VDOT chief warns about more studies

BY SCOTT SHENK / THE FREE LANCE–STAR | Posted: Friday, October 25, 2013 2:42 pm

Charlie Kilpatrick knows full well the traffic challenges in the Fredericksburg area.

The Spotsylvania County resident and Virginia Department of Transportation chief deputy commissioner also knows quite a bit about the history of battles that have been waged by politicians, transportation planners and residents over the region's congestion problems.

This week, in the third floor of the Fredericksburg Area Museum, Kilpatrick was the keynote speaker for a business leadership forum hosted by the Hirschler Fleischer law firm. He gave a group of about three dozen an overview of VDOT's statewide work, which is kicking into high gear because of an influx of new state money.

But he also touched on the area's most recent transportation battle.

A long-running feud, pitting Spotsylvania supervisors against fellow members of the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization from Fredericksburg and Stafford County, has revolved around a parkway into Spotsylvania included in the Rappahannock River Crossing project.

The crossing project would improve the U.S. 17 and State Route 3 interchanges along Interstate 95 and add collector–distributor lanes for local traffic between the exits. It also originally included the Rappahannock Parkway, a road that would run from the Virginia Welcome Center on I–95 and tie back into Route 3 at Gordon Road in Spotsylvania.

A majority of Spotsylvania supervisors opposes the parkway.

The conflict has threatened the crossing project and caused hard feelings between FAMPO Policy Committee members.

Virginia's secretary of transportation recently asked VDOT to collect suggestions from area officials and determine what seems like the best options to address congestion along the I–95 corridor. Some of the options, put forth by Stafford supervisors, include versions of the old Outer Connector, a western bypass of the area.

Kilpatrick is leading the VDOT study of those alternatives.

At Thursday night's forum, he talked about his experience as a resident engineer with VDOT's Fredericksburg District during the early days of the Outer Connector battles, which date back decades.

Now, he is right back in the middle of a similar situation, and says the re-emergence of Outer Connector options is like the movie, "Groundhog Day."

Kilpatrick noted during his talk that most local leaders seem to approve of the collector–distributor roads and bridges over the Rappahannock as a way to ease congestion at the exits.

After Kilpatrick's talk, Spotsylvania Supervisor Tim McLaughlin asked him about VDOT's role in settling the dispute.

"VDOT is not going to make the decision, and I think that's an important thing to know right up front," Kilpatrick said. "The decisions on what projects get built in Virginia are not made by VDOT."

He said VDOT's task is to study the options and tell the Commonwealth Transportation Board which seem to be the best. That should happen at the December CTB meeting.

In areas with metropolitan planning organizations such as FAMPO, Kilpatrick explained, they decide what to put in the transportation plan. He added that the CTB also plays a key role, because it determines what gets funded.

The issue of the Fredericksburg region's traffic congestion has "been going on for a long time," said Kilpatrick, adding that he wonders what the situation would be like if they had gone ahead with building a version of the Outer Connector in the 1990s.

It's time to get something done, he stressed.

"We don't want to just go do more studies, we did enough of that back in the '90s," he said. "We've got to be able to say what's most important, what are we going to put our energy into. And we've got to put our energy into something we're actually going to build."

There is no perfect solution, he added, but there are projects that can help.

"We've got to prioritize," he said. "We're going to run out of money before we run out of ideas."

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