

# Editorial: I-95 requires some rail relief

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD STAFF OF THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Sunday, September 25, 2016 12:00 am

LIVING, as we do, along the East Coast's main north-south highways and rail lines has brought both prosperity and pain to our region for generations.

Let's face it, a lot fewer of us would have come here if not for Interstate 95, U.S. 1 and CSX's double set of steel rails that link the Fredericksburg area to Washington, Richmond and points far beyond. When first built, each of these transportation corridors forced people in their path to move, and each changed the face of the area and prompted growth. There's still opportunity on the Main Street of the East, but it takes effort for it to remain vital.

As a region, Fredericksburg-area residents and elected officials need to examine where we are today—with our nearly maxed-out highway and railroad network—so we can consider where we're headed.

There's a chance for real change in the future, thanks to an investment in our transportation infrastructure that we haven't seen in decades.

In July, Gov. Terry McAuliffe announced the Atlantic Gateway Project. Virginia won \$165 million in competitive, federal transportation grants and will put those dollars together with \$710 million in state money and \$565 million in private investment to help untangle the congestion on Interstate 95 and improve commuter, passenger and freight rail service between Fredericksburg and Arlington. That's a total of \$1.4 billion.

The hope is that with targeted improvements, Virginia and our region will lose their worsening reputation as an Eastern Seaboard bottleneck. These investments, such as extension of the I-95 express lanes through Stafford County and a new southbound bridge over the Rappahannock River, are intended to ease congestion and encourage economic development by businesses looking to expand outside the D.C. area.

While the Atlantic Gateway Project is a newly funded initiative, federal and state officials have separately pursued the so-called Southeast High Speed Rail Project for years. Its stated purpose is to add new tracks and make crossing and signal improvements so passenger trains can compete with longer-distance auto and air travel, while not slowing movement of freight trains.

That's way easier said than done, and state officials acknowledge it.

"We're never going to have high-speed rail in Virginia, we're going to have higher-speed rail," state Secretary of Transportation Aubrey Layne said last week while meeting with The Free Lance-Star editorial board. He explained that adding capacity to the rail line here can allow for more reliable passenger and freight service, reducing the 123-mile trip time between Washington and Richmond by 15 to 20 minutes. It also would allow nine additional passenger trains per day.

That may not sound like much, but these improvements are crucial in the Richmond-to-D.C. corridor. Better rail service will take pressure off often-gridlocked I-95. More rail capacity in our region and Tidewater will allow the Port of Virginia to use double-stacked containers on railcars, Layne said. The port in Hampton Roads can be more competitive once railroad tracks, bridges and tunnels along the lines are expanded.

However, proposed improvements along the CSX line from Hanover County to Stafford County, which are part of the higher-speed rail project, have generated controversy of late. One alternative envisions building the new tracks around the town of Ashland and Randolph–Macon College as well as the city of Fredericksburg. However, homeowners in the paths of proposed rail bypasses in Hanover, Caroline, Spotsylvania and Stafford counties have strongly objected to the idea, saying the lines should be built along existing tracks. As a result, the boards of supervisors in those four counties and the Fredericksburg Metropolitan Planning Organization have voted in recent months to oppose the rail bypasses.

These are short-sighted, parochial decisions.

The higher-speed study won't be complete until next year. Of course, it must justify the costs and benefits of each alternative before a decision is made by the Federal Railroad Administration.

Clearly, doing nothing is not a solution.

Transportation networks can function only if they are conceived and built to meet regional, state and national needs. We'll withhold judgment until the study is further along, but it appears that adding a third set of tracks alongside existing lines in densely developed and historic areas would be a costly mistake.

A complete and careful analysis of the alternatives needs to be done before local officials dig in their heels over specific proposals.

It's also incumbent on state and federal transportation officials to make sensible, timely decisions and move forward with projects so that homeowners aren't left with a cloud over the future of their property for years to come. Fair compensation is a must.

Mobility, economic vitality and the quality of life in our region and commonwealth are at stake with both the higher-speed rail project and the Atlantic Gateway initiative. We need to invest in roads and rail. Let's get a move on.