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EDITOR'S PICK

## Will express lanes ever reach into Spotsylvania?

Scott Shenk 10 hrs ago



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A sign along southbound I-95 alerts drivers about a mile north of the express lanes merge in Stafford.

With last week's revelation that a new design concept would build lanes for the southbound Rappahannock River crossing project in the median of Interstate 95, some wondered what happened to the original plan to extend the express lanes to the Massaponax area.

It appears that any plan to stretch the electronically toll lanes (which run in the median) to Massaponax died some time ago, based on financial reasons. The crossing project's new plans seemed to toss more dirt onto the southern extension's grave.

But that doesn't mean the express lane extension couldn't be revived.

The crossing project's new plan to build three lanes in the I-95 median between U.S. 17 and State Route 3 "doesn't prevent the express lanes from going further south," said Paul Agnello, administrator of the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization. "I think it's still very possible."

He said there would be room in the median for the toll road, even with the three new Rappahannock River crossing lanes.

Agnello thinks such an express lanes extension likely would end in the Courthouse Road area in Spotsylvania County because of costs.

Transurban, the operator of the express lanes, is not interested in such an extension at this time, but Agnello said the company seems open to revisiting the idea in the future.

It appears there is one primary reason why Transurban isn't interested in the extension now: money. The belief is the expected toll revenues wouldn't offset the estimated \$30 million to \$40 million per lane mile the extension would cost.

In late 2015, the Virginia Department of Transportation determined that such an extension would not produce the toll revenue to justify the investment. VDOT based the assumption on a 2009 study.

The study indicated that the northern section of the express lanes would generate six times the toll revenue as a southern segment (from State Route 610's current start/end point in North Stafford to Massaponax).

In early 2016, FAMPO criticized the study, saying it used outdated data and underestimated traffic figures south of Garrisonville. FAMPO's traffic figures indicated there was no significant drop-off of southbound traffic at Garrisonville.

Those figures do show, however, a sizable decrease in traffic south of Route 3. And that's interesting to note, since the crossing project's new lanes will run to just south of the Route 3 exit.

At the time, FAMPO suggested another study be conducted, but that hasn't happened. However, the second phase of a soon-to-begin I-95 corridor study will include analysis of an express lanes extension to the Massaponax area.

Currently, the express lanes are being extended about two miles south of the merge area at Route 610, with a planned longer extension that will take the electronically tolled lanes to the U.S. 17 area in Stafford.

That's where the southbound crossing project lanes will begin, meaning express lanes traffic will be able to merge onto the main lanes or the collector-distributor lanes.

While it may be a long shot, it seems there is at least still a flicker of life remaining in the prospect of an express lanes extension into Spotsylvania.

Just don't expect anything anytime soon.

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