

EDITOR'S PICK

FAMPO members upset with results of funding program

By SCOTT SHENK THE FREE LANCE-STAR Jan 23, 2017

The poor result for a major Interstate 95 project in a state prioritization funding program shocked members of the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization Policy Committee.

During Monday night's monthly meeting, committee members talked about what led to the low score for the \$132 million northbound Rappahannock River Crossing project, as well as the poor overall performance of the Fredericksburg district's other submitted projects, and how to deal with it.

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

"We have not done that well" in this round, said FAMPO Administrator Paul Agnello.

The district did well in the first round of Smart Scale, securing \$204.6 million for 19 projects out of 22 that were submitted. The southbound segment of the crossing project gained funding during the first round and is moving along, with preliminary designs set to be released Wednesday. The \$125 million project, which will add collector-distributor lanes along I-95 between U.S. 17 in Stafford and State Route 3 in Fredericksburg, is expected to be completed in 2022.

This time around, state staff recommended providing the district with \$46 million for seven projects out of 29 that were scored.

The northbound crossing project's score dominated the FAMPO committee's Monday conversation about how the district fared in this year's round of Smart Scale.

"We thought it was going to get funded," Agnello said of the project.

But state staff did not recommend funding it. The project ranked 11th in the district and 201st in the state, according to the scores.

Stafford representative Paul Milde and Fredericksburg representative Matt Kelly both called the low score for the northbound crossing project ridiculous.

Kelly said "something is wrong" when a small, \$2.1 million Spotsylvania street project, which had the highest score in the district, outscored the northbound crossing project, which is considered crucial for clearing up the bottleneck on local stretch of interstate.

It was noted during the meeting that smaller projects and those that already had dedicated funds scored best.

Kelly said FAMPO is going to put together a working group to study the Smart Scale program in depth in an effort to do better in the future.

He also told committee members that local leaders need to consider ways to leverage projects with funding so they score better.

Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads have regional transportation tax districts, which help those regions collect funding for projects. Both districts by far outpaced all others in the state in the second round of Smart Scale. Combined, the two districts were allocated more than \$590 million in recommended funding this round, more than half of all the money available.

After the Smart Scale scores were released last week, Hap Connors, the Fredericksburg area's representative on the Commonwealth Transportation Board, said local leaders need to consider creating a similar tax district.

There were only hints at the meeting at pursuing such a tax district.

At Monday's meeting, Connors said he plans to appeal the Smart Scale score for the northbound crossing project.

"I'm not giving up," he said.

There will be public hearings held on the Smart Scale scores in the coming months before the CTB votes on which projects to fund in June.

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