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EDITOR'S PICK FEATURED

Does Fredericksburg area need a regional transportation tax?

By SCOTT SHENK THE FREE LANCE-STAR May 26, 2017



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Thursday's meeting will focus on local transportation.

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The cry for more money to get more transportation projects done in the Fredericksburg region is nothing new.

But some area transportation officials are now pushing for new solutions to fill the funding gap. One such idea could ease the region's reliance on federal and state dollars, they say.

That idea is the creation of a regional transportation authority, which would be able to levy taxes to fund area transportation projects. This mirrors programs in Hampton Roads and Northern Virginia, which combined have allocated nearly \$2 billion in local funds for projects in those regions since 2014.

The Fredericksburg Regional Chamber of Commerce will host a meeting this week with local transportation officials to talk about how regional authorities work, along with other transportation-related topics. The meeting, which is open to the public, will be held from 8:30 to 10:30 a.m. Thursday at LifeCare Medical Transports in Stafford County. Seating will be limited, so anyone interested in attending must reserve a space.

Hap Connors, the area's representative on the Commonwealth Transportation Board, has repeatedly implored Fredericksburg transportation officials to consider the creation of a regional authority.

"I'm a big proponent of it," said Connors, who will speak at the chamber meeting. "We need to have a serious conversation about a regional transportation authority."

For years, Fredericksburg Councilman Matt Kelly has said the system is broken and that funds aren't available to do all the work that is needed. He repeated that at this month's meeting for the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization's Policy Committee, which he chairs.

"This really is a question of how to we achieve these goals" of getting projects done, he said at the meeting. "If this is not an option, I'm hoping I'm going to hear other options of how we're going to meet the demands we're facing and how we're going to get projects funded."

The Northern Virginia Transportation Authority was created in 2002 by the Virginia General Assembly to handle transportation issues in nine jurisdictions, including Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun and Prince William counties.

In 2007, state lawmakers made it possible for the authority to initiate taxes to support transportation projects in the region. A year later, the Virginia Supreme Court ruled against the tax and the authority returned some \$30 million that had been collected.

In 2013, Virginia's revamped gas tax law allowed tax districts in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads to raise transportation funds through a combination of a retail sales tax, a "transient occupancy tax," and a tax on wholesale motor fuel distributors.

The regional authorities have leveraged the tax revenues, by investments and bonds, to funnel hundreds of millions in funding to transportation projects.

In 2015, the NVTA adopted a two-year program dedicating \$345.9 million toward transportation projects. The authority's 2017 budget allocated more than \$466 million for 12 projects.

"To date, the Authority has adopted 79 projects totaling over \$990 million," according to an NVTA release following its adoption of the 2017 budget. "It has also distributed over \$256.7 million, as of June 2016, to member jurisdictions for local transportation projects of their choice."

In fiscal year 2016, the Hampton Roads regional tax brought in \$157 million, according to the Transportation Accountability Commission there. The commission reports that it has leveraged the tax revenue to allocate more than \$1 billion for regional transportation projects since its inception.

The commission dedicated more than \$934 million for transportation projects in fiscal year 2016, according to the commission. All that money is helping to pay for four projects on Interstate 64.

According to a FAMPO report, such a transportation authority could generate \$35 million a year for the Fredericksburg region.

FAMPO's report indicated the revenues would be pay for numerous major area projects, including the northbound Interstate 95 Rappahannock River crossing project (estimated at about \$150 million). While the southbound crossing has been approved for \$125 million in federal and state funds, that northbound part of the project remains unfunded.

"There are a number of things you can do," said Connors.

Not everyone is on board with creating a new tax, though.

Spotsylvania Board of Supervisor Tim McLaughlin bristled at the idea during this month's FAMPO meeting. Continuing to spend money to build more lanes "is not going to fix the problem," he said.

McLaughlin said a better option would be to invest in bringing federal jobs to the area, in essence creating "a reverse commute."

"That's how you fix transportation," he said.

Kelly said that idea has been considered before and "politics" has proved a major hurdle. He also noted that the roads aren't clogged by just commuters, explaining that much of the traffic, primarily on I-95, comes from out of the area and state.

In an interview last week, Connors said he is tired of hearing the regional authority idea being panned by tax opponents, but added that he "is all ears to hear options."

He said additional money needed to address the area's major transportation needs will most likely have to come from tolls or taxes.

"There's no magic solution," he said. "Pick your poison."

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