

EDITOR'S PICK FEATURED

Fredericksburg area officials question how smart Smart Scale is for ranking road projects

By SCOTT SHENK THE FREE LANCE-STAR Mar 25, 2017



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U.S. 1 traffic crawls northward in Fredericksburg in this 2016 file photo.

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On a recent Sunday afternoon, a train of traffic pattered along northbound Interstate 95, with the congestion stretching from Stafford County to just south of the U.S. 1 exit in Spotsylvania County.

Meanwhile, a smaller train of traffic chugged slowly north along U.S. 1 between the University of Mary Washington and the Falmouth intersection at U.S. 17 and Butler Road.

Such weekend northbound traffic is common through the Fredericksburg area bottleneck, especially during the summer.

And data back up the issue.

Those weekend figures, however, weren't included in the northbound I-95 crossing project proposal as part of the state's Smart Scale program, a complex metric-based scoring system that ranks transportation projects for funding across Virginia.

The northbound crossing project failed to reach a threshold score for projects to be suggested for funding in Smart Scale.

It's unclear why only weekday numbers were included in the proposal, but the issue highlights something state transportation officials noted when Smart Scale started two years ago: There will be mistakes and adjustments along the way.

In the first year of Smart Scale, the Fredericksburg region came out a winner, securing just more than \$200 million for 19 projects out of 22 that were submitted.

But local transportation officials were left scratching their heads over the area's poor results after the second round of Smart Scale scores were released in January. In those, state staff recommended \$46 million for seven local projects out of 29 that were scored in Smart Scale.

"We got lucky" in the first round, Hap Connors, the Fredericksburg region's representative on the Commonwealth Transportation Board, said in a recent interview. "We got cocky."

The Fredericksburg Metropolitan Planning Organization has reviewed the crossing proposal and Smart Scale scoring methodology. FAMPO also created a task force to focus on Smart Scale.

The task force found potential issues in the Smart Scale program, among them the missing weekend traffic data, shortcomings in the metrics, communication with state officials and a possible issue with how big, expensive projects scored in the second round of Smart Scale. No project costing more than \$100 million reached the predetermined threshold in the second round.

At a recent task force meeting, Matt Kelly, a Fredericksburg councilman and member of the FAMPO Policy Committee, said the state needs to do better explaining how the metrics are weighted and why projects score the way they do.

A FAMPO report outlined the keys to the crossing project's poor score. The lack of weekend data was the top issue, since congestion impact accounts for the biggest portion (45 percent) of the metrics.

A FAMPO report says that including the weekend traffic figures would result in the crossing project zone having the worst congestion of all projects in the current round of Smart Scale. Such a change would not push the project to the Smart Scale threshold score, but it would be significantly closer to it.

Accessibility to work comes next, as this metric accounts for 15 percent of a project's score. Smart Scale sets a 45-minute threshold limit between a highway project and access to jobs. Many area drivers' commutes eclipse that threshold, so those jobs weren't counted for the crossing project.

Economic development and safety account for just 5 percent each in Smart Scale scoring, but both metrics were also sighted by FAMPO as negatively impacting the crossing project's score. Under the economic development metric, a project's score is based on its impact within a 5-mile radius. The safety metric accounts for a project's impact in the immediate area only.

Local transportation officials argue that the crossing project would have a much larger impact on safety and the economy than allowed in the Smart Scale metrics.

Leveraged funding, or lack thereof, also hurt the crossing project score, according to the FAMPO report. The northbound crossing project has a price tag of \$130 million, but only \$2 million in dedicated funds.

Connors believes a key issue with Smart Scale is how interstate projects are scored. He said in a recent interview that the Smart Scale grading shouldn't consider I-95 to be a local project in competition with other transportation needs in the state.

I-95 "shouldn't be a regional problem," Connors said, echoing other state transportation leaders. "It should be a state problem."

The way interstate projects are scored currently is "ineffective" and inefficient," Connors said.

He also has pointed out that Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads gain an advantage over other state projects because those jurisdictions have dedicated regional taxes that raise money for transportation projects. He believes such a regional tax should at least be considered for the Fredericksburg region.

FAMPO plans to send its findings to state transportation officials.

The second round of Smart Scale projects are set to be approved in June by the CTB, which can divert from the scores and approve projects that score lower than others. Public hearings will be held on the current Smart Scale process prior to that meeting.

Two area hearings will be held. One will be at 5:30 p.m. April 10 at the Spotsylvania Germanna Community College campus, 10000 Germanna Point Drive. The other will be 5:30 p.m. April 25 at the Culpeper VDOT office at 1601 Orange Road.

"[Interstate 95] shouldn't be a regional problem, It should be a state problem." —HAP CONNORS

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