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Grading the path of an ancient bison trail, highway builders constructed Interstate 81 along Virginia’s mountainous spine in the 1960s. I-81 was one link in realizing President Eisenhower’s dream for safe travel on a seamless national asphalt web, free from tolls and traffic lights. Its route along the Blue Ridge and through the Appalachian Mountains literally links small valley communities and their destinies together and to the world, just as it did for centuries.

Settlers variously called the time-worn thoroughfare Warrior’s Path, the Great Road, and Valley Pike. Indian, settler, and Civil War soldier fought in turn alongside the road. In 2002, a different sort of conflict broke out on this critical artery. This time, the battle would be waged for control of the road itself. The struggle matched aspirations for privatization and profit against the futures of communities. On one hand, a mysterious corporate consortium bid to seize control of I-81, doubling its size and charging tolls for “safety improvements.” On the other, people in adjoining localities organized to retain title to I-81, their call to arms: “Take back our Main Street.”

Over the years, I-81 truck traffic doubled and in some locations nearly tripled because of subtle shifts in national shipping and distribution patterns. Truckers and shipping dispatchers turned to I-81 to bypass I-95 and the congested eastern seaboard. Other trucks, with freight generated by the North American Free Trade Agreement, also hammered down I-81. By 2003, big rigs averaged 28 percent of total traffic—exceeding 40 percent at certain times and places—on an interstate designed for 15 percent trucks. The I-81 corridor south from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to east Tennessee became the densest truck freight corridor in the nation. Travelers saw horrific accidents and worried about their own safety.

Don Young had a solution to dangerous truck congestion on the nation’s highways. The bold and powerful U.S. representative from Alaska, Young in 2003 chaired the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. He championed a revolutionary new system of truck-only interstate lanes—the pilot project earmarked
for Virginia, “Where the rest of my Congressional friends can see it, and once they see it, then they [truck-only lanes] will be mandated across the country.”

Sixteen months earlier, STAR Solutions, an enigmatic construction consortium, was proposing to redesign and rebuild I-81 in Virginia. The 325-mile-long highway is western Virginia’s single most valuable public asset. A critical economic and transportation link, I-81 crosses some of the nation’s most beautiful and historic landscapes. STAR Solutions pitched reconstructing I-81 into an enormous eight- to twelve-lane leviathan, with four center lanes exclusively for heavy truck traffic. For the first time in the United States, a free public interstate would be converted into a mega-truck toll road.

The STAR proposal emerged as a wedge-point in the transportation arena for the political crusade to privatize the public domain. Committing Virginia to build his truckway would launch Representative Young’s play for a nationwide system of privatized, tolled, truck-only lanes. If the STAR partners won in Virginia, privatization of I-81 would be secured from Tennessee to Pennsylvania. Appended at the north and south ends of the corridor, the other I-81 states would be left no alternative but to build their own truck-only lanes. Such a massive highway scheme would checkmate an environmentally benign and cheaper rail freight alternative.

The Reason Foundation, a Los Angeles–based libertarian think tank, is a mastermind behind privatization of the American commons. The foundation promotes privatization of everything from airports and state lotteries to prisons and highways. Reason forged an enviable relationship with Chairman Young, lobbying for construction of truck-only lanes nationwide, particularly along I-81, and strongly opposing any public support for rail transportation.

But well before Chairman Young was openly promoting his pet truck lane project, agitation was stirring in the valleys of Virginia. Appalled at the prospect of a monster truckway bisecting rural Virginia, I organized what came to be called RAIL Solution, a citizens’ group promoting a rail-based freight and passenger alternative to the STAR Solutions concept.

STAR Solutions rolled out its project before a Virginia General Assembly starved for transportation revenues but besieged by demands for improvements. The consortium confidently claimed that its influence in Congress would leverage $1.6 billion in federal subsidies. The General Assembly heartily embraced STAR Solutions, exempting the project from competitive bidding under the state’s Public Private Transportation Act of 1995 (PPTA).

Harrowing stories of close calls with trucks on I-81 had become common conversation for residents of western Virginia. So, the driving public was primed for relief when the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) reported STAR Solutions would improve I-81 safety and reduce congestion by separating cars and trucks. This concept seemed the answer to a prayer.
However, as citizens began to visualize the reality of STAR’s plan, they recoiled from the prospect: Did we need a New Jersey Turnpike slithering down Virginia’s valleys? The burden of diesel emissions and greenhouse gases from the projected four to seven million additional trucks per year by 2035 would be enormous. Asphalt would entomb acres of agricultural land and forests and displace local businesses. STAR proposed truck tolls up to $129 for one pass through Virginia, tolls that would sour regional business and economic prospects. Businesses located along I-81 and captive to it for procurement and distribution may not be competitive with industries able to access untolled routes. Our places of employment could be forced to move or shut down.

As an elementary school counselor, I was frequently reminded that air quality in southwest Virginia is already poor. Many students suffer from asthma. Air frequently stagnates in our valleys between the ridges. The prospect of all these trucks accelerating through our towns, belching diesel smoke, was, in a word, breathtaking. As details emerged, I was unable to find any citizen supporting the STAR scheme, but virtually no one was willing to fight it either. “It’s a done deal,” I heard over and over those first nine months.

In March 2002, I wrote a lengthy letter about the situation to the editor of the Roanoke Times, the principal newspaper along Virginia’s I-81 corridor. Close to three months later, in June, it was published, not as a letter, but as a guest op-ed. I noted that “Star Solutions has succeeded in ramming through legislation that eliminates any roadblocks for its scheme.... What will happen to our respiratory disease rates....? It is clear that Star Solutions’ overbuilding plan is only a ‘solution’ for gigantic construction companies that want to make big bucks on the backs of interstate users.” I received one response. Roanoker Ann Rogers, a seasoned highway fighter, tracked me down at school. The founder of Virginians for Appropriate Roads, Ann introduced me to a number of highway opponents, several of whom came to take up the cause against massive I-81 expansion.

One opponent was longtime rail advocate Michael Testerman, president of the Virginia Association of Rail Patrons. Michael, along with state senator John Edwards of Roanoke, explained that through-state truck freight was the real cause of congestion on I-81. That freight, they asserted, could be carried on a new, faster, modernized intermodal version of the existing Norfolk Southern railroad, already paralleling I-81, between terminals near Knoxville, Tennessee, and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Intermodal freight employs two or more transportation modes for shipment. Typically a truck picks up the load, hauling it to a nearby terminal to be shipped the long distance on rail. Then it is off-loaded to another truck for final delivery to the customer. Michael introduced me to former federal railway administrator Gil Carmichael’s vision for Interstate II: “The concept is not radical.... Once the rail line is adequately upgraded.... the I-81 Corridor rail line could
Dave Foster, a retired Norfolk Southern economist, soon joined our team. Dave envisioned a truck ferry operation, carrying not just trailers but whole trucks. Independent drivers could maintain their loads, eat, sleep, and update their logbooks in “sleeper” cars while their trucks rode the rails toward their destinations. Shipping whole trucks and trailers by rail is vastly greener, cleaner, and safer than trucking individual loads and would boost the local economy, offering a cheaper, but time-competitive, shipping alternative. Rail is less impacted by fuel costs or availability. And restoring passenger service would be warmly welcomed in a region without it since the 1960s. The “rail solution” or steel interstate, as we came to call it, became our positive alternative concept.

Our vision was taking shape, but a huge obstacle remained. I recognized it from 1983 when, as director of the Coalition of American Electric Consumers (CAEC), I worked alongside the Brumley Gap (Virginia) Concerned Citizens in their successful six-year battle to defend their valley. American Electric Power (AEP), the nation's largest investor-owned utility, contrived to seize their valley and build the world's largest pumped storage dam. But dam opponents defeated the mammoth utility by drawing upon a deep well of solidarity knit tight by generations sharing the same space within their valley. Moreover, community was cultivated by mutual pledges of support—fund-raising activities such as turkey shoots and cake walks, and the display of plywood signs with Bible verses articulating its mission in the shared religious vernacular.

A less successful part of the CAEC’s broad struggle for people's land involved fighting a proposed web of AEP extra-high voltage transmission lines. These power lines would be suspended above homes and farms from Wythe County toward Danville, Virginia. Organizing against these lines was tough. The lines’ inherent linear quality would similarly affect people dozens or even hundreds of miles away from each other, while the neighboring farm family over the hill might feel no real impact. We lost the power line battle for lack of proximity, failing to achieve a sense of community along the transmission right-of-way. By the time we began the struggle against STAR, however, a new tool would help us overcome this obstacle.

In the intervening twenty years, wide distribution of personal computers and Internet access offered a bridge, enabling people to come together across distances. E-mail, cheap and largely accessible, radically altered the dynamic for linear organizing by creating “virtual” community. In 2002, few felt overwhelmed by spam and listservs. People were open to entering into virtual conversation with strangers.

A Virginia Tech graduate student volunteer set up the RAIL Solution listserv. The listserv became our glue, our town crier, an electronic community—quicker
and cheaper than telephone or a newsletter and far less labor-intensive. Supporters could be involved in daily, ongoing, strategic discussions by e-mail or elect to receive only special messages or alerts.

Throughout 2002, stunned by what we were learning, I contacted state and national environmental groups, still fantasizing that some national organization would champion the fight against STAR Solutions. Come December, I heard no cavalry hoof-beats. With no money or resources, we needed a low-cost strategy to build opposition and bring quick success. I wrote a boilerplate resolution supporting improved rail capacity over highway expansion. My goal was to find people to submit ten to twelve resolutions to county supervisors and city and town councils along the I-81 corridor. Ann Rogers teased, “If you start this, you’ll work full-time fighting this road for years.” I laughed at her hyperbole. But by 2012, I have already logged ten years and counting.

Over succeeding months, like kernels of resentment in hot oil, rail support resolutions popped up from Winchester to Knoxville. Sometimes a few people, frequently only one, offered a resolution, convincing their supervisors or council to adopt it. Doggedly calling on friends of friends, I begged for e-mail addresses of electronic acquaintances. An organizer develops immunity to rejection. Almost none of this organizing involved any contact so human as a voice or a face. Bitterness against STAR’s plan was spreading like the flu, so as I broadcast word of a strategy to fight the disease, people emerged from the electronic ether. These good citizens ultimately won forty-eight pro-rail local government resolutions! Persistence. As our successes grew, we paraded the results on our new Web site (www.railsolution.org). Only one county ultimately rejected our resolution. All those resolutions compelled the media, officials in Richmond, and some citizens who were initially too dispirited to fight, to pay attention. Our resolution campaign won national notice for our efforts. As part of their “Road to Ruin” project, Friends of the Earth and Taxpayers for Common Sense named the STAR I-81 proposal the second most wasteful highway scheme in the nation.12

Though “virtual” organizing was producing results, supporters needed to meet face-to-face to take ownership and create democratic organization. Early in 2003, my e-mail entreaties to urge highway opponents to meet got no response. Ellen Shepard of Virginia Conservation Network asked, “Why haven’t you called a meeting?” I said, “I tried, but no one responded.” “Let me try,” she said. She then telephoned people. At times, only direct human contact works.

“Choose an initial fight you can win” is a basic tenet of community organizing. When Ellen Shepard first called these e-mail collaborators together in April, we were not only excited to see the faces behind the e-mails, we were already winning. Several resolutions had passed and more were clearly in the works. Local voters are the best advocates before local boards and councils, and our early strategy required every participant to become an activist in their own community. “I can’t do this for you; if you don’t, who will?” We structured RAIL Solution to quickly
absorb newcomers. Our steering committee, not our executive board, serves as our principal governing and strategizing body. We wrote bylaws to provide that if you attend two consecutive meetings, you participate as a voting steering committee member.

Because Republicans predominate in the I-81 corridor, we needed to uncouple the ideological from the partisan. We did that in 2005 by nurturing a sense of public ownership in an effort to counter the drive for privatization, a libertarian, conservative, and capitalist mantra. With leadership from the Rockbridge Area Conservation Council, an allied environmental group, and member donations, we produced and distributed a fanciful “local newspaper” as an educational tool. The *Shenandoah & Southwest Citizen* editorialized, “Speak up—Take back our ‘Main Street.’” It called citizens to “Stand up for your family and your community. . . . Your neighbors volunteered to write and paid for printing this paper, to help people make up their own minds and to restore public control over this momentous transportation decision. . . . The Interstate is our ‘Main Street.’ Let’s keep it ours—and free.”

We appealed to Virginians to claim ownership and fight Representative Young’s expropriation even as our leaders, from the governor on down, forsook this public trust. “No toll-taxation by Alaskan representation!” *Citizen* articles further examined the STAR project’s sordid political-corporate genesis, safety issues, proposed tolls and their impact on the regional economy, and how our intermodal rail vision would work. The *Citizen* also included a map showing forty-one community resolutions supporting rail and pictures and contact information for state and federal officials.

Early in our struggle, we used the Internet to try to unmask STAR Solutions. We knew it was a corporate conglomerate, including Halliburton, a huge energy and engineering company where Dick Cheney worked prior to becoming vice president. But not until we requested their proposal to VDOT did we begin to adequately size up our adversaries. We learned that Halliburton Corporation’s then-subsidiary KBR (formerly known as Kellogg Brown and Root) was the lead contractor of forty STAR Solutions collaborators. A giant international engineering firm, KBR was also the notorious war-profiteering, no-bid contractor for military supplies in Iraq and Afghanistan and for cells at Guantanamo Bay detention camp. The company had been reprimanded by the Securities and Exchange Commission for its bookkeeping and had come under multiple investigations for overbilling the Pentagon and provisioning supplies deadly to the troops. In our *Shenandoah & Southwest Citizen*, we criticized VDOT for entering contract talks with a corporation with such a reprehensible history. “Contractors for any VDOT job should meet reasonable standards . . . be stable financially, have a reliable history of ethical behavior. . . . KBR . . . fails to meet these standards. Yet VDOT is now negotiating a contract with STAR Solutions to ‘improve’ I-81. Who is selling this snake oil?”
Our struggle took place in a climate of inappropriately cozy relationships at high levels of business and government. In 2003, Congressman Young was under four separate federal criminal corruption investigations. Yet, during the truck lane battle, Young was at the height of his power, the czar of federal transportation funding, and able to insert earmarks at will. He named the 2005 omnibus transportation bill SAFETEA-LU in honor of his wife, because he could.

STAR Solutions–related contributions of $150,000 to Young’s 2004 congressional campaign were discovered by RAIL Solution volunteer John Hutchison on the Federal Election Commission Web site. These contributions from executives of STAR’s partner corporations greased earmarked pork toward Virginia’s pot. Virginia officers and employees of the STAR consortium alone donated at least $64,000—for a race run and won in Alaska. In another 2003 example, STAR Solutions partner Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc. (VHB) left the STAR Solutions consortium for the purpose of bidding on the contract to perform the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) study for the I-81 project. Despite the conspicuous conflict of interest, VDOT accepted VHB’s bid.

Crucial to waging a war on the home front are a handful of citizens possessed by passion and commitment. You have to believe, as Ann Rogers and I and our RAIL Solution prophets do, that it does not matter that you have no chance of winning. It does not matter that no foundation will fund you. You fight viscerally because it is right to oppose something so awful. It is like this: The week of the Iraq invasion, a third grader asked me, “Was that you, yesterday, holding up a sign, protesting against the war?” “Yes,” I said, pleased to be recognized. “Well, you lost!” he retorted. “Son,” I responded, “sometimes you take a stand, even when you know you’re going to lose.”

Only people who have had positive experience with citizens’ groups grasp their power. They “get it” that in working together you risk time and energy in exchange for hope. It is actually fun for them, or at least invigorating. If an issue resonates, almost mystically a core of dedicated supporters emerges, each with his or her own passion and reasons. You cannot manufacture passion, only offer yours up and hope it is contagious. Usually only a few respond with deep commitment, but often that is enough. For this chapter, I polled key participants in RAIL Solution, asking what motivated them to become involved and stick with our long struggle. I left the question open-ended. Remarkably, “making the political system work” outstripped concern for environmental sustainability issues or affection for passenger railroad service in volunteers’ self-analysis of what was their motivating rationale.

They embrace democratic process in statements like: “David v. Goliath: it is inspiring to see grassroots democracy.” “Working against the tide of ‘business as usual.'” “The upbeat feeling of being on the right side, of joining with Robin Hood to battle the bullies (KBR, et al.), of helping to expose bluster and greed.” “I discovered that 90% were opposed to a ‘pilot project’ by a congressman from Alaska.
of all places. Who the hell did he think he was?” “I recognized a call for ordinary people to help create a better path into the future. . . . We ARE the government, here in the U.S. We foot the tax bills and should have a hand in determining how they pay for transportation and how they rearrange our landscapes and lives. This is our ‘place’ in the big picture.” Dave Foster summed it up, “We are in this for the long term. . . . We live here.”

Here is how I, for one, juggled this democratic responsibility. I would get home from work, make some small contributions to keep home and family intact, and then get to my second job—organizing. My tapping away on the bedroom computer in the wee hours was exasperating for my usually forgiving wife, but, nevertheless, I was able to carve out time early mornings, nights, weekends, holidays, and summers to hold down the equivalent of two full-time jobs—a day job at a public school, and a volunteer job for RAIL Solution. Why was I driven? Partly it was rage at corporate greed and government complicity. Partly it was the fun of playing Lilliputian.

Using e-mail was freeing. Conventional organizing is time-bound. It is socially unacceptable to phone someone at 1:39 A.M. or to come by for a quick visit before work at 7:00 A.M. Electronic jiggering of time and space afforded me and others the opportunity to subsidize RAIL Solution “full-time” or part-time as

Area residents rally for a rail alternative at the old Abingdon, Virginia, freight depot, February 2, 2005. (Photo by Kathy Shearer)
our obsessions compelled us. STAR Solutions and VDOT are stuck inside a rigid eight-hour-day-five-days-a-week-and-holidays corporate construct.

Leadership and support are hard to maintain when addressing a multiyear, perhaps multidecade, problem. Corporations and bureaucracy grind forward slowly as suits their purposes. While, as at Brumley Gap, project delay can work to the people’s advantage, it is also wearing. Life goes on—key supporters move, become disgruntled, or flat wear out. A few die.

Tabling at local events, RAIL Solution volunteers attracted new supporters by asking people to sign a petition, then harvested their contact information. After four years, our supporter list remained steady at about 1,300. Most were inactive, but many would respond to special alerts. The most devoted volunteers were already committed rail fans, environmentalists, or community activists.

We held steering committee meetings every two or three months on Saturdays. Working through lunch, we typically met for over five hours. It was trial-by-ordeal. We wore out potential committee members with this approach. However, some participants drove two to four hours, one way, to attend a meeting, so planning more frequent, shorter meetings was not realistic. As the elected chair, I favored sufficient time to illuminate background for newcomers and allow for open and full airing of issues and strategic decisions. Meeting via e-mail was much easier.

In the Brumley Gap struggle, we not only took a positive stance, offering cheaper and environmentally benign alternatives for meeting AEP’s electrical demand projections, but we attacked AEP as greedy and cold-hearted. We hammered home that AEP already had excess capacity but wanted to generate even more power for the lucrative wholesale market—proof that AEP’s specious claim to need more generating capacity was actually bullying the people of Brumley Gap at great cost to all electric ratepayers. Early on, I sought to carry this experience over to RAIL Solution, but the steering committee meeting burst into heated debate. Many advocated for an exclusively positive approach and decried the negativity of my determination to drive a stake into STAR so that our positive vision could be clearly heard. RAIL Solution ultimately adopted a forked strategy: advocate, explaining and supporting our positive rail vision, but also attack, vilifying STAR Solutions and federal earmark purveyor Don Young as carpetbaggers, wasting our tax funds, recklessly sacrificing our air and land, the public’s health and safety, our local economies, and our children’s future on an altar of greed. Along with fierce fighters, RAIL Solution is blessed with visionaries. Michael Testerman and Dave Foster applied modern rail technology to our corridor to develop a freight rail service concept unique in the United States.

RAIL Solution operated on volunteer labor for four years before we were able to hire a part-time director. The organizing described in this chapter occurred without staff assistance. Volunteers donated uncounted hours. They lobbied the General Assembly; updated the Web site, supporter, and listserv lists; performed research; wrote op-eds; composed formal responses to VDOT; tabled at local
events; presented the RAIL Solution story to local civic clubs and organizations; created and distributed the Citizen; and submitted resolutions to local governments. Hundreds commented at VDOT public hearings and attended the governor’s transportation town meetings.

In all of 2003, we raised only $350 from outside our membership. By 2005, we needed $20,000 to print and distribute the Citizen. Congress was debating the final details of the SAFETEA-LU bill, including the STAR Solutions’ federal earmark in a House-Senate joint committee. VDOT would soon schedule public hearings on its draft EIS, which completely excluded our rail concept. Yet, all but two organizations committed to funding change in Appalachia or the South, promoting citizen involvement in public policy or environmental protection, locked us out. Several funding agencies initially appeared to be an ideal fit. Yet, these grantors rejected our applications because they maintain applicant screens converging on demographic organizing and group process rather than outcomes. This bias discriminates in practice in favor of more established multi-issue organizations over emerging single-issue groups. In the view of these foundations and churches, fighting an environmental and economic crisis was not enough; it appeared to matter more who was doing the fighting.

Lacking outside financial resources to print and distribute the Citizen, we turned to our own members. Stopping all other activities, we trained volunteers to ask other members or potential supporters to contribute at least $100. In six months, we raised almost $20,000 for the Citizen. We distributed one-quarter million copies as an insert in regional and local newspapers throughout the I-81 corridor. It is good internal organizing to meet our own financial needs, but I recall feeling angry, frustrated, and isolated seeing so little institutional funding for our efforts.

The risks we took investing our energy in RAIL Solution began to pay off. Chairman Young introduced a nearly $900 million I-81 truck lane earmark in the 2004 federal transportation bill, but the bill failed to pass. Undeterred, Young came back in 2005, inserting some $600 million for the “demonstration project” in the transportation bill. The House bill passed with a $500 million earmark in it for exclusive truck lanes for I-81 in Virginia, a big step down from the $800 million STAR had promised to leverage from Congress. Using the prerogative of his chairmanship, Rep. Young slipped the earmark in just hours before the vote by the House. There was no opportunity to debate the project. The Senate version did not include any similar earmark.

Senator John Warner (R-Va.) sat on the House-Senate joint committee charged with marking up a compromise version of the separate House and Senate versions of the transportation reauthorization bill. RAIL Solution, its regional and national partner organizations,21 and state and national trucking interests, opposed to high truck tolls, lobbied Senator Warner all year. Governor Mark Warner (D), Representative Bob Goodlatte (R-Va. 6th), and House of Delegates majority leader Morgan Griffith (R-Salem) lobbied in support of the earmark.
Senator Warner stayed neutral on the earmark controversy until the committee neared the end of its dealing. Then he announced he had supported the earmark. But Warner damned it with faint praise because the committee reported a series of three I-81 earmarks for Virginia, totaling “only” $142 million. Just $100 million of this amount was designated explicitly for I-81 truck-only lanes in the final SAFETEA-LU Act. There would be no $1.6 billion federal truck lane subsidy, as STAR had promised. Citizen organizing and lobbying had rolled back over 90 percent of the Young-STAR Solutions boondoggle. Presidential pressure to reduce transportation spending also played a role. The highly vaunted federal subsidy that had driven state support for the STAR proposal came down to an expensive but hollow gesture to campaign contributors. This was the beginning of the end for STAR Solutions.

RAIL Solution acted primarily as an environmental organization, but much of the public perceived and welcomed it simply as pro-rail. The citizens’ group found fast friends and tenacious enemies in each political party. To maintain a political diversity of supporters, the group remained strictly nonpartisan. That tactic allowed openness left, right, and center. Organizing along the length of the interstate corridor also enhanced the group’s legislative strategy. The I-81 corridor is divided among many delegate and senatorial districts, creating a substantial “I-81 caucus.” In 2006, RAIL Solution authored a bill to reverse VDOT policy excluding a multistate rail alternative to massive highway construction in its EIS. Under the savvy leadership of conservative Republican delegate Ben Cline, RAIL Solution’s bill mandating state study of that multistate rail option passed the Senate and House of Delegates unanimously. All other transportation legislation remained bottled up in a tug-of-war between an evenly divided Senate, a Republican-controlled House, and a Democratic governor.

In April 2006, one thousand citizens attended VDOT public meetings to comment on the I-81 draft EIS. The draft supported massive widening of I-81, but rejected truck-only lanes as excessive for projected demand, expensive, inflexible, even dangerous. Ninety percent of the citizens opposed VDOT and STAR Solution’s border-to-border widening plans; most endorsed a rail alternative. Truckers and shipping companies strongly opposed STAR Solutions’ $129 per trip truck tolls. That opposition, along with the organizing by RAIL Solution, most certainly doomed the STAR project.

Finally, in December 2007, its aspirations diminished from a $13 billion project to a $142 million truck hill-climbing lane, KBR quietly withdrew from STAR Solutions. VDOT responded in January 2008 by suspending all Public Private Transportation Act contract talks with STAR Solutions, ending a six-year engagement.

Despite the collapse of STAR Solutions in 2009, VDOT still planned for a mostly eight-lane I-81. Road building is VDOT’s culture. Virginia Secretary of Transportation Pierce Homer, a key player in the PPTA process, became our principal adversary. He refused to meet with us even after Governor Tim Kaine
directed him to do so during a 2006 meeting with RAIL Solution and the governor’s transportation team.

Taking a cue from STAR, in 2009 RAIL Solution initiated a campaign to request federal financing to jumpstart construction of the steel interstate. Returning to our local resolution strategy, we urged governments to petition Congress to make I-81 a pilot project for a national steel interstate system. We had failed to build constructive bridges to the trucking industry, and so, in the absence of the STAR Solutions bogeyman, local officials with a background in trucking-related services succeeded in blocking several resolutions. In their eyes, the railroad potentially competes with trucks. Nevertheless, fifty-one resolutions were adopted in just six months.

Yet, Secretary Homer blocked initial efforts by Ninth District Virginia Congressman Rick Boucher (D) to place into the reauthorization of SAFETEA-LU a study for the Knoxville to Harrisburg segment as a pilot project for a national steel interstate system. This system would offer nationwide advantages for meeting goals articulated by the Obama administration, including vastly increased energy efficiency, fuel conservation, and public infrastructure as fiscal stimulus. The electric-powered national steel interstate system we described would also enhance safety and national security while reducing costs and environmental and public health damage related to highway widening. The Millennium Institute, in modeling options for the United States to contend with an oil-constrained future, found that “[t]he most positive result by every significant metric (GDP, greenhouse gas emissions, oil used) came from the combination of the two most environmentally positive policies: a massive push for electrified rail transportation . . . coupled with a massive push for renewable energy, to be completed by 2030.”24

Many obstacles to making public investments in a private railroad remained. Still, RAIL Solution, in contrast to STAR Solutions, worked to leverage real public benefit from the private sector. It pressed Norfolk Southern to offer freight and passenger services that were not in the railroad’s business plan. At this writing the I-81 steel interstate was still a distant dream.

In sum, RAIL Solution modeled civic involvement that reconceived and reinterpreted development schemes in human terms and at a scale suited to human understanding. The language the group used clearly illustrated each citizen’s stake in preserving public ownership and control of I-81 as a local and regional asset. Though it didn’t hesitate to attack its adversaries, RAIL Solution embraced a positive, realistic vision of how to handle the freight problem rather than adopting a preservationist or not-in-my-backyard stance. RAIL Solution employed computer technology to stretch conventional concepts of place and time. It constructed community out of the e-mail ether. Organizers must be alert, though, to employ personal contact where appropriate.

RAIL Solution devised a locally based strategy to attack a regional problem—building one small success upon another, it constructed power out of weakness.
The group urged local citizens across the corridor to propose a resolution before their city or county. This strategy strengthened the organization by being achievable and by creating the RAIL Solution supporter-base.

RAIL Solution consciously provided background at its meetings to make them welcoming to newcomers and offered almost immediate access to its listserv and to democratic decision making and policy generation. However, the group encountered some class conflict. Its few attempts to reach out to truckers and the trucking industry failed. These efforts would have benefited from greater priority, more skilled volunteers leading the effort, courage, and better timing. This failure prevented RAIL Solution from pressing state and federal officials more effectively.

Because both grantor and recipient benefit from their longstanding relationships, funding agencies make a leap of faith if they put aside preference for multi-issue groups. Multi-issue groups have broader perspective, more resources, greater stability, and a longer view. They can more flexibly address questions of class, race, and gender or other process issues at the center of a foundation’s mission than groups with a tightly focused goal. These organizations frequently can point to proven track records and clearly established fiscal procedures. In contrast, single-issue groups may be here today and gone tomorrow—suffering from a failure of leadership or division, tactical or administrative blunders, or insufficient resources and funding. Yet, single-issue groups have the power of focus and clarity that generates popular energy.

Single-issue organizing is an often spontaneous, organic, energetic response of the people to perceived injustice. These organizing struggles take on issues that might otherwise be submerged in a multi-issue agenda. RAIL Solution undertook a task that multi-issue groups and conventional wisdom dismissed as unwinnable. Many communities will benefit if funding agencies take on more risk, ferreting out, welcoming, and supporting the work of worthy single-issue citizens’ groups.

Every citizens’ battle is potentially winnable, despite the entrenched power of corporate interests and their political allies. Winning requires that citizens fashion creative strategies and easily accessible democratic processes. Strategizing is not easy and requires some luck as well as creative thinking. Democratic process, on the other hand, is a learned skill and is achievable with persistence. Two RAIL Solution volunteers, summing up how group action afforded them meaning and efficacy, said of their experience, “From the beginning I thought of RAIL Solution as a very fine example of citizen organization and advocacy. Seeing that example in action is the greatest benefit I derived from my participation in the struggle.” “We are changing the world. We are having more of an impact than I could have dreamed. Most of these are only battles which you might win today only to get stomped tomorrow. But if we build a railroad, we will have won the war, not just a skirmish. What more can we ever ask for but to make a real improvement in the world?”
Notes

1. RAIL Solution, Shenandoah & Southwest Citizen, “Speak up—Take Back Our ‘Main Street,’” 2.
3. Ibid.

   In June 2002, two Reason colleagues and I accomplished the seemingly impossible. We persuaded both the American Trucking Associations and the National Safety Council . . . to endorse . . . that these highly productive trucks (long doubles and triples) be allowed to operate . . . where they are currently banned by federal law, provided that they operate on new, barrier-separated truck-only lanes. . . . House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee Chairman Don Young (R, AK) liked the idea so much that he arranged a room for our news conference in the Rayburn building, and personally expressed his interest in the idea.

   Fast forward 20 months. The pending House reauthorization bill, TEA-LU, contains a provision for truck-only lanes, but thus far no specifics. To help Chairman Young and the Committee fill in the details, Reason is today releasing a new study which identifies . . . the 10 best routes. . . . And the winners [include] . . . I-81 from Knoxville, TN to Harrisburg, PA. . . .

8. Virginia Department of Transportation, 2–11.
13. RAIL Solution, 2.
14. Ibid.

15. Ibid. Snake oil, indeed! At the time, lobbyist Randolph DeLay, another STAR Solutions partner, was CEO of the Texas firm Public/Private Strategies Consult. Randy is the brother of then-U.S. House majority leader and former House Speaker Tom “The Hammer” DeLay. At the state level, STAR Solutions partner McGuire Woods had helped conceive Virginia’s Public Private Transportation Act of 1995. The firm’s unabashed slogan “Relationships that drive results” plays on their access to power.


17. Kondracke, “Driving Forward,” 3. In 2003, Roll Call reported that Young was able to flex his political brawn in a way few in Congress ever have:

**ROLL CALL:** Should we switch off to TEA-21 [federal transportation bill] . . .?

**YOUNG:** It’s “Tea-Lu.” I’m serious about that. Transportation Equity Act, logistics unlimited or lanes unlimited or something like that, but it’s going to be “Lu.”

And I don’t care whether they want to make fun of that, I’m the chairman, that’s what’s going to happen.

**ROLL CALL:** And the “Lu” is what again?

**YOUNG:** That’s my wife’s name. [laughs]

18. RAIL Solution, 2.


21. On the national level, “Road to Ruin” partners—Friends of the Earth and Taxpayers for Common Sense—lobbied against wasteful, environmentally damaging federal spending; regional partners—Southern Environmental Law Center, Virginia Organizing, Rockbridge Area Conservation Council, Virginia Chapter Sierra Club, and the Piedmont Environmental Council projects (Coalition for Smarter Growth and Shenandoah Valley Network)—offered organizing and special project assistance along with links to the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation and the National Trust for Historic Places.


23. The Virginia Department of Transportation continues to study truck tolls ranging from $65 to $114, http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/programadmin/032003.cfm.