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EDITOR'S PICK FEATURED

## Transportation discussion shows finding more funds won't be easy

By SCOTT SHENK THE FREE LANCE-STAR 14 hrs ago



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Local officials disagree on whether a regional transportation authority is needed to raise more funds for road projects.

"It always seems like we're marching and not fighting" traffic congestion issues in the Fredericksburg area, longtime PermaTreat Pest Control owner Joe Wilson told a crowd of local business leaders and transportation officials Thursday.

The morning meeting was organized to discuss traffic problems and try to gain a better understanding about a regional transportation authority and whether it would work or be supported in the Fredericksburg area.

If the meeting was any indication, the march toward finding another way to get more money for regional transportation projects may be a long, difficult one.

The meeting organized by the Fredericksburg Regional Chamber of Commerce included comments from two local transportation officials and a discussion by four elected officials, representing Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania, Stafford and King George counties.

Those officials were split on the creation of a regional transportation authority.

Fredericksburg Councilman Matt Kelly said he would be in favor of such an authority, or at least to having a conversation about one.

Spotsylvania Supervisor Greg Benton opposed the idea. Stafford Supervisor Paul Milde said he would not support an authority either.

King George Supervisor Ruby Brabo said she is undecided.

A regional transportation authority would allow localities to levy taxes to fund area transportation projects. Such programs exist in Hampton Roads and Northern Virginia, which combined have allocated nearly \$2 billion in local funds for projects in those regions since 2014.

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.

There was little talk during Thursday's meeting about how to start a regional authority or how one would work, something a disappointed Stafford Supervisor Gary Snellings pointed out.

In response, Kelly said local officials are using the Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads authorities as models, along with some others. There are differences in how those regional authorities work, he said, but both use 70 percent of the funds for regional projects and 30 percent goes to localities.

Kelly also said Virginia's General Assembly would have to approve such an authority.

Another disappointed attendee was Charles McDaniel, the longtime president of Stafford-based Hilldrup Moving and Storage and now the company's chairman. He asked how the area's traffic woes could be fixed.

The only person who answered him directly was Benton, who said, "I don't think there is a solution."

Benton's response mirrored his comments from earlier in the meeting about the possibility of raising gas taxes, or any taxes, which he opposes.

"I'm concerned with Spotsylvania," he said. "I'm not too concerned with people going up and down (Interstate) 95."

Benton said people have a choice to either work locally and make less or commute north and make more.

"You want to make six figures, there's 95," he said.

Earlier in the meeting, the Spotsylvania supervisor said the area should look at moving federal jobs to the area instead of raising or creating new taxes.

Kelly said drivers working in the area fill up roads, too, and that is an issue that needs to be addressed now and for the future. He said the region's population is expected to double in the next 20 years.

The transportation issue is "complex" and can't be fixed with "quick and simple answers," the councilman said.

Kelly added that it was a good thing to have the conversation and that local officials and the public need to be involved in finding a solution, even if it isn't the creation of an authority.

Milde said plenty of area transportation projects have been completed or are in the pipeline, especially in Stafford. He said he is opposed to raising gas taxes, and explained that he was more focused on how state and federal elected officials are spending tax revenues.

Brabo said "all options should be considered" and that she wants King George to be "proactive" so the county doesn't eventually face the problems Fredericksburg-area localities are dealing with after decades of explosive growth.

Prior to the roundtable discussion, Paul Agnello, administrator of the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, presented slides covering the transportation problem and information about the regional authorities in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads. He pointed out that the Fredericksburg region has \$1.1 billion in needed road work and \$500 million in rail project needs.

Transportation taxes, he added, haven't kept pace with needs.

He told the crowd that the federal gas tax has remained at 18.4 cents since 1993, and Virginia's gas tax rate is one of the lowest in the nation, coming in at 38th.

"It's no longer pay as you go," he said.

Agnello said a regional authority could raise an estimated \$35 million annually.

Hap Connors, the Fredericksburg region's representative on the Commonwealth Transportation Board, told the crowd that he likes the idea of a transportation authority, something that should be considered along with other approaches, including technology.

He said the state should look into using its transportation infrastructure to expand broadband access—allowing lines to be run beside highways, for example.

Such a move could help traffic issues in various ways, Connors said. Instead of driving to work or to attend college courses, people could simply hop online to do their job or earn a degree.

Connors also talked about a parking app for long-haul truckers that is in the works at the Virginia Department of Transportation, and said the state plans to launch a “crowd-sourcing” website to generate ideas from the public, which could lead to better ideas and speed up the process.

“I agree with some people that we can’t build our way out of this,” he said, adding that the region is playing catch-up with problems that should have been addressed two decades ago.

Connors said he doesn’t think state lawmakers are going to address the region’s funding shortfall, and he raised doubts about what appears to be a growing interest in some sectors in public–private projects like the I–95 express lanes.

“I don’t think the private sector is doing this for free,” he said. “So buyer beware.”

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