

Local transportation proposals abound, but money is tight

By SCOTT SHENK THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Tuesday, November 1, 2016 12:15 am

The message was clear at a Tuesday transportation meeting focused on the state's fledgling Smart Scale program: Progress and is being made on road and rail systems, but there isn't enough money to do all that is needed.

During the public comment period, one woman mentioned the Norris Bridge in the Northern Neck and how it should get funding for rehabilitation or replacement. Spotsylvania Supervisor Gary Skinner noted how difficult it has been to get funds for improvements at the Interstate 95 exit in the Massaponax area. Fredericksburg Councilman Matt Kelly, while applauding recent project funding as part of the Smart Scale program, noted that the initial plan for the I-95 express lanes to go all the way to Massaponax petered out.

To all of those comments, Virginia Secretary of Transportation Aubrey Layne had a consistent reply: There are plenty of worthy projects in the hopper but not enough money to go around.

Layne, who said he considers transportation infrastructure a "core" aspect of government and a key to the economy, explained that the answer to the lack of funding lies at the feet of the legislature, the elected officials who determine where tax revenues are spent.

Regardless of the funding situation, Layne pointed out that the way to get that needed funding is to use the current funding "wisely." And he believes the Smart Scale program is working in that sense.

In last year's inaugural round of the program, which ranks projects on predetermined criteria, the Fredericksburg district did as well as any other in the state with 19 of its 21 projects being selected for funding.

In the current round, the Fredericksburg district submitted 29 projects. Other localities also are seeking more projects and money this time around, but there is a lot less money in the program.

Last year there was \$1.7 billion available in the Smart Scale program. This year there is \$750 million, and the 436 projects submitted amounted to \$9.25 billion in requests.

Regardless of those bleak numbers, there are plenty of road and rail projects on the horizon in the region.

Marcie Parker, administrator of VDOT's Fredericksburg district, noted that in the next five years there will be eight construction projects on I-95 between Garrisonville in Stafford County and Thornburg in Spotsylvania.



Interstate 95

Southbound Interstate 95 motorists take a slow trip through Stafford County.

“In five to six years this will be a whole new place,” she said, adding that traffic on the interstate would be smoother, which drew guffaws from the crowd.

One of those projects on the interstate, approved for funding through Smart Scale, is the Rappahannock River Crossing, which will add collector-distributor lanes from U.S. 17 in Stafford to State Route 3 in Fredericksburg. A Rappahannock River Crossing project for the southbound side of I-95 is up for scoring in the current Smart Scale program. Layne said the project should score well.

Rail projects also are part of the Smart Scale program, including local Virginia Railway Express platform expansion projects that are being scored in the current round.

Rail was a key topic at the meeting, as the hot-button high-speed rail issue dominated much of the conversation.

The Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation is studying the 123-mile Richmond-to-Washington segment of the Southeast High Speed Rail line, which is part of a system stretching from Florida to Washington, D.C. As part of the study, the DRPT has included several alternatives in certain locations, including in the Fredericksburg area, where there are three options being considered.

Several people spoke up on their positions, most notably those opposed to an eastern bypass option that would run new tracks just south of the VRE station in Spotsylvania County, loop around inside Caroline and then run next to the existing track parallel to State Route 3 into southern Stafford County, including through the Ferry Farm area. There also were residents from Ashland who spoke against running the rail through the small town in Hanover County.

U.S. Rep. Rob Wittman, R-Westmoreland County, said he has heard “from thousands of people expressing deep reservations” about those options.

Wittman, who is running for re-election, said he is opposed to the project. He added that the planning was “backwards” and that the DRPT did a poor job of including residents in the process.

Layne noted that part of the problem was caused by federal rules and regulations, a problem that legislators should consider addressing.

Layne also pointed out to the crowd that whatever happens with the proposed line, not everyone is going to be happy, which is the case with most transportation projects.

There will be bigger problems, he added, if nothing is done. The region’s corridor is already a choke point.

The secretary said transportation officials want to do what’s right, and in that vein the process for the higher-speed rail proposal “has been slowed” so the options can be explored in more depth.

The Commonwealth Transportation Board, he explained, was set to vote on the proposals this fall, but that vote has been pushed back. The CTB likely will vote on the proposal no earlier than March.

The DRPT’s study is currently being reviewed by the Federal Railroad Administration. The FRA’s findings are expected to be released this month or in December.

After Tuesday's meeting, a public hearing was held on the Atlantic Gateway, a group of projects aimed at fixing congestion issues along the area's I-95 corridor.

The Atlantic Gateway, which received \$165 million in federal grants, includes rail and road projects.

One of those projects is the planned extension of the I-95 express lanes to Route 3. Those electronically tolled lanes currently end near State Route 610 in North Stafford. Work has already started on another project that will extend the lanes about two miles south.

About 75 people attended the meeting at Germanna Community College Center for Workforce & Community Education in Spotsylvania.