

# Opponents of rail options speak out at CTB meeting in Fredericksburg

By SCOTT SHENK THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Wednesday, September 21, 2016 5:30 pm

About a dozen people spoke against options floated so far as part of a higher-speed rail line during the Commonwealth Transportation Board's monthly meeting Wednesday in downtown Fredericksburg.

The speakers continued a push in recent months by residents and officials in the Fredericksburg area, Hanover County and the town of Ashland against early alternatives of a proposed 123-mile Richmond-to-Washington segment of the Southeast High Speed Rail line project.

Most of the speakers targeted the alternatives in Hanover and the town of Ashland, but there also were speakers from Spotsylvania and Caroline counties who told the board that an eastern bypass option would be too disruptive for residents in those counties.

The Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation is conducting a \$49 million environmental impact study. Part of the study's task is to consider three options for the third track in the Ashland and Fredericksburg areas.

Locally, a two-track eastern bypass option would run from just south of the new Virginia Railway Express station in Spotsylvania, loop around just inside Caroline and then run next to the existing track parallel to State Route 3 into southern Stafford County, through the Ferry Farm area.

A new bridge would have to be built over the Rappahannock River for this option, and there would be new road crossings. Those likely would be overpasses, with the tracks running beneath them.

Another option for the higher-speed rail is to build the third track alongside the existing tracks in CSX Transportation's right-of-way, which would bring the new line through Fredericksburg's train station.

The third option is to not add a third track. Instead, there would be improvements made to crossings, signals and safety systems in the Fredericksburg area, including the downtown train station.

Local opposition has been raised primarily by residents whose properties would be impacted by the eastern bypass option.

One of those residents is Tim Davis, whose property straddles the Caroline and Spotsylvania border. The bypass, he said, would run about 200 feet from his home.

The alternatives, he said, are "premature" and the damage has already been done to him and neighbors. He said he can't sell or refinance his property and that land values in the area of the bypass alternative have already fallen.

"We will suffer for years and years to come," he told the CTB members gathered at the Courtyard Marriott downtown. "Please don't leave us hanging."

Along with area residents, the boards of supervisors in Caroline, Spotsylvania and Stafford and the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization have officially opposed the eastern bypass alternative.

The options, and opposition, to the south are similar to Fredericksburg's.

The alternatives there include running a new third track through Ashland alongside the existing tracks or adding a two-track bypass to the west of the town. A third option would not add tracks to or around Ashland, but would instead include upgrades to crossings, signals and safety systems, according to DRPT.

Residents of Ashland said running a third track through the town would virtually destroy it and have a detrimental impact on the campus of Randolph–Macon College.

Many of the speakers said they wanted to work for better solutions and asked the CTB and DRPT to work with them.

“We need to come together on this,” Aubrey Stanley, chairman of the Hanover Board of Supervisors, said as he voiced his board's opposition to the western bypass option.

Aubrey Layne, Virginia's secretary of transportation, said he understands the concerns and added that CTB and DRPT officials will do what they can to make the process work better. He said CTB members will take a tour of Ashland so they can better understand the issues there.

The secretary added that the DRPT is following guidelines stipulated by the Federal Railroad Administration, which will ultimately have the final say in the matter, no matter what local boards or the CTB decide.

Layne noted that there are no specific alignments in the alternatives yet and that even the next phase may still show only a wide swath for a potential corridor.

According to estimates, the proposed higher-speed rail line would add nine daily round trips to train traffic through the Fredericksburg area and shorten those trips between Richmond and Washington by 15 to 20 minutes.

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***NOTE: This article has been updated to correct the position of the Fredericksburg City Council on the high-speed rail eastern bypass alternative. The council has not taken up or voted on the issue.***