The legislature does this rarely, and I don’t expect any successful attempt again for many years.”

May and Sherwood, 20-year veterans of the statehouse who hold powerful gavels, were both knocked off by political neophytes. May, the Transportation Committee chairman, was defeated by general contractor Dave LaRock. Sherwood, who chairs the Agricultural Committee, lost to retired physician Mark J. Berg.

But transportation advocates noted that other veteran Republicans who also backed the tax fared far better. House Speaker William Howell and Del. Bobby Orrock Sr. both staved off primary challengers who blasted their support for the McDonnell plan.

*Adam Snider and Kathryn A. Wolfe contributed to this report.*