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EDITOR'S PICK

## Fredericksburg area officials seek ways to boost road projects' scores

By SCOTT SHENK THE FREE LANCE-STAR 10 hrs ago

Local transportation officials are trying to move on as the ripples of disappointment fade in the aftermath of the Fredericksburg region's poor showing in the state's fledgling Smart Scale program.

That was the focus at a recent Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization task force meeting, which was attended by Virginia Department of Transportation officials tied to Smart Scale. The program uses a complicated set of metrics to score transportation projects for funding.

The Fredericksburg region did well in last year's first round of Smart Scale, securing more than \$200 million for 19 projects out of 22 that were submitted.

But this year proved to be the dreaded sophomore slump. State staff recommended \$46 million for seven local projects out of 29 that were scored in the second round of Smart Scale.

Following the release of scores in January, some members of FAMPO and its Policy Committee were critical of the program and its process. But the tone has softened recently.

"We're not crying sour grapes," Matt Kelly, Fredericksburg city councilman and chairman of FAMPO's Policy Committee, said during Thursday's meeting. Kelly noted that he and other local officials want to hammer out potential issues with Smart Scale and be better prepared for the third round of scoring, which will be held in two years.

FAMPO Administrator Paul Agnello echoed Kelly's comments, saying local officials support Smart Scale and that they simply want to help improve the process.

VDOT has been working on revisions to Smart Scale and has been gathering input from metropolitan planning organizations across the state. That's what the task force meeting focused on.

Agnello gave a presentation with newer data, questions, concerns and suggestions for the program. Chad Tucker, an administrator with VDOT's Transportation and Mobility Planning Division, was on hand.

Among a handful of questions raised by FAMPO was how the northbound Interstate 95 crossing project failed to meet a threshold to be considered for funding. The project was not selected in the first or second rounds. The southbound crossing project, which will add lanes parallel to I-95 between U.S. 17 in Stafford and State Route 3 in Fredericksburg, was approved for funding in the first round of Smart Scale.

A sticking point with the crossing project proposal was the fact that only weekday traffic data was used to determine the congestion problem and the impact the project would have.

The data, with only weekday figures, was supplied by FAMPO. All other Smart Scale projects used the same weekday-only data.

Tucker said it is common practice to use only weekday traffic data for planning, not only in the state but nationwide. He explained that planners avoid using weekend or seasonal traffic data because often it covers only a small aspect of the overall situation.

Tucker noted that weekend traffic congestion is a known problem on I-95 in the Fredericksburg area, so it could be a good idea to include it in the future. He said the inclusion of weekend data is being considered for the future of Smart Scale.

There were other reasons the northbound crossing project scored low, according to Tucker.

The cost (\$130 million) “dragged it down,” he said. Also, the project impacted only one direction of traffic. And, he emphasized, Smart Scale doesn't focus on a problem, but instead on the overall benefit a project would have.

Another key issue raised is the fact that small projects scored so much better than big, expensive ones such as the northbound crossing.

Agnello highlighted two other issues—there is no chance to make corrections to project proposals that are screened out and more time is needed to put proposals together. Those two issues are something other transportation officials across the state have noted.

Another concern local transportation officials have raised is how regions such as Hampton Roads and Northern Virginia have dedicated tax districts that help raise funds for transportation projects. Projects with significant amounts of funding already set aside have a big advantage under Smart Scale.

Hap Connors, the Fredericksburg-area Commonwealth Transportation Board representative, has focused on that issue for some time and said the CTB plans to address it, possibly through state legislation.

Tucker told task force members that their information and data would be considered in the state's effort to improve Smart Scale. He also pointed out that the Fredericksburg region has benefited greatly through Smart Scale and other funding generated by state programs in recent years.

“A lot of that stuff,” he said, “gets glazed over.”

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### **If You Go**

A local public hearing on the Smart Scale program will be held soon.

- Where: Germanna Community College, Spotsylvania campus, 10000 Germanna Point Drive
- When: April 10
- Time: 5:30 p.m.

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**Scott Shenk**

