

Study pinpoints I-95 problems, solutions

By SCOTT SHENK THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Saturday, July 30, 2016 11:00 pm

A recently completed study on what it's like to travel through the Fredericksburg area's stretch of Interstate 95 highlighted the obvious: It stinks.

But the study also pinpointed congestion hotspots and recommended an expensive list of projects to improve travel in the area's interstate corridor.

The I-95 corridor study covered the area from Garrisonville to Massaponax and looked at traffic during the week, as well as on weekends since that aspect has rarely if ever studied in the corridor.

The study results and a list of suggested projects were highlighted last week during the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization's Policy Committee meeting. FAMPO staff worked with a consultant and local, state and federal transportation officials on the study.

The final report focuses on "the worst of the worst" congestion periods and areas in the corridor, said FAMPO Administrator Paul Agnello.

According to late 2015 data used for the study, I-95 southbound weekday traffic crawls well below the speed limit from about 3 p.m. to shortly before 7 p.m. between Garrisonville and State Route 3, with speeds hovering in the low 40s to the low 30s.

Likely to the surprise of no southbound afternoon weekday commuters, Thursdays and Fridays are the worst times to be on the interstate.

Even worse is the Sunday drive heading north through the area.

Between 3 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. on Sundays, traffic slogs along at a low average speed of 31 mph, with the southern end of the corridor between U.S. 1 in Spotsylvania to just past Route 3 being the worst. The traffic congestion starts well south of the Massaponax area, but that is outside of the study's scope.

While presenting the study earlier this month, Agnello noted that he was on the interstate the previous Sunday and it was a "parking lot" northbound from Ladysmith to Fredericksburg.

The study recommended a laundry list of improvements to help alleviate the congestion problems, including some already approved projects along with others not yet in the pipeline. The study is focused on the long term, spanning decades of possible road construction.



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Southbound Interstate 95 motorists take a slow trip through the Garrisonville Road interchange in Stafford County. Trees in the median are being removed to extend the express lanes and ease the choke point at the merge with regular lanes.

The overall combined costs of the recommended projects range between just more than \$700 million to \$1 billion.

The top-rated recommended projects, some of which were approved and funded after the study began, include major and expensive work:

The \$125 million southbound Rappahannock River Crossing project, which will add two lanes parallel to the interstate between U.S. 17 and State Route 3 and will include the construction of a bridge next to the current span over the river. Work is expected to start in 2018 and be completed in 2021.

I-95 express lanes merge extension. This project will extend the problematic merge area around State Route 610 in Garrisonville about two miles south. Work is underway.

Courthouse Road, I-95 interchange reconstruction. The \$149 million project will replace the interchange with a relatively new design style known as a divergent diamond interchange. Work is expected to start next year. If funding is available, a fourth lane could be added on I-95 between Route 610 and Courthouse Road.

Route 3 interchange improvements. The \$21 million project will revamp the high-crash I-95 interchange at Central Park and the Spotsylvania Towne Centre mall. Work is expected to start in the spring and be completed by the fall of 2018.

The next tier includes longer-range and not-yet-approved or funded projects:

The northbound segment of the Rappahannock River Crossing Project. It wasn't chosen in the first round of the state's new prioritization program (now called Smart Scale), but will be a priority submission for the next round of applications.

The addition of a fourth lane along northbound I-95 between U.S. 17 and Centreport Parkway in Stafford. This would be aimed at avoiding a choke point where the northbound crossing project's lanes would end. A flyover ramp from eastbound Route 3 to northbound I-95, where the current interchange reconstruction project is being done.

The last two tiers include four projects:

The extension of the express lanes to U.S. 17, which recently garnered funding from a federal grant called the Atlantic Gateway. There is no timeline for that project yet.

Adding a ramp that would take Route 610 traffic in Stafford directly onto and off of the express lanes, eliminating the current crossover traffic at the merge area.

The construction of a new I-95 exit at Harrison Road in Spotsylvania.

Adding a fourth lane on I-95 between the U.S. 1 and Route 3 exits in Spotsylvania. The FAMPO Policy Committee has endorsed the study's recommendations.

FAMPO will conduct a second study that will cover a longer swath of the I-95 corridor and include other modes of transportation, including mass transit.