

Editorial: In Stafford, a little less gridlock

BY THE EDITORIAL PAGE STAFF OF THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Tuesday, August 23, 2016 12:00 am

Well at least one motoring headache should get better.

To the relief of drivers traversing the area, the Virginia Department of Transportation is done with widening U.S. 17 in southern Stafford County—that long-running bit of roadwork, which often added to congestion on part of Warrenton Road.

The project, extending two miles from McLane Drive to near Stafford Lakes Parkway west of Interstate 95, widened the highway from two to three through-lanes each way. It added a continuous right-turn lane in both directions, plus sidewalks, a concrete median and upgrades to eight intersections.

Regrettably, the additional lanes stop before they reach the Walmart Supercenter and Stafford campus of the University of Mary Washington at Stafford Lakes Village Parkway, two magnets for motorists. Local traffic, though, should move more quickly around Geico, a major regional employer, and the many other businesses lining U.S. 17.

Mostly, motorists are rejoicing that the construction is over. Nearly three years of work on the vital artery was quite enough, though VDOT took pains to limit most of its lane closures to nighttime to reduce the havoc.

Still, “it’s difficult to build in traffic,” quipped Mike Coffey, the assistant administrator for construction in VDOT’s Fredericksburg District. A bit of wry understatement there. Daily, some 55,000 vehicles use that part of U.S. 17—nearly a fifth of them heavy trucks.

But using U.S. 17 should be less of a pain now. The \$48.9 million widening project should reduce backups and speed traffic flow for vehicles getting off I-95. That’s a nice addition to the redesigned Falmouth intersection finished last October.

Still, eastbound cars and tractor-trailers on U.S. 17 will bunch up and slow as they approach the I-95 interchange, especially on weekday evenings and weekends when the interstate is clogged.

No one should expect a neat end to the stacking at the southbound I-95 ramp. Only time will tell if U.S. 17’s new six-lane stretch speeds the flow for long, given how congested I-95 is at the Falmouth interchange—and generally in the Fredericksburg region.



U.S. 17 widening wraps up

The \$48.9 million U.S. 17 widening project in Stafford County is finishing up months early.

Weekdays on I-95 from about 3 p.m. to shortly before 7 p.m., southbound traffic crawls well below the speed limit between Garrisonville and State Route 3, with speeds hovering in the low 40s to the low 30s.

Real relief will have to await the additional southbound I-95 lanes, a new bridge and interchange improvements that are part of the Rappahannock River Crossing project. However, construction isn't expected to start on the so-called collector-distributor lanes until 2018.

The state recognized the urgent need for this \$125 million project when it applied for and received a federal grant for its Atlantic Gateway project, of which these improvements are a part.

Specifically, the improvements call for adding two southbound lanes parallel to the interstate between U.S. 17 and State Route 3, construction of another bridge next to the current spans. Work on the crossing project is to be completed in 2021.

The Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization's recent corridor study of I-95 from Garrisonville to Massaponax recommended the crossing project and handful of improvements that would cost from \$700 million to \$1 billion.

Obviously, more extensive efforts are essential to add overdue capacity to our section of the East Coast's Main Street.

The work can't begin soon enough. So, please, encourage your elected officials to see that these projects are done. It's going to take a lot of heavy lifting, by everyone.