

EDITOR'S PICK

Smart Scale scores released; local recommended funding down

BY SCOTT SHENK THE FREE LANCE-STAR 1 hr ago

The Smart Scale financial pie is smaller this year than in the inaugural, 2016 round of the state's transportation project scoring program, and so is the Fredericksburg area's projected slice of that pie.

The state on Tuesday released the scores of 404 state projects as part of the Smart Scale program. The application requests totaled \$8.5 billion. There is \$1 billion available in the second round of the program, down from \$1.7 billion set aside for last year's first round.

The Fredericksburg District did well in the first round, with 19 of its 22 project requests approved, totaling about \$204.6 million. This time around, state staff recommended funding for seven of 29 district projects, totaling nearly \$46 million.

While the local Commonwealth Transportation Board representative says there is good news in the scores, he is concerned about the low score generated by a project highlighted by many local and state officials as important to moving traffic through the corridor: the northbound segment of the Rappahannock River Crossing.

The project's score ranked 11th in the district and 201st in the state, according to the scores. It did not make the list of recommended projects to get funding.

The southbound segment of the crossing project, which will add feeder lanes parallel to Interstate 95 between U.S. 17 in Stafford County and State Route 3, tallied a low overall score in the first round, too, but was nonetheless selected by the CTB.

Public meetings will be held statewide to provide details on the scores before the CTB votes this summer on which projects to fund under the program.

"This is the first shot," said Hap Connors, the Fredericksburg area's CTB representative, who added that he hadn't yet "drilled down into the core" of the scores and that he wants to meet with local transportation authorities to understand where all projects stand, including the northbound crossing.

He said he is "disappointed" the crossing project appeared to have not scored well enough to make the cut this round. Connors said he was told southbound is the logjam during the week, while the northbound segment is considered more of a weekend issue.

"There's more work to be done" to see what the data say about the northbound crossing project, he said.

The CTB can deviate from the overall project scores when making its final selections, but must explain the rationale if it does so.

Connors pointed out that there is plenty of transportation-related work going on and more coming, including projects funded through the first round of Smart Scale.

The southbound segment of the crossing project is moving along, with preliminary designs set to be released next week. The \$125-million project is expected to be completed in 2022.

Of the seven local projects recommended for Smart Scale funding, two account for about \$35 million of the total.

One would include \$22 million in funding for improvements at the Brooke and Leeland Virginia Railway Express stations in Stafford County. More than half of the funding for the \$59.8-million projects is already in place.

The other big local project is aimed at improving the I-95 exit in the Massaponax area by extending, widening and adding southbound turn lanes to U.S. 1 and Southpoint Parkway.

That project request, made by Spotsylvania, asks for \$12.745 million of the overall \$14.495 million project cost.

Overall cost and money requested for projects seems to play a key role in how projects score in the program, something Connors thinks needs to be considered by local transportation officials.

He suggested that local decision makers should consider at least "talking about" the creation of a regional tax authority to raise transportation funds, similar to the Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads districts.

Scott Shenk: 540/374-5436

sshenk@freelancestar.com

Scott Shenk