

VDOT unveils Rappahannock River Crossing designs

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Sunday, June 28, 2015 12:00 am

The Virginia Department of Transportation has unveiled its latest proposal for easing traffic along Interstate 95 in the Fredericksburg area: a set of collector-distributor lanes running beside the interstate from U.S. 17 to State Route 3.

Preliminary designs of the proposed Rappahannock River Crossing project were on display for the first time Wednesday at a VDOT public hearing on a recently completed environmental study on the project.

Sixty-one people showed up at James Monroe High School to see maps and talk to officials about the proposed project.

In an effort to alleviate congestion and crash problems, the project would add two-lane collector-distributor roads parallel to the interstate between U.S. 17 in southern Stafford County and Route 3 in Fredericksburg.

The new lanes, which would be on both sides of the interstate, are supposed to separate local traffic from traffic passing through the area.

Hearing attendees seemed to agree that the project would help improve the interstate, but some doubted the overall benefits.

Commuters Brian and Diane Picerno, who live in Stafford Lakes off of U.S. 17, say congestion is awful on the highway.

The crossing project “will provide relief for 95, but I’m not sure you’re helping Route 17,” Brian Picerno said.

They would rather see the old Outer Connector plans come to fruition.

Here’s a breakdown of some the highlights of the proposal:

PROJECT STATUS

The project would be split into two phases, with the southbound lanes being built first.

VDOT estimates the southbound C-D lanes would cost \$121 million; the northbound side around \$151 million. To get funding, the project must compete with other Virginia transportation projects in the state’s new prioritization program, recently approved by the Commonwealth Transportation Board.

Hap Connors, the area’s CTB representative, and others believe the project will score well because of its expected impact on I-95 and the interchanges.

“Everybody I’ve talked to knows this is our biggest problem,” Connors said in an interview prior to the hearing.

The state will begin accepting project applications for the prioritization program later this year.

HOW THE LANES WORK

According to the preliminary plans, the southbound C–D lanes would begin north of the U.S. 17 interchange.

Southbound traffic headed to U.S. 17 and Route 3 would have to get on the lanes at this point; there would be no other exit options from I–95.

The U.S. 17 interchange would be reconfigured. The current cloverleaf would be replaced with flyovers and redesigned ramps.

U.S. 17 traffic would have two lanes to access the main southbound interstate lanes and two for the C–D lanes.

Once on the C–D lanes, southbound traffic would be able to use a slip-ramp near the rest area to get back into the main interstate lanes. The entry and exits for the rest area would be adjusted as part of the project.

At Route 3, the C–D lanes would be incorporated into planned improvements at the interchange as part of a separate project aimed at improving that exit area, as well as the one at U.S. 17.

Those proposed changes for the Route 3 interchange include separating traffic headed into Central Park from traffic going farther west on Route 3.

Traffic exiting onto westbound Route 3 would have three lanes. A red-light signal will be installed at the end of the ramp, where traffic would make a slight right onto the highway.

The northbound C–D lanes would be designed similar to the southbound lanes.

GROWTH AND CRASHES

The study shows that I–95 and the interchanges in the area of the proposed project fail to handle current peak traffic flows and would only grow worse as more people move into the area.

In 2013, 152,600 cars traveled each day on I–95 between the U.S. 17 and Route 3 exits. According to the study, if nothing is done, daily traffic on the interstate in that area will grow to 226,000 by 2040.

If the C–D lanes are built, mainline I–95 traffic volumes would be 159,000 in 2040, according to the study's estimates.

Much of the I–95 traffic is pass-through traffic, but locals use the interstate, too.

The study notes that the Fredericksburg area population is expected to skyrocket in coming years: from more than 275,000 people in Stafford, Spotsylvania and Fredericksburg in 2010 to more than 663,000 by 2040.

More traffic means more accidents, and the study shows that crash rates between 2010 and 2012 in the project area were already high.

According to the study, crash rates were 76 percent higher than the statewide average on the I–95 project area, 379 percent higher than average in the Route 3 interchange area and 239 percent higher around the

U.S. 17 interchange.

The crossing project is expected to reduce crashes in the area.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The environmental report found that the project should have no significant impacts on the area around it.

Three private residences and five businesses possibly would have to be moved. Two historic sites might be impacted by the project: a piece of the Fredericksburg Civil War battlefield and the Rappahannock Navigation and Canal lock.

The study found that impacts to the canal could be avoided or minimal.

But the project possibly would “encroach into approximately 1.6 acres of the battlefield and would likely need to be acquired for the project,” according to the study.

However, the area “is far removed from where known fighting occurred during the Battle of Fredericksburg I” and the study found “no above-ground or archaeological resources associated with the battle that could be impacted by the project.”

The study notes that the battlefield area in question already has been “diminished” by a quarry, gravel pit and access roads, as well as I-95.

In light of those findings, the study found that potential impacts to the battlefield would be minimal.

The study also indicated potential impacts to a recreational area and existing and planned trails, but also determined them to be minimal.